

Toward a Typology of Concern: A Reanalysis of the Ethical Dative in Relation to Possession

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Abstract

This paper proposes a typology of ‘concern’ as a solution to the problem of the “ethical dative” in European languages. Examining ‘ethical dative’ phenomena from the perspective of both argument structure and relations between discourse participants, it suggests that ethical datives as a form of affective possession, or what is termed here ‘concern.’ In addition, the paper argues that concern phenomenon may be found in very different languages, such as Santali, an Austro-Asiatic language spoken in eastern India. By considering ‘concern’ cross-linguistically, and as encompassing a range of different phenomena with both pragmatic and semantic functions, the paper outlines a new area for further research.

1. Introduction¹

The ethical dative, also known as the dative of affect or sentential dative, has long been a problem for linguistic theory. Usually relegated to the periphery of any study of dative construction, the ethical dative fits in all and none of the typical dative categories: indirect object, possession, interest, or beneficiary. The semantic content of an ethical dative, rather than realized within the sentence structure alone, can only be discerned by looking at the alignments between interactive participants. This is because ethical datives usually index some form of affective relationship that a speaker, addressee, or a third party has with both a given argument of an utterance, and with other participants in the ongoing interaction. This paper argues that the semantics of the ethical dative, ‘empty’ at the level of sentence structure, can be understood through the relations of affect among discourse participants toward each other and with an argument within the sentence or utterance².

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² In the interactional linguistic literature, this is usually referred to as “stance” (Englebretson, ed. 2007, Jaffe, ed 2009, etc.) Here in order to highlight the relationship not only between speakers but also at sentence-level relations between arguments, I am referring these affective relations as “concern.”

The paper presents a cursory typology of “ethical datives” and poses a preliminary argument that there is a continuum between what is known as an “ethical dative” and categories of possession. Much of the literature on ethical datives focuses on its freestanding position within the sentence, and views the construction as purely indexical or affective at the discursive level. However, if other ethical dative-types are examined, one may begin to see that relations of “concern” may substitute for possession. Ethical datives are thus not wholly detached from the argument of a sentence but rather are linked by an interface that takes into account the degree of concern of the speaker in relation to particular arguments at the sentence-level, as well as to other participants within a given interaction. The first section of the paper will present conventional ethical datives from various European languages and in section two, an example from Santali, called the ‘concerned object’ will be introduced. Finally, the last section cites other data and arguments that further highlights the interrelation between ethical datives and possession, analyzed through a lens of concern relations.

2. Ethical dative in European languages

The “*dativus ethicus*” or “dative of affect” was first referred by the Latin grammatical tradition as the “use of the pronominal datives *mihi*, *tibi*, *nobis*, and *vobis* when they are ‘attached to the sentence in a very free manner’ (Hoecke 1996:17). Hoecke offers the following examples from Latin:

(1) *Ego hanc machaeram mihi consolari volo*
 I-NOM this sword-ACC me-DAT console-INF want-1s
 ‘I want to console this dear sword’

(2) *Alter tibi descendit de Palatio*
 Other-NOM you-DAT come down-3s Palatine-ABL
 ‘The other, there you are coming down from the Palatine’ (Hoecke 1996:17)

Hoecke writes that some claim the *dativus ethicus* as a type of verification. However, he says that unlike the “*dativus iudicantis*” (dative of witness) in Latin, the *dativus ethicus* is “not an essential element of the utterance itself” (18). Hoecke is correct that if the utterance is taken as purely self-contained (in the way it is presented here), than the *dativus ethicus* seems nonessential. However, from the point of view of the speaker, the ethical dative asserts what may be an essential affective relation between themselves and the argument. In this way, the dative *mihi* ‘me’ in (1) acts like a possessive, showing that the speaker is invested in the accusative argument *maecharam* ‘sword.’ In (2) the dative mediates the relationship between the speaker and the 3rd person subject, again showing interest or concern. Hence

the ethical dative posits an explicit relationship between an argument and the speaker of a given utterance.

Ethical datives are also found in other romance languages like Portuguese and Spanish mostly in the form of clitics (see Berlinck 1996). In German, the ethical dative is called the “sentential” and like in Latin usually involves the first or second person pronoun. Draye writes that “under the appropriate pragmatic conditions...it occurs freely, usually as a 1st or 2nd person personal pronoun, and clearly is not case-governed by the verb” (Draye 1996:183). Usually the ethical dative indicates that either speaker or addressee is shocked or surprised at a particular action as in (3):

(3) Plötzlich hat er mir zu flüstern angefangen.

Suddenly has he me-DAT to whisper begun

‘To my dissatisfaction/surprise he suddenly began to whisper’ (Draye 1996: 183).

In addition, whereas two dative NPs in one sentence are excluded, a combination of an ethical dative and an adverbial dative are acceptable. This shows that the ethical dative is excluded, as opposed to other datives by being governed by the verb (183). This is shown in (4)

(4) da hat er mir ihm etwas zugeflüstert und...

Then has he me-DAT him-DAT something to-whispered and...

‘Then to my surprise/dissatisfaction, he whispered something to him and... (184)

In his analysis of examples (3) and (4), Draye posits an exception for the ethical dative, showing it to be highly distinct from the core arguments of the utterance. However, we could reanalyze both (3) and (4) as the 3rd person subject whispering something either a) about me (which dissatisfied me) b) that concerned *me* that dissatisfied/surprised me. In the latter analysis (b), the ethical dative slides much more freely into possession, or what is termed here “concern.” However, this can only be ascertained if we understand the utterance in conjunction with the speech event. When there is an actual direct object in German, the possession/free-standing nature of the utterance becomes even more ambiguous.

(5) da hat er mir die Hand auf das Knie gelegt

Then has he me-DAT the hand on the knee put

‘Then (to my dislike/surprise) he put his hand on his knee’

or: “Then he put his hand on my knee” (185)

Draye believes the two possible interpretations of this sentence to be distinctly different, with one as an ‘adverbial’ reading and another as a ‘sentential’ or ‘ethical’ reading. However, they are also similar in that both readings show concern on the part of the speaker for the action taking place. This element of “concern” connects both readings of *mir* ‘me’ either as an “ethical dative” or as a “dative possessor;” it only matters to which argument the concern is directed (‘my knee’ or ‘his knee’) in order to render the utterance clear.

Like in the German examples (3-5), the English ethical dative often connotes “a tone of amazement or affront,” or similar to Latin example (1) the ethical dative can also connote “personal honor” (Gillett 1974:7). However, the English ethical dative allows a speaker to index their affect for a particular argument within the discourse-structure. For instance, in this example from Shakespeare’s *Two Gentleman of Verona* when Launce is talking about his dog:

(6) I came no sooner into the dining chamber but he [3sS] steps me [DAT] to [Silvia’s] trencher, and steals her capon’s leg...He thrusts me [DAT] into the company of three or four gentleman-like dogs, under the duke’s table...[for] a pissing while...I, having been acquainted with the smell before, knew that it was Crab, and goes me [DAT] to the fellow that whips the dogs...He makes me [DAT] no more ado, but whips me out of the chamber. (IV.iv.7-28).

In this dialogue excerpt the speaker, instead of saying “my dog,” liberally uses the ethical dative throughout the verb phrases. The speaker does not opt to say that the dog is “his” by using the possessive pronoun, instead, by employing the ethical dative, he is showing that the dog’s multiple actions directly concern him. In order to understand this particular usage of the ethical dative, one must take into account the argument, ‘he’ the dog, and the speaker’s attitude toward the dog. Consequently, the concern relation, whether it is one of honor or disdain, derives from the explicit relation between the speaker, other participants, and a particular argument within the utterance. While the ethical dative functions in part as a “possessor,” its scope goes much beyond that, indicating a specific affective connection between the speaker and in this case, his dog.

3. The “concerned object” construction in Santali

In the preceding sections an attempt was made to draw out the connection between the “ethical dative” and possession. While this connection is by no means explicit in the Romance and Germanic examples, the examples illustrate that the ethical dative expresses “concern” towards a particular argument, and thus creates an affective relationship between the speaker (or addressee) to a particular object. This object can either be an implicit relationship between speaker or addressee as mediated by a

2nd person ethical dative and a 3rd person singular subject like in (2) or between the speaker and an explicit argument in the discourse like in the English (6). Yet in order to make a typological argument, one must also show that this same relation exists in the grammar of unrelated languages. One example would be the ‘concerned object’ construction from Santali, an Austro-Asiatic language spoken in the eastern part of the Indian subcontinent. The “concerned object” is ostensibly a possessive phrase that is part of the Santali verbal morphology. However, unlike the unmarked form of possession in Santali, this phrase, like the ethical dative, is employed to display affect on the part of the speaker or 3rd person subject towards a particular argument.

In order to understand the “concerned object” construction, a brief overview of Santali’s phonology and verbal morphology is required. Santali’s consonant and vowel inventories are presented in Tables 1 and 2 below:

Table 1 Santali Consonant Inventory (adapted from Neukom 2001, Ghosh 2015)

	Bilabial	Alveolar	Retroflex	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
voiceless	p (p ^h)	t (t ^h)	ʈ (ʈ ^h)	c (c ^h)	k	
Stops						
voiced	b (b ^h)	d (d ^h)	ɖ (ɖ ^h)	ɟ (ɟ ^h) (j j ^h)	g (g ^h)	
glottal	pʼ	tʼ		cʼ	kʼ	
Fricatives		s				h
Nasals	m	n		ɲ (ɲ̃)	ŋ	
Trill		r				
Flap			ɾ			
Lateral		l				
Glides	w			j (y)		

Table 2 Santali Vowel Inventory (with nasalized vowels included, adapted from Neukom 2001)

	Front	Central	Back
High	i ĩ		u ũ
Mid-High	e	ə ə̃	o õ
Mid-Low	ɛ ɛ̃		ɔ ɔ̃
Back		a ă	

the use of the 2sD as a “dativus ethicus” does not only evince the speaker’s concern, but also mediates a concern relationship between the speaker and the addressee. This type of “concern relationship” can also be seen in certain second-person uses of the –ta- morpheme in Santali:

- (12) *tengo-len-me, adɔ -ñ ñel-ta-m-a*
 stand_up-COND:ITR-2sS then-1sS see-CPOSS-2s-FIN
 ‘Stand up, and I shall see what is the matter with you’ (Neukom 2000:102).

In this example, as Neukom notes, “the clause does not contain overt noun phrases of which the noun phrase could be the possessor” (102). So this type of phrase structure effectively revokes the argument that the –ta- morpheme is a traditional possessor. Rather the use of the –ta construction here indicates a concern between the speaker and the addressee, who is indicated as the subject of the preceding clause, and the referring object of the –ta construction by anaphora. Hence the “concern relationship” does not, as in (2), necessarily have to directly concern to a core argument in the clause itself, but rather to some contextualized argument as part of the ongoing interaction.

Like the English example (6), Santali also has an order of concern relationship between the speaker and a third person animate argument. This can be compared to the affective possession displayed in (8) or (10) with the first and second persons respectively. However, also like in (12) it can indicate a concern relationship, where the speaker is discussing an issue that concerns a subject argument and a third party. Like in (12), the 3rd person does not necessarily have to be in an explicit possessor of a noun-phrase in a clause, but can be anaphoric. For instance:

- (13) *tinək'-em dharao-akat'-ta-e-a*
 How much-2sS owe-PF:TR-CPOSS-3s-FIN
 ‘How much do you owe him?’ (Neukom 2000:102)

In this example the speaker is setting up a relationship of concern between the 2sS and the 3sS. The concern is directed not at any particular argument, but the verb phrase, which states something to the effect that ‘this third party ‘him’ is concerned that you owe him how much?’ The speaker emphasizes that the action primarily concerns the third party, since the third party is the creditor. However, in the ethical dative examples it is impossible to locate explicitly the affect within a third person since ethical datives only allow first or second person,⁴ whereas this is very common in Santali. In addition, speakers

can also index multiple affective relationships through the use of more than one –ta- prefix within a single verb phrase. For example:

- (14) *hopon-iñ-də khube-ge-y-e kəmi-ket'-t-e-ti-ñ-a*
 Son-1s:KPOSS-TOP very_much-FOC-y-3sS work-PST:TR-CPOSS-3s-CPOSS-1s-FIN
 ‘This son of mine worked very much and well for him’ (Neukom 2000:111).

In (14), like in (9), we see dual possession. Though there is no explicit genitive morpheme present, the speaker does employ a 1s pronoun attached to the 3sS. In Santali, attaching a stand-alone personal pronoun either before or after an argument indicates kinship possession. Therefore, the mother, who as Neukom notes, is very proudly relating this fact to an old missionary, feels especially affective towards her son, indicating possession both through a 1st person singular kinship-possessor pronoun and a concerned object construction ‘ti-ñ.’ However, in the utterance, the speaker is not simply talking about her relationship to her son, but is also indicating her son’s affective relationship to the predicate, the verb ‘kəmi.’ The speaker is not only proud of her son, but also is proud that her son is a conscientious worker. By using two –ta- constructions in the same sentence, the speaker sets up an affective concern relationship between her and her son, and her son and his work, both critical elements in parsing the meaning of the utterance. Example (14) shows the breadth of the ethical dative-like construction in Santali, covering affective possession of core arguments, affective relationships between speakers and third parties, as well as affective relationships between third parties and other elements like the predicate. It is also interesting to note that Neukom’s gloss posits that the positioning of “concern” here indicates that the speaker is positive about her son, translating the –ta3s as ‘well for him.’ This meaning of course could not be understood without understanding the situation and ongoing interactive environment in which this phrase was uttered, though the missionary noted that the speaker was obviously proud when relating this fact (111).

Finally, original field data shows that the ‘-ta’ particle can also be used in conjunction with imperatives, indexing a relation of concern between participants: speaker (and others present) and the subject, which in the case of imperatives, is the addressee(s). This is accomplished as in (15) and (16) through the combination of a 2nd person pronoun subject and a ta+1st person plural inclusive pronoun (*abo*) instead of the exclusive 1st person (*ale*), which brings all participants into the ambit of the invitation or request, and conveys, as my consultant noted, certain “feelings” on behalf of the speaker towards addressees.

(15) *hijuk'-ta-bon-pe*.
come-CPOSS-1p:INC-2pS:IMP
“Please come (to my home).”

(16) *duɖup'-ta-bon-me*.
Sit-CPOSS-1p:INC-2sS:IMP
“Please sit.”

In (15), for instance, the *-ta+1p:INC (tabon)* + the present verb ‘to come’ along with an imperative 2nd person morpheme is used as a way to invite a group of addressees to the speaker’s home, while in (16), the speaker is requesting a singular subject to sit down. In each case the speaker is a singular subject, yet the use of the 1st person plural inclusive indicates that that the response to the question or the consequence of the command is of broader concern beyond those immediately present in the speech event.⁵

Thus, when looking at these ‘concerned object’ constructions, like with the ethical datives, one must attend not only to how the grammar and the discourse itself conveys affect and concern through grammatical categories, but how these categories interact with relationships between discourse participants and relevant features of the speech situation.

4. Possessor ascension in Spanish as a concern phenomenon

The sections above have highlighted the similarities and differences between ethical datives and possession. They show that in European languages such as Latin, German, and English, the ethical dative does have some possessive function although this is implicit. In Santali, the possessor function is made explicit. In both cases, the realm of “affect” or “concern” can be seen to have a dimension associated with possession, although, as the examples above suggest, their scope extends further. Tuggy has made the argument that sentences which are commonly said to display “possessor ascension,” whereby a genitive is raised and placed into another structural position as a dative, actually is “possessor omission + ethical dative.” He argues this by noting that possessor-ascension does not account for some sentences adequately, but understanding the Spanish datives as ethical datives and showing how they indicate a special affective relationship to the possessed argument that a normal possessor does not accounts more completely for the data. He offers the following examples:

⁵ Thus the concerned participants do not have to actually be present at the time of utterance; ‘ta-bon’ is often only where there are two participants as was the case in (16). In (15) and (16) the relations of concern are extended beyond those present, by anticipating a future event that would be of concern to potential participants as well.

(17) Le ensuciaron el coche.

3s-DAT 3pS:dirtied the car

'They dirtied his car.'

(18) Le robaron todo el dinero

3s-DAT 3pS:robbed all the money

'They robbed all his money'

(19) Le cortaron la mano

3s-DAT 3pS:cut the hand

'They cut his hand off'

(Tuggy 1980:98)

Instead of adopting a “possessor ascension” analysis, Tuggy argues that these sentences can be better accounted for with what he calls “possessor omission” and ethical dative. While the argument is too complex for this short paper,⁶ Tuggy claims that a process of “possessor ascension” is not in fact necessary if one understands the full scope of the ethical dative. An example of an ethical dative in Spanish would be something like the following:

(20) Se le murio el hijo

3s:REFL 3s:DAT died the son

'His son (up and) died (on him)'

(Tuggy 1980: 108)

Tuggy suggests that the ethical dative in (18) and the datives that are “ascended” in (17)-(19) are exactly parallel in that “the final stratum has a noun phrase with the definite article which is understood to be possessed by a person who is represented in the sentence by a dative pronoun” (Tuggy 1980:108). Hence both (20) and (17)-(19) demonstrate a structure of an ethical dative, where a dative is used for an animate object who is in some way concerned with the action taking place, while (20) cannot be accounted for with possessor ascension. While this does not rule out possessor ascension (this is done through his argument of Possessor Omission), it does reveal a point emphasized in this paper, namely that “concern” must be understood at the interface between discourse participation and relations between arguments at the sentence-level.

⁶ See Tuggy 1980 for a complete analysis of how possessor omission is independently motivated in Spanish and how it accounts for a variety of non-initial datives than does possessor ascension

5. Conclusion

The ethical dative is an interesting subject because it opens the door to a number of different ways one can begin to analyze grammatical categories. On the one hand, as studies have noted, the ethical dative indicates some amount of affective investment by the speaker in relation both to the argument and the other discourse participants.⁷ However, many have used that fact to marginalize the ethical dative from proper linguistic analysis. This paper suggests that the ethical dative and related constructions such as the concerned object construction in Santali reveal how the interface between the morpho-syntactic structure of a sentence and participant attitudes intersect and provide clues to the semantic structure of such constructions. Thus, the analysis accounts for the semantics of the arguments of the sentence, the scope of “concern” that an ethical dative extends to other grammatical categories, the ongoing structure of interaction as well as the illocutionary context in which a particular speech act is uttered. In addition to indexing concern for a speaker, addressee, or third party, the “ethical dative” also has a possessive function. “Possession” in the normal use of the term implies a possessor and an object possessed, and that is how the category is understood in terms of genitive case. However, the “ethical dative” offers another view of possession: concern and the object concerned. In this view of possession, it is not a simple relationship of possession, but one that is mediated by the affective position of a speaker, addressee or third party. In some cases, such as in Santali or possibly in Spanish, this “affective possession” has become explicitly grammaticalized.

This preliminary discussion of ethical datives points to further study of the interface between morphosyntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Also, it may allow one to rethink the process of “possessor ascension” in other languages such as French or Choctaw which also use datives in the possessor function. Finally, while it was not discussed here, languages such as Basque where the “ethical dative” is an obligatory part of the grammatical system would be interesting to analyze in the context of the previous discussion.

List of Abbreviations

ABL Ablative
ACC Accusative
ANIM-Animate
CPOSS-Concerned Possession
COND-Conditional
DAT-Dative
dO-Direct Object

⁷ Dubois (2007) argues that the primary relation of ‘stance-taking’ in interaction to be triangular in this respect

FIN-Finite
FOC-Focus
GEN-Genitive
IMP-Imperative
INC-Inclusive
INF-Infinitive
ITR-Intransitive
KPOSS-Kinship Possession
NOM-Nominative
p-Plural
PRS-Present
PS-Past
s-Singular
S-Subject
TR-Transitive

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倫理与格と属格：関心の類型論に向けて

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要旨

本論文はヨーロッパ諸言語にみられる「倫理与格」(ethical dative)問題の解決策として、「関心」(concern)の類型論を提示する。項構造および談話参与者間の関係という観点から「関心の与格」現象を考察することによって、本論文は関心の与格が感情を伴った所有(affective possession)ないし本論文の用語における「関心」の形式として捉えられることを主張する。加えて、本論文は関心の現象が様々な言語、例えば東インドで話されるオーストロアジア系言語であるサンタル語などにおいても観察されることを論じる。「関心」を通言語的に考察し、語用論的・意味論的機能をもった様々な現象を包括することによって、本論文は更なる研究に向けて新たな分野を提示するものである。

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