Personal Datives: A syntactic and intersubjectivity account

Personal dative (PD) constructions, like the Southern English (SE) sentence in (1) and the Lebanese Arabic (LA) sentence in (2), contain nonargument dative pronouns that express the attitude of the speaker towards the subject involvement with the event depicted by the predicate. PD’s normally take the subject as antecedent. They are considered non-arguments because their deletion does not affect the truth condition of the sentences.

(1) *Sue bought her a nice jacket for her boyfriend.
(2) Layla ḥakalit-l-a liʔme la-tsidd juːʕ-a
      Layla ate.3.S.F-DAT-3.S.F a bite to-stop/plug hunger-3.S.F
‘Layla ate a bite to stop feeling hungry; it wasn’t a big thing.’

PD constructions are mysterious from a Binding Theory perspective because they occupy a position where a SELF-anaphor is expected. Conroy (2007) argues that PD’s are SE-anaphors. I show that PD’s are neither SELF- nor SE-anaphors, and I account for their choice of antecedent by referring to Accessibility Theory (Ariel 1989) and (inter)subjectivity theories as proposed in Traugott 2003 and Langacker 2007.

To account for the non-anaphoric nature of PD’s, I adopt the movement approach to Binding Theory (Grohmann 2003). Grohmann argues that a mono-clausal sentence contains three Prolific Domains: thematic (vP), phi (IP), and discourse (CP). Movement within a Prolific Domain is illicit unless the lower copy is pronounced. Grohmann further argues that SELF-anaphors are the result of movement within the Thematic Domain, (3a); they are copy spell-outs that are inserted in the derivation (similar to dummy do’s), (3b), and their job is to save the structure.

(3) a. [vP Sue [vP loves *She]] b. [vP Sue [vP loves herself]]

Unlike SELF-anaphors, PD’s are unselected arguments since they do not belong to the thematic grid of the predicate. Thus, they fall outside the Thematic Domain. Boneh and Nash (2010), building on Pylkkänen 2002/2008, argue that PD’s merge as high applicatives above vP. Assuming that they merge in the Phi Domain, this means that they are not related to the subject through movement. This is why they are not subject to the B Condition of the Binding Theory.

Conroy (2007) argues that PD’s are SE-anaphors. For example, she holds that PD’s yield a sloppy reading under ellipses, (4). I show that Conroy’s evidence is suspect. For example, the sloppy reading is not always available, as (5) illustrates. The same applies in LA.

(4) *I bought me a pair of shoes, and Nelly did too (buy herself a pair of shoes).
(5) *I bought me a pair of shoes for my boyfriend, and believe it or not that bitch his ex did too
      (bought my boyfriend a pair of shoes, and I don’t think that her purchase was an
      accomplishment; that is, *she bought her a pair of shoes for my boyfriend).

If PD’s are not anaphors, what are they? Webelhuth and Dannenberg (2006) argue that SE PD constructions are idioms. I show that this is also true for LA. For instance, the meaning of a PD construction cannot be completely inferred from the meanings of the individual words and their order. Note the contrast between SE and LA in (1) and (2) above. In order to express a sense of accomplishment, LA PD constructions must contain a PD that refers to the hearer, (6). At the same time, a PD that refers to the hearer or speaker in LA may imply that the subject’s involvement with the event is viewed negatively, (7).

(6) Layla raʔas ʕit-l-ik maʕ huni:k ʃab (bijannin)
      Layla danced.3.S.F-DAT-2.S.F with there guy (stunning)
‘Layla danced with an amazing guy (stunning).’
Layla goes out 3.S.F-DAT 1.S/2.S.M every day with guy different
‘Layla goes out with a different guy every day; this is unacceptable.’

I suggest that PD’s are linguistic markers that index (inter)subjectivity à la (Traugott 2003). They allow speakers to express their beliefs and attitudes, as well as their awareness of the addressee’s attitudes and beliefs. I also suggest that PD’s determine their referent through accessibility. PD’s are unstressed pronouns/clitics. According to Ariel (1988), these are high accessibility markers in that they require a salient antecedent, such as a discourse topic. Rizzi and Shlonsky hold that “subjects … share an interpretive property of topics, the ‘aboutness’ relation linking subjects and predicates as well as topics and comments” (2007: 118). Therefore, subjects are good candidates for high accessibility markers like PD’s.

Other salient discourse elements are the speaker and hearer (Bhat 2004), mainly due to their role as conceptualizers in a communicative interaction (Langacker 2007). According to Langacker, in a communicative interaction, there is an object of conception, which is the focus of the communication, and it occupies what Langacker calls the “onstage region.” The speaker and hearer, on the other hand, are the subjects of conception or the conceptualizers. They lie “at the very margin of awareness” (2007: 171). I suggest that by using 1st or 2nd person PD’s, the speaker moves herself or the hearer to the onstage region, along with their attitudes and beliefs.

In this paper, I show that PD’s are syntactically free in that they are not related to any other element through movement. Thus, their construal is dependent on discourse/pragmatic factors. I also show that their choice of referent is determined through accessibility and (inter)subjectivity.