The emergence of the Dutch prepositional dative construction

As illustrated in (1) below, present-day Dutch displays the well-known phenomenon of dative alternation: the large majority of verbs of giving, as well as verbs from a number of other, semantically related verb classes, can be used in two largely functionally equivalent argument structure constructions, viz. (a) the *double object construction* in which the theme and recipient arguments are both encoded as zero-marked objects and (b) the *prepositional dative construction* in which only the theme argument appears as a zero-marked object and the recipient argument is marked with a preposition, usu. *aan* (see, e.g., Van Belle & Van Langendonck 1996; Colleman 2009).

The present paper zooms in on the emergence of the prepositional dative construction with *aan* (which is cognate with English *on* and German *an*), as an alternative for the double object construction in the early stages of Modern Dutch. It is received wisdom that the history of Dutch grammar—just like the history of English and several other Germanic languages, for that matter—is characterised by a general shift towards the prepositional marking of semantic functions, as a result of the loss of morphological case. In that sense, the emergence of *aan* as a recipient marker in (Early) Modern Dutch—see (2) and (3) for early examples with prototypical verbs of giving—can be related to the virtually complete loss of the dative/accusative distinction in Middle Dutch. However, with the exception of a preliminary study by Weijnen & Gordijn (1970), the details of this process have never been investigated. This is a pity, as, from a diachronic construction grammar perspective, the emergence of the *aan*-dative raises all kinds of interesting questions:

- Which verbs of giving, if any, played a pathbreaking role in the emergence of this new construction?
- How does the new ‘recipient’ function of *aan* relate to the preposition’s functions in earlier language stages?
- When and how did the construction expand its semantic range to include other subclasses of dative verbs, such as verbs of communication (e.g. 4) and verbs of refusal (e.g. 5)?
- To what extent was the choice between the *aan*-dative and the double object construction in earlier sub-stages of Modern Dutch determined by the same (kinds of) factors known to determine the dative alternation today?
I will address these questions on the basis of a dataset of over 2,500 instances of the aan-dative from a corpus spanning the period 1600–1900. First, using collostructional analysis (Stefanowitsch & Gries 2003), I will reconstruct the construction’s semantic range in 17th century Dutch. Then I will document its expansion towards more verbs and verb classes in 18th and 19th century language and investigate, for each sub-period, which (classes of) verbs are particularly attracted to the aan-dative in terms of frequency. The investigation will add to the growing body of constructionist work on the diachrony of ditransitive constructions in Germanic languages (Rohdenburg 1995, Barðdal 2007, Barðdal, Sveen & Kristiansen 2011, Colleman & De Clerck 2011).

Examples
(1) a. De man heeft zijn broer een boek gegeven/overhandigd/verkocht/aangeboden/beloofd.
   ‘The man has given/handed/sold/offered/promised his brother a book’
   b. De man heeft een boek aan zijn broer gegeven/overhandigd/verkocht/aangeboden/beloofd.
   ‘The man has given/handed/sold/offered/promised a book to his brother’
(2) ... dat ... het lichaem wederom sij aan den vrînden gaeven.
   ‘... that they returned the body to the relatives.’
(P.C. Hooft, Achilles en Polyxena, 1600)
(3) en was vercocht van Iacob Raeuwaert, aan (ick meen) den Graef van der Lip
   and was sold of PN PN AAN I presume the count PN
   ‘... and it was sold by Jacob Raeuwaert to, I presume, the Count van der Lip.’
   (Karel van Mander, Het Schilder-boeck, 1604)

References


