Oh, the humanness: the dative marking of affected human patients in Hebrew

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Abstract

As a grammatical case, the essential function of the Dative (crosslinguistically) is to describe a particular relation between a state of affairs (an event or a state) to a referent. That is, it is a tool provided by the language for the speaker to portray how a specific situation is related to an entity in the world. If so, what is unique about the Dative? What is the difference between the Dative and other cases, other tools the language provides for describing relations between situations and referents, like the Accusative, or the Nominative, for instance, that also mark relations between a referent and a state of affairs? The Dative, as its syntactic status in many languages suggests (an Indirect Object), marks indirect relations. Such indirect relations are manifested as an indirect or partially affected participant in an event, or as a secondary, non-inherent participant in a situation. This type of relations is usually related to cognitive, rather than physical, involvement (Dąbrowska, 1997). This quality of the Dative, I argue in the present talk, is unique to the marking of human patients. Human patients tend to be marked as non-canonical direct objects (Haskemath, 2001), and their patient status is marked relative to an inanimate theme. That is, human patients are marked as going through an incomplete change of state. In the present talk I show that when a choice of dative vs. accusative marking is available, it is the communicative need to mark the humanness of the referent that guides dative marking. Using a corpus analysis (Dattner, 2015), I argue that this communicative demand of humanness marking is related to a conceptualization of the referent as a more subject-like or more object-like entity.
References

