

Argument alternation as a p-demotion strategy: Evidence from Indo-European

Eystein Dahl & Tania Ahmad

Adam Mickiewicz University, Adam Mickiewicz University

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Argument alternations represent a common inherited morphosyntactic phenomenon across the ancient Indo-European languages. While a variety of alternation patterns exist, they most commonly involve the object argument, as illustrated by the examples from Vedic Sanskrit and Homeric Greek in (1).

(1) a. *sadyó yáj jātó ápibo ha sómam*
ADV CONJ be.born:PPP drink:IPF.2SG PTCL soma:ACC.SG
'On the very same day you were born, you drank the soma' (RV III 32.9 [Vedic Sanskrit])

b. *kuvít sómasya ápām*
INTERROG soma:GEN.SG drink:AOR.1SG
'Have I drunken soma?' (RV X 119.1 [Vedic Sanskrit])

c. *ho d' epeì píen haíma kelainón*
3SG.NOM PTCL ADV drink:AOR.1SG black:ACC.SG blood:ACC.SG
'And then he drank the black blood' (Hom., Od. 11.98)

d. *haímatos hóphra píō*
blood:GEN.SG CONJ drink:AOR.SBJ.1SG
'So that I may drink blood' (Hom., Od. 11.96)

These examples suffice to illustrate that the accusative characteristically triggers a definite reading, whereas the genitive is associated with an indefinite reading and most scholars agree that this alternation in part reflects the partitive function of the genitive in the Indo-European languages (cf. e.g., Conti and Luraghi 2014, Cepraga 2022, Dahl 2009, 2014, Napoli 2006). Analogous alternation patterns are shown by several semantic classes of predicates, suggesting that object alternation does not represent an idiosyncratic feature of individual verbs. It rather seems to be a more general morphosyntactic strategy for differentiating between various types of objects, thus being classifiable as a p-demotion strategy. In contrast, alternations involving the subject argument occur much less frequently and mostly involves the subject argument of unaccusative monovalent predicates, thus strengthening the assumption that this phenomenon is a type of p-demotion.

This paper explores how different types of argument alternation relate to different types of verbs across the Indo-European languages, aiming to include data from all known branches. Drawing on previous work by Dahl (2009), we assume that the availability of argument alternation presupposes that the predicate has a relatively low inherent semantic transitivity. This is reflected in the fact that this construction type is unavailable for prototypically transitive verbs such as *kill*, *destroy*, *build* etc., that is, verbs inherently implying a highly agentive first argument and a highly patientive second argument (cf., e.g., Dowty 1991).

As we will show, there is considerable variation across the Indo-European branches regarding the use of argument alternation. The present paper represents the first attempt to explore this phenomenon in detail across the Indo-European languages.

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