

Prof. UAM dr. hab. Krystof Stroński
Adam Mickewicz University in Poznań
Collegium Novum al. Niepoldegłości 4
61-875 Poznań
Poland

Faculty of
Arts and Humanities
Institute of German Studies

Univ.-Prof. Dr. Stefan Hartmann
Professor of German Linguistics

Phone +49 211 81-13684
E-Mail hartmast@hhu.de

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Review of the doctoral dissertation “Benefaction in Polish: An analysis of the interplay with related functions” by Piotr Wyroślak

**Heinrich Heine University
Düsseldorf**
Universitätsstraße 1
40225 Düsseldorf
Building 24.53
Level U1 Room 94
www.hhu.de

The dissertation under review deals with benefaction in Polish. The term *benefaction* refers to the linguistic construal of a situation in which someone is (positively) affected by something. The work is structured in ten major sections, starting out with theoretical and definitional chapters and then moving on to three empirical case studies. After a brief introduction in Section 1, Section 2 offers an in-depth overview of the concept of benefaction and the definitional problems it entails: it is not always clear what it means for something or someone to be “affected”, nor is the evaluation of the affectedness as “positive” always unambiguous. Benefaction is also closely related to a number of other functions which are discussed in some detail as well, before the section moves on to formal means of expressing benefaction in Polish. Section 3 is dedicated to the overarching theoretical and methodological framework in which the dissertation is anchored, viz. functional and constructionist approaches. The author discusses three perspectives on functional complexity that are relevant for the theoretical background of the dissertation: (i) form-function relations are many-to-many relations, (ii) uses of a form may be polyfunctional, (iii) formal and functional categories are non-discrete. This of course entails challenges for the methodological operationalization of the pertinent categories; these are addressed in the second part of the section, which introduces the corpus-based methods that the author has applied in his case studies.

Sections 4 and 5 present the first case study, zeroing in on the alternation between the Polish dative and the preposition *dla* ‘for (the sake)’. Section 4 lays out the theoretical background, discussing in detail the benefactive potential of both alternants. Section 5 then presents an empirical case study of this alternation. To find instances of the two constructions in maximally similar contexts, the author uses the valency database Walenty to find “schema doubles”, i.e. schemas for verb lemmas for which one entry

with the dative and one entry with a *d/a*-PP is attested. He then compiles all possible combinations for the schemas and annotates them as “paired”, “blendable”, or “residual”. “Paired” means that the schemas are identical (except for target phrases) and can be assumed to be functionally near-equivalent, while “blendable” means that despite some differences, the doubles can subsume identical material under ellipsis, which is why they can be considered functionally near-equivalent. Where available, the author also uses Walenty’s semantic annotation information to determine whether two schemas count as “blendable”. All schema pairs that do not fall into one of the two aforementioned categories are subsumed under the “residual” category. The 296 pairs categorized as “paired” or “blendable” are subjected to further qualitative analysis, which is complemented by a quantitative analysis of n-gram pairs obtained from the Polish National Corpus. Based on the n-gram pairs, the author discusses to what extent the constructions are interchangeable in different contexts (e.g., verbs of producing and creating, of acquisition, etc.).

Sections 6 and 7 are dedicated to the second case study, which explores the benefactive potential of the dative reflexive marker *sobie/se* in its interplay with other functions. Section 6 gives an overview of the numerous functions that the marker can fulfill. The author argues that *sobie/se* is mainly used as an axionormative marker, i.e. it is used to construe something as ‘normal’ (and morally legitimate). Importantly, these normative functions are argued to interact closely with those of benefaction and volitionality. Section 7 sets out to empirically validate this hypothesis on the basis of data from two components of SPOKES, a corpus of Polish conversational data. A first analysis focuses on verbs of motion and posture, showing that *sobie/se* tends to combine with delimitative verbs with the prefix *po-* as well as with path-backgrounding verbs. A follow-up study uses Multiple Correspondence Analysis to zoom in on the use of *siedzieć* with and without *sobie/se*, showing that the latter is often used in “narrative” contexts, which is argued to support the idea that *sobie/se* tends to be applied to ordinary, backgrounded situations.

Sections 8 and 9 present the last case study, which is concerned with impersonal *-ne/-te* participles and related constructions. Again, the first of the two chapters outlines the current state of the art and gives a theoretical overview of the constructions in question, while the second delves into the empirical exploration of the pattern, drawing on Twitter data and using n-gram and skip-gram analyses as well as Principal Components Analysis, hierarchical clustering, and network analysis. It is shown that the construction is often used in an “extravagant”, humorous sense in which the core meaning of ‘task completion’ clashes with evidence of incompleteness or failure provided by the context. As for the latter, the author also takes a multimodal and intertextual perspective, showing that additional cues

such as pictures or URLs often contribute context that is indispensable for fully understanding the intended meaning of the participles. Section 10 summarizes the main results of the dissertation.

Overall, this is a highly convincing thesis that adds important theoretical insights to the linguistic discussion and uses an impressive range of data and methods. The dissertation is structured very clearly and written in an engaging, highly readable style. The research questions are clearly formulated, and the author triangulates evidence from multiple sources to tackle them. A broad set of empirical methods is used in innovative and creative ways. Each methodological decision is well-thought-through and well-justified. Importantly, the author is always very clear about the limitations of his case studies, sometimes to the point of arguably underselling them.

Still there are some minor criticisms that should be pointed out. Firstly, the theoretical discussion of benefaction and related functions could be clearer: The author correctly observes that benefaction is notoriously hard to define, and that it is closely related to other functions, but he somehow shies away from trying to offer a clear definition of what does and what does not count as benefaction. To some extent, this is of course a deliberate – and understandable – choice because there are significant overlaps between benefaction and other functions. Nevertheless, despite or even because of the elusiveness of the notion of benefaction, I think the dissertation would have benefitted from a more rigorous attempt to pin down this concept by defining clear criteria that allow for assessing whether or not a construction can count as benefactive. This does not preclude the possibility of allowing for grey zones between benefaction and related categories – quite to the contrary, it would maybe allow for a more systematic modelling of the prototype/family-resemblance structure of these categories, akin to e.g. Jurafsky's network model of the functions of diminutives across languages (Jurafsky, Daniel. 1996. *Universal Tendencies in the Semantics of the Diminutive*. *Language* 72(3). 533–578.).

Another small criticism pertains to the way the empirical case studies are presented: First of all, they would be easier to follow if there was an overview of the different studies reported in a chapter (and, perhaps more importantly, their respective goals) at the beginning of each empirical chapter. Secondly, the main findings of each study with regard to the overarching topic of benefaction could be summarized even more succinctly. While the author does a good job at discussing the results in a very differentiated and nuanced way, the concluding sections at the end of the empirical chapters often focus more on the appropriateness and the limitations of the methodological approaches than on the actual main results. This relates to my statement above that the author sometimes undersells his

ideas and findings: He does have very innovative ideas and hypotheses and uses cutting-edge methods to test them, but they could be presented in a slightly bolder way, especially so in the conclusion sections of the empirical chapters – even if the results turn out partly inconclusive, these are still great ideas that deserve to be pursued further. In a similar vein, the explorative nature of the case studies is perhaps evoked a bit too often, usually in connection with the limitations of the case studies. If the author decides to revise the thesis for a book publication (which I hope!), I would recommend to stress the explorative character of the entire study in the introduction and to focus more on the added value and the innovativeness of the empirical approaches chosen by the author in the individual chapters.

Despite the minor criticisms, this is an outstanding PhD thesis full of innovative ideas and using a broad array of state-of-the art empirical methods. In my view, it should be **considered for distinction** for the following reasons: Firstly, the combination of an in-depth theoretical treatment of the topic with an extensive and versatile set of empirical approaches is exemplary. Secondly, each of the three case studies contributes significantly to our understanding of benefaction in Polish (and beyond!), and in addition to that, the case studies complement each other extraordinarily well. Thirdly, the empirical analyses are painstakingly detailed, and to anyone who is familiar with corpus linguistics, it is clear that the seemingly simple figures and tables are the result of many years of hard annotation work, including the development of annotation schemes and guidelines tailored to the specific research question. And finally, the thesis is written in a very engaging, reader-friendly way and in an excellent style. The author never loses track of the research questions and at the same time always guides the reader through the complex subject matter, making it easy to follow even for someone with a very limited knowledge of Polish.

All in all, this is a highly convincing dissertation that shows that the author is both an excellent theoretical linguist deeply familiar with the relevant work in usage-based linguistics, Construction Grammar, and typology, and an expert in the versatile use of statistical and data science methods.

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