

Grammar Revision 5: Verbs with Two Objects – Giving and Transmitting

Verbs of giving, telling, teaching and the like take two objects. What is given, told, taught etc. corresponds to the direct or accusative object, while the recipient or beneficiary of the action, usually personal, corresponds to the indirect or dative object: “to give sth. (*dir. obj.*) to so. (*indir. obj.*)”.

An act of giving or transmitting can simply be expressed by the construction verb – direct object – indirect object:

與人規矩	to give a man a compass and a square
授孟子室	to give Master Meng a house
后稷教人稼穡	Lord Millet taught men sowing and reaping.
與犬肉	to give meat to a dog
賜臣金	to bestow metal on a minister

The direct object can be replaced by a phrase governed by the preposition (or, as some say, coverb) *yǐ* 以. Since its verbal meaning is ‘to take’, the literal meaning of these constructions is “to take and give / transmit etc.”.

堯以天下與舜	[The mythical ruler] Yáo gave the realm to [the mythical ruler] Shùn.
以玉與之	to give jade to him

The phrase introduced by *yǐ* 以 can either precede the main verb or follow it, as in this example:

教人以善	to teach others goodness
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As always, the object pronoun *zhī* 之 can be omitted after *yǐ* 以 (some grammarians call this usage “pregnant *yǐ* 以”, because the preposition seems to incorporate its object). In these cases, *yǐ* 以 must precede the main verb:

以與之	to give it to him
以告孟子	[He] announced this to Master Meng.

There are verbs referring to processes one might call “reversed transmission” in which the subject, not the indirect object, is the recipient. Which such verbs the indirect object turns into the source of the direct object that is transmitted:

奪之食	to rob him of his food
奪民時	to rob the people of their time

While the indirect object in the preceding examples was identifiable by its position in the sentence (immediately following the verb), some verbs require the use of the preposition *yú* 於 to mark the beneficiary of the transmission process.

獻玉於君	to present jade to a prince
傳天下於賢	to hand the realm on to a worthy man
託妻子於友	to entrust one’s wife and son to a friend

The way these verbs are used is thus similar to verbs describing the motion of objects like the following:

棄灰於街	to discard ashes on the street
投石於池中	to throw a stone into a pond

A similar construction is used with verbs of “reversed transmission”, notably ‘hearing’ and ‘asking, enquiring’, but here the source of the object that is transmitted is part of a prepositional phrase with *yú* 於:

吾聞之於夫子	I heard this from the Master.
君問政於我	The prince asked me about governance.
受命於君	to receive a command / mandate from the prince

In these cases, pronominal *yān* 焉 (= **yú zhī* 於之) can substitute for the prepositional phrase:

獻玉焉	to present jade to him
託妻子焉	to entrust wife and son to him
孔子使弟子問焉曰	Master Kong sent the disciples to ask her: “[...]”
[...]	