

# The Polysemy of Swedish *ge* 'give' from a Crosslinguistic Perspective

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## Abstract

The polysemy of the Swedish verb *ge* 'give' is described and contrasted to English *give* based on data from the English Swedish Parallel Corpus (ESPC). The major extended uses of Swedish *ge* have parallels in other languages judging from the typological description by Newman [1996]. At a general level, the set of major extended meanings in Swedish and English are shared with the exception of the use of *ge* as a motion verb (*Peter gav sig av* 'Peter left.'). which is language-specific. In spite of that, the correspondence between the two cognates *ge* and *give* is very complex at a fine-grained level of analysis.

## 1 Introduction

This paper is one in a series dealing with Swedish verbs of possession from a crosslinguistic perspective. In Table 1, the frequencies of the ten most frequent verbs of possession in Swedish in "The Stockholm-Umeå Corpus" [SUC 1997] are shown in comparison to the ten most frequent verbs of possession in the British National Corpus (BNC) according to the frequency list prepared by Kilgariff [1998]. (The semantic classification in both cases is the sole responsibility of the present author.) The texts in SUC represent a wide range of genres and were chosen according to principles similar to the ones used for the Brown corpus.

As can be observed in Table 1, a few verbs dominate both in Swedish and English in terms of frequency which motivates an in-depth study of the most frequent verbs. The polysemy of the rather language-specific Swedish possession verb *få* 'get; may' has been treated in an earlier study [Viberg 2002]. Its closest equivalent in English is *get*, but there is a striking contrast already with respect to the relative frequency of the two verbs. As is shown in Table 1, *få* covers 0.45% of all the running words (%W) in the Swedish corpus in comparison to *get* which covers 0.22% in the BNC. This study will be concerned with another basic verb within the field, namely Swedish *ge* 'give', which has a meaning that universally tends to be realised as a basic verb with a characteristic set of extended meanings [Newman 1996]. Primarily, *ge* will be compared to English *give* which is a cognate. In relation to the earlier study of *få* and *get*, which compared rather language-specific basic verbs, the present study will contrast two basic verbs that could be expected to be similar to a high degree and this turns out to hold at a general level. At first, it can be observed that the relative frequency of *ge* (0.16%) is rather similar to that of *give* (0.13%). However, since both verbs have complex patterns of extended meanings and can be used in a wide range of syntactic constructions, there is ample room for contrasting patterns at a more detailed level.

English (based on BNC)				Swedish (based on SUC)			
Rank	Verb	Frequency	% W	% W	Verb	Gloss	Frequency
1	have	1375636	1.38	1.38	ha	'have'	13826
2	get	220940	0.22	0.45	få	'get'	4588
3	take	179220	0.18	0.23	ta	'take'	2291
4	give	131417	0.13	0.16	ge	'give'	1630
5	need	62201	0.06	0.03	betala	'pay'	292
6	keep	50092	0.05	0.03	köpa	'buy'	251
7	provide	47923	0.05	0.02	sälja	'sell'	236
8	pay	36665	0.04	0.02	sakna	'lack'	197
9	buy	25582	0.03	0.02	äga	'own'	174
10	send	24816	0.02	0.02	räcka	'hand'	157
Total number of words in corpus		100 million					1 million

%W = % of the total number of words in the corpus

Table 1. The the ten most frequent verbs of possession in English and Swedish

The analysis of the patterns of polysemy of *ge* and *give* is based on the complete set of occurrences of Swedish *ge* and English *give* in the English Swedish Parallel Corpus (ESPC) prepared by Altenberg & Aijmer [2000], which contains original texts in English and Swedish together with their translations. The texts are divided into two broad genres: Fiction and Non-fiction with several subcategories.

The degree of intertranslatability between words that are the closest equivalents in two languages being compared gives a general indication of their semantic similarity. The Swedish possession verb *få* treated in the earlier study turned out to be very language-specific with respect to its semantic patterning. Its closest equivalent in English *get* was used as a translation of only 11.7% of the 2043 occurrences of *få* in the Swedish original texts in the ESPC. In comparison to that, Swedish *ge* and English *give* are more similar as shown in Table 2. In the top row, the frequencies of *ge* and *give* in the original texts are shown. The next two rows show the frequency of the equivalent in the translated texts in absolute numbers and as percentage.

Swedish originals				English originals			
	Fiction	Non-Fict.	Total		Fiction	Non-Fict.	Total
<i>ge</i>	312	506	818	<i>give</i>	410	382	792
<i>give</i>	148	167	315	<i>ge</i>	169	162	331
%	47.4	33.0	38.5	%	41.2	42.4	41.8

Table 2. The degree of intertranslatability between Swedish *ge* and English *give*.

## 2 An Overview of the Major Meanings

In this section, each of the major meanings (presented in boldface) of Swedish *ge* will be briefly described and illustrated with examples from the ESPC. Some of these meanings will be commented on more in detail in later sections. The following example shows the prototypical meaning of *ge*:

### Concrete possession

I stället har de **givit** mig en färg-tv. PCJ      Instead, they have **given** me a colour TV.

In its prototypical meaning, *ge* describes the act by one human individual of transferring possession of something concrete to another individual. This meaning is referred to as Concrete Possession, since certain abstract uses like 'give an idea' might also be regarded as a kind of transfer of possession.

The relationships between the various extended meanings which will be treated now are shown in Figure 1. The prototypical meaning, which is shown in the centre of the figure, can be broken down into a number of componential meanings. A human agent which simultaneously functions as a source of motion transfers the possession of an object to a human receiver. The extended meanings to a great extent can be accounted for as a focusing of various componential meanings. At the top of Figure 1, a number of meanings are displayed in which the source of the transfer is focused and the receiver is backgrounded. The receiver can be backgrounded even when *ge* refers to Concrete Possession. Typically, *ge* in that case is combined with the particle *bort* 'away'. The meaning of *ge* in such a use approaches 'dispose of', 'get rid of' even if an unspecified receiver is implied:

Och ett värdelöst gammalt orv som dom lika      They had accepted money for a worthless  
gärna kunnat elda upp eller **gett bort** hade      scythe shaft that they could easily have  
dom tagit emot pengar för. SC                      burnt or **given away**.

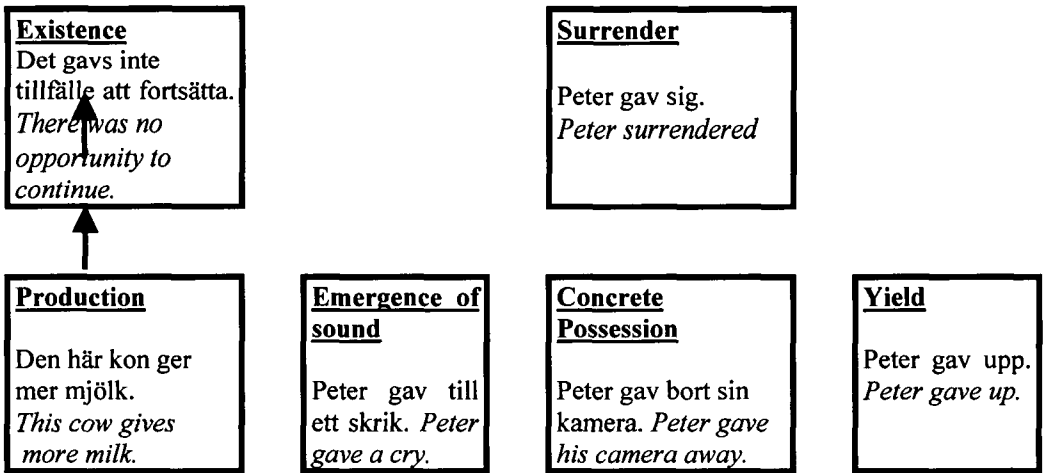
A receiver is totally absent in the following use, where *ge* refers to the emergence of a sense impression. At most, an experiencer is implied:

### Emergence of sound and other sensory phenomena

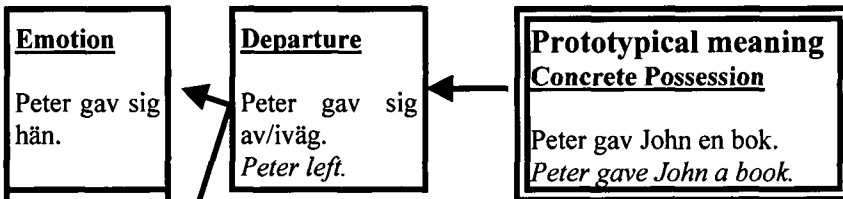
Den darrade i hela kroppen och **gav ifrån**      It was trembling all over and **making**  
**sig** otäcka ljud, AP                                      horrible noises,

In this use, *ge* is typically combined with the particle *ifrån* which indicates the source (in combination with the reflexive pronoun *sig*) or the particle *till* indicating a momentary event (*Hon gav till ett tjut först, AL / She let out a shriek at first.*).

**1. Focus on Source (Receiver backgrounded)**



**2. Focus on motion**



**3. Abstract objects**

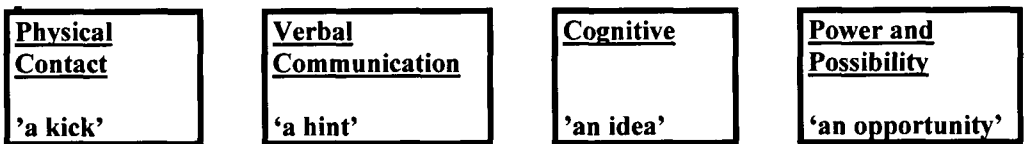


Figure 1. The basic patterns of polysemy of Swedish ge 'give'

An interesting use, which will be commented on more in detail below is the use of *ge* as a verb of Production or Cause. As is well-known, there is a close relationship between Cause and Source which motivates the inclusion of this meaning among the ones which focus Source. In this use, the subject normally is non-human:

**Production/Cause**

Han fann att själva lokomotivets tyngd *gav* He found the locomotive's own weight  
den erforderliga friktionen. JMY *created* the necessary friction.

Production indicates an event that causes something to exist. It is interesting to note that the passive form of *ge* can be used to indicate existence, even if this is an infrequent use:

**Existence (relatively infrequent)**

Här *ges* inte plats till en heltäckande nordisk *There is* no room here for a detailed  
ekonomisk historia; HG economic history of the Nordic countries,

A rather specific meaning which is treated separately primarily because of its relatively high frequency is Yield/Surrender which seems to cover at least two different types of relationships to other meanings of *ge* as shown in Figure 1. (In Table 3 below, these are collapsed to one category since there are intermediary cases which are difficult to separate in the counting.)

**Yield/Surrender**

Hon *gav sig* aldrig. AP She never *gave in*.

One construction expressing this meaning in Swedish is the reflexive *ge sig* which is primarily translated *give in*. This appears to be related to the idea of giving oneself away to the the victor even if the construction normally has a meaning that is more abstract than this. The most frequent expression within this group of meanings is the combination *ge upp* which directly corresponds to *give up* in English:

Då och då satte han i gång någon ny Every now and then he would go on some  
bantningskur men brukade snart *ge upp*. SW new diet, but he generally *gave up* pretty  
quickly.

The motion away of the object from the subject is one of the central meaning components of the verb 'give'. The motion component can be focused. In Swedish, the object can be realised in a reflexive form to describe the departure of the subject. In this use, the verb is combined with one of the spatial verbal particles, in particular with *av* 'off' or *iväg* 'away'(This meaning will be described more in detail in a separate section below.):

**Motion: Departure**

Mia *gav sig iväg* efter samtalet. KE Mia *left* after the conversation.

There is a wide range of uses where *ge* is combined with an abstract noun functioning as an object. In many cases, it is difficult to decide which components of the meaning of the

combination belong to *ge* and which belong to the abstract noun. It would, however, be misleading to regard the combination as an idiom since many of the combinations follow a productive pattern. The meanings of this type of combinations are classified on the basis of the meaning of the abstract noun as can be seen in the lower part of Figure 1. When *ge* is combined with nouns referring to physical contact such as 'kick' and 'punch' or nouns referring to verbal communication such as 'answer' and 'permission', *ge* has a meaning that represents a more schematic version of the prototype. Similar to the prototype, the verb refers to one human individual acting on another individual functioning as a receiver or experiencer but in this case physical energy or information is transferred instead of something concrete.

### Physical Contact

När jag inte rör mig, *ger* han mig *en fast knuff* framåt, PCJ

When I don't move of my own accord, he *gives* me *a firm shove* forward,

In the following example, *ge besked* 'give information' has been translated with a verbal communication verb:

### Verbal Communication

Till slut la han på luren och *gav besked* till Ebba om att de inte skulle störas den närmaste halvtimmen. HM

At last he put down the receiver and *told* Ebba they were not to be disturbed for the next half-hour.

When the object of *ge* is a mental noun such as *intryck* 'impression', *idé* 'idea' or *påminnelse* 'reminder', the subject is often non-human and its role is Stimulus (or Phenomenon). The indirect object which is optional in many of these examples has the role Experiencer:

### Mental

Vägen *gav* också *intryck av* att vara bättre underhållen och mer använd. HM

The road also *gave the impression of* being better maintained and more often used.

Olyckan i Japan har återigen *gett oss en påminnelse om* de oerhörda riskerna i samband med kärnkraft. EOLS

Mr President, the accident in Japan has again *reminded us of* the very great risks associated with nuclear power.

A last group of meanings that has been identified is tentatively called Power and Possibility. A rather frequent combination belonging to this group is *ge möjlighet* 'give an opportunity' and the semantically related *ge en chans* 'give a chance'. Since the abstract noun is often modified by an infinitive phrase these combinations can serve as markers of modality:

### Power and Possibility

Amsterdamfördraget *ger* oss denna *möjlighet*. EHUL

The Treaty of Amsterdam *enables* us to do this.

Det goda arbetet *ger* den enskilde *möjlighet* att känna gemenskap med andra. SOC  
 Good working life *gives* the individual *an opportunity* of social participation with others.

Solveig, *ge oss kraft att...* fortsätta. GT  
 Solveig, *give us the power to...* continue.

The frequencies of the major meanings of *ge* in the Swedish original texts in the ESPC are summed up in Table 3. Since there are sometimes very striking differences between Fiction and Non-fiction, these genres are presented separately. N shows the total number of occurrences of *ge* in each genre. The columns marked %N show for each genre how many percent each meaning covers out of the total number of occurrences. The last two columns have been included in order to show to what extent English *give* is used as a translation of each meaning. In this case, the total number of occurrences of *ge* in a specific meaning forms the basis and the two columns marked %give indicate in percent to what extent *give* has been used as a translation.

	Swedish originals		English translations	
	Fiction	Non-fiction	Fiction	Non-fiction
N	312	506		
<u>Meanings</u>	% of N	% of N	% give	% give
Concrete Possession	17	4	74	43
Yield/Surrender	12	2	74	56
Sound etc emergence	4	0.4	18	0
Production/Cause	4	25	17	27
Existence	1	1	0	0
Motion	13	2	0	0
Physical Contact	6	1	45	0
Verbal Communication	14	15	52	36
Mental	8	13	63	40
Power and Possibility	4	16	50	33
Other abstract meanings	16	20	43	36

Table 3. Major meanings of Swedish *ge* and their relation to English *give*

The prototypical meaning Concrete Possession can serve as an example of what can be read out of the table. There were 54 occurrences of *ge* indicating Concrete Possession in the Fiction texts. This amounts to 17% of the 312 occurrences of *ge* in that genre, which is a relatively high figure even if Concrete Possession is far from dominating in any absolute sense. However, the prototypical meaning accounts for only 4% of the 506 occurrences in Non-fiction. Even if a difference in this direction can be expected between Fiction and Non-fiction, it is obvious that frequency is problematic as an indicator of prototypicality. What motivates regarding a certain meaning as prototypical is its centrality and the possibility to derive the other meanings from it in a principled way.

There is also a clear difference between the two genres with respect to the use of *give* as a translation of *ge*. 40 of the 54 occurrences of *ge* referring to Concrete Possession in the Fiction texts were translated with *give* which amounts to 74% as shown in the left-most of the two columns marked % *give* in Table 3. The corresponding proportion for Non-fiction is 43%. For any meaning of *ge*, *give* tends to serve as a translation to a greater extent in Fiction than in Non-fiction, even if there is a great variation with respect to the various meanings. The table also shows that the correspondence between *ge* and *give* is particularly low for certain meanings such as Production/Cause or non-existent as for Motion.

### 3 Two Language-Specific Meanings

#### 3.1 Subject-Centered Motion

As mentioned above, the use of *ge* as a motion verb is rather language-specific. As can be observed in Table 4 where the English translations of *ge* in this use are shown, a wide range of verbs indicating Departure are used as translation:

<i>Swedish</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Freq.</i>
ge sig av <i>or</i> ge sig iväg	go (off, away)	7
	leave	9
	set off/out	11
	clear off	2
	be off/gone/on one's way, make off, run away, turn	6
	<i>Paraphrase</i>	3
ge sig ut	go out	6
	<i>Paraphrase</i>	1
ge sig upp	put oneself up in the air	1
ge sig in i	stroll into	1
ge sig till	travel	1
<b>Total</b>	<i>Fiction: 40; Non-fiction: 8</i>	48

Table 4. The translations of Swedish *ge* referring to motion

The most frequent translations are *go (off/away)*, *leave* and *set off/out*:

Min man hade mycket grejer, men när han *gav sig iväg* skänkte jag bort det mesta. LG      My husband had a lot of things, but when he *went off* I gave most of it away.

Så var det nästan ända tills Siiri *gav sig av*, AP      That's what it was like almost until Siiri *left*,

Ursäkta mej, Henry, men nu är det nog på tiden att vi *ger oss av*. ARP      Excuse me, Henry, but it's about time we were *setting off*.



Occasionally, some more specific and expressive verbs such as *clear off* are used as a translation of *ge sig iväg/av*:

De hade utan vidare spisning *gett sig iväg* LG      They'd *cleared off* without any notice

There is also some variation with respect to which spatial particle is used with *ge* as a motion verb. When *in* 'in' is used as in the following example, the perspective is shifted slightly from departure to the starting point of a new motion event:

Från Stortorget kan vandraren *ge sig in i*      From Stortorget the visitor may *stroll into*  
dess vindlingar LI      the winding streets

The motion sense can also serve as the source of metaphorically motivated extensions (not included in the count in Table 4):

Dras till yngre män, *ger sej in i* huvudlösa      They're attracted to younger men, they *get*  
förbindelser. SW      *involved in* stupid affairs.

### 3.2 Production and Cause

When *ge* functions as a verb of production it is monotransitive. The subject in the following examples designates an origin or cause and the direct object the product or result:

Förbränning av fossila bränslen *ger* också      The burning of fossil fuels also *produces*  
stora utsläpp av koldioxid som bidrar till      large amounts of carbon dioxide which  
växthuseffekten. EVIR      contributes to the greenhouse effect

Övergången i slutet av 1997 från användning      The 1997 transition from the use of oil to  
av olja till naturgas i Brasilien har under      natural gas in Brazil *generated* lower levels  
1998 *gett* lägre utsläpp till luft av bland annat      of emissions into the air of such substances  
svaveldioxid. PER      as sulfur dioxide during 1998.

Däremot förefaller det sannolikt att      On the other hand, it does appear probable  
mineralullsfibrer *ger* ögonirritation. BJ      that mineral wool fibres *cause* eye irritation.

Skarpa sociala klasskillnader *ger* tydliga      Wide gaps between social classes *lead to*  
skillnader i sjuklighetsmönstret, CP      distinct differences in the pattern of  
morbidity

The core semantic component of the verbs of production is EXIST and such verbs can broadly be paraphrased as 'cause to become existing' or in a predicate notation: DO(x,S) & CAUSE(S, HAPPEN(EXIST(y))). In the data from the ESPC, the use of *ge* as a verb of production is much more frequent in Swedish than in English in examples that appear primarily in the non-fiction texts. The subject in such examples typically refers to a process of some kind. As can be observed in Table 5, verbs of Production or Causation often appear as translations of *ge* in this use, even if *give* and some other Possession verbs also are used with some frequency. The table indicates that English *give* is also used as a verb of

production but much less frequently than in Swedish and the English original texts point in the same direction. Whereas this use accounts for 16% of the occurrences of Swedish *ge*, the corresponding figure for *give* in the English originals is 3.4%. A special case, where Swedish and English have equivalent expressions, is when the coming into existence is expressed with an abstract noun (Swed. *upphov*, Eng. *rise*):

Dessutom kan vissa plastkomponenter Moreover, certain plastic components can sönderdelas och *ge upphov till* ett ämne med be decomposed and *give rise to* a substance stark och obehaglig lukt. BJ with a powerful and unpleasant smell.

<i>Semantic field</i>	<i>English verb</i>	<i>Freq.</i>
<b>Possession</b>	give rise to	12
	<i>Other give</i>	21
	provide	10
	have	13
<b>Production</b>	produce	9
	create	4
	generate	2
<b>Causation</b>	cause	12
	lead to	7
<i>Various alternatives</i>		43
<b>Total</b>	<i>Fiction: 12; Non-fiction: 121</i>	133

Table 5. The translations of Swedish *ge* referring to Production/Cause

The extension from production to existence as in the following example also merits some further comments:

Det var bara det att de svårigheter som It was just that the difficulties to be skulle övervinnas blott *gavs* i deras fantasi. overcome *existed* only in their imaginations. JMY

Typological data point to a rather close relationship between Possession and Existence. In many non-European languages, 'have' is expressed with a variant of an existential construction, whereas the verb 'have' in several European languages such as Serbo-Croat, Modern Greek and French is used in the existential construction (cf. etymologically Spanish *hay* 'there is'). According to Newman [1998], the use of the German impersonal construction with *es gibt* 'it gives' as an existential construction 'there is' seems to have developed from uses of *geben* 'give' where it meant 'lead to, give rise to'. The Swedish use of *ge* in the passive form as an existential verb is an interesting parallel even if this use is very restricted. The most basic existential construction in Swedish is *det finns* 'there is' ('it' + 'find' in the passive form).

#### 4 The Contrasting Lexicalization Patterns of a Shared Extended Use

One of the most frequent extended uses both in Swedish and English is the use of the verb 'give' in combination with a noun describing an act of verbal communication. At a general level, the two languages follow the same pattern. There is, however, much variation with respect to which nouns within this semantic field can appear in such combinations. Table 6a shows the English translations of Swedish *ge* in combination with such nouns.

Swedish expressions with <i>ge</i> + N	English translations	N
<i>ge svar/råd/tillstånd/exempel/ uppdrag/uttryck/instruktioner/ order</i>	<b>give + N</b> give/answer/advice/permission/ example/assignment/expression/ instructions/order	50
<i>ge tillstånd/varning ge ett löfte ge hela sanningen ge uppgift ge ord åt ge namn ge titel ge bakgrund/ svar ge exempel ge regler</i>	<b>Other verb + N</b> issue permit/warning make a promise/ a vow tell the whole truth set a task/entrust tasks find words to describe endow with names confer title upon provide a background/an answer cite/ mention examples lay down rules	27
<i>ge svar ge namn ge besked ge uttryck för ge order ge en eloge ge karaktäristik ge beskrivning ge ett referat ge förslag</i>	<b>Simple verb</b> answer call / name say / tell express / say order praise characterize review summarize suggest	36
<b>Other alternatives</b>		7
<b>Total</b>	<i>Fiction: 44; Non-fiction: 76</i>	120

Table 6a. Examples of English translations of Swedish *ge* + N<sup>Verbal Com.</sup>

There are three major types of translations. English can use *give* in combination with the corresponding noun (*ge svar/give an answer*), another verb can be used in combination with the corresponding noun (*ge ett löfte/make a promise*) or *ge* + Noun can be translated with a

single verb *ge svar/answer*). Sometimes several options exist in both languages (*ge svar/svara, besvara* vs. *give an answer/answer, V*):

Då reser han sig genast och *ger svar* på det han redan vet. [GT]      Then he gets up immediately and *gives answers* to what he already knows.

På den frågan kan inga EEG-kurvor *ge svar*. PCJ      No EEG-curves can *answer* that question.

The picture is very similar when the direction of the translation is reversed as can be observed in Table 6b.

English expressions with <i>give + N</i>	Swedish translations	N
give/answer/advice/permission/ example/assignment/expression/ instructions/order	<b>ge + N</b> ge svar/råd/tillstånd/exempel/ uppdrag/uttryck/instruktioner/ order	73
give opinion/position	<b>Prefixed ge + N</b> avge yttrande/omdöme	3
give discharge give evidence be given orders/ the word give an order give dictum give lectures/sermon give a talk give advice give a piece of evidence give one's opinion	<b>Other verb + N</b> bevilja ansvarsfrihet framlägga bevis 'put forward' få en order/ ordet 'get' göra en beställning 'make/do' göra ett uttalande 'make/do' hålla föredrag/predikan 'hold' hålla ett anförande 'hold' komma med goda råd 'come with' lämna vittnesmål 'leave' uttrycka sin uppfattning 'express'	43
give notice give account give congratulations give permission give an update give consent to give an answer give instructions give evidence give a welcome to	<b>Simple verb</b> anmäla/meddela/älägga berätta lyckönska låta informera samtycka till svara uppmåna vittna välkomna	23
<b>Other alternatives</b>		14
<b>Total</b>	<i>Fiction: 63; Non-fiction: 93</i>	156

 Table 6b. Examples of Swedish translations of English *give + N*<sup>Verbal Com.</sup>

This table shows a case when different verbs are used in the translation due to the fact that a noun has two different equivalents in the other language. The English noun *order* is translated with the Swedish noun *order* when it refers to a command and with *beställning* when it refers to an order of articles. Only the first of these nouns can be combined with *ge*, whereas the other one is combined with *göra* 'make':

"I 'm quite positive we must *give the order*", he said at the meeting at 9.45 pm on 4 June. MH

"Jag är fullständigt övertygad om att vi måste *ge ordern*", sa han på mötet den 4 juni klockan 09.45.

It 's a customer who wants to *give an order*. DF Det är en kund som vill *göra en beställning*.

När jag nickade till svar *gav* han Bombay *order* om att ge mig den långa åsnepiskan. LH When I nodded yes, he *ordered* Bombay to hand me the long donkey whip.

## 5 Conclusion

At a general level, the patterns of polysemy of Swedish *ge* and English *give* are very similar and most of the semantic extensions have parallels in a number of other languages and appear to represent universal patterns of meaning extensions for GIVE judging from [Newman 1996]. The major exception is the use of Swedish *ge* as a motion verb which appears to be relatively language-specific (but not unique). In spite of that, a contrastive, corpus-based analysis of Swedish *ge* and English *give* shows that there is a large amount of variation between the two cognates with respect to the restrictions that exist with respect to finer semantic distinctions within the more general meaning areas and with respect to combinatorics in particular with individual nouns.

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