It's Giving Syntactic Shift: Examining the Syntactic Pattern of It's Giving "X"

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Dr. Heather Bliss' LING 282W course *Writing for Linguistics*. The assignment asked students to investigate a research question based on previous writing assignments into an experimental or argument paper. The paper uses APA citation style.

Past findings have shown that the syntactic category of slang terms often have a tendency to shift and deviate from the standard variety of the language. For example, one study exploring the syntactic category of the slang diminutive suffix "-ie" shows that when added to a verb, it forms a noun such as "munchie"—the feeling of hunger after smoking marijuana—from "munch"—to eat snack foods (Gallová, 2021). While this highlights a specific aspect of syntactic variation in slang, further research on the linguistic properties of other slang terms remains warranted. The present study shares a similar focus, aiming to determine the type of syntactic shift shown by the slang phrase "it's giving X", with "X" being any particular modifier of the direct object. Specifically, the inquiry addresses whether "X" adheres to a subject-verb-indirect object-direct object (S-V-IO-DO[1]) or simply a subject-verb-direct object (S-V-DO[2]) sentence pattern. To explore this, three Gen Z participants, proficient in Standard Canadian English, performed a test for syntactic distribution. The test involved using their judgment to assess whether the modifier "X" could be plugged into nine sentences featuring the subject "it's", the verb "giving", with or without the addition of the term "me" as the indirect object and "vibes" as the direct object, while maintaining grammaticality. Results indicate that the modifier "X" grammatically conforms to both S-V-IO-DO and S-V-DO sentence patterns, which shows its versatility in syntactic structures.

[1] S-V-IO-DO refers to Subject-Verb-Indirect Object-Direct Object
[2] S-V-DO refers to Subject-Verb-Direct Object

Introduction

Previous studies have highlighted the flexibility of slang terms, allowing for a diversion from traditional linguistic structures through a syntactic shift; in fact, it has been shown that a slang, or "the language of streets" (Green, 2015, as cited in Pei et al., 2019) is twice as likely to undergo a syntactic category transformation compared to an arbitrary word (Pei et al., 2019). For instance, research investigating a list of slang terms show that the diminutive suffix "-ie" changes a verb into a noun (Gallová, 2021). A similar study shows that from one of their lists of slang, the suffix term "-ed" forms a new noun from an existing noun (Lihawa et al., 2021). However, further analysis of the syntactic shifts of other slang terms remains necessary, prompting an investigation into the phrase "it's giving".

For more context, the term "it's giving X" refers to an experience that gives off a particular feeling, energy, or aura, being the "X" in the sentence. Originating from the 1980's New York City African American ballroom scene within the LGBTQ+ community, it characterizes situations or styles (*What does "it's giving" mean?: Later Social Media glossary*, n.d.). It can stand alone, as in "it's giving", or precede descriptors (see Figure 1), such as in "it's giving the 80's", referring to a style reminiscent of that era.

Figure 1 *The Usage of "It's Giving"*
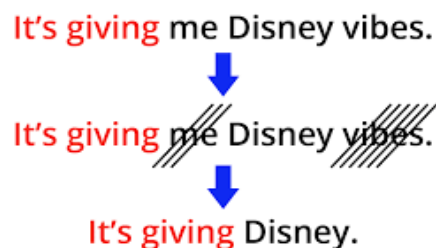
Note. Omission of an indirect object and direct object.
From ThisInterestsMe, 2022, (https://thisinterestsme.com/its-giving-meaning/).

Moreover, while "it's giving" operates as an idiomatic expression defying traditional grammatical rules, the phrase "it's giving X" allows for a more detailed slang analysis. Consequently, this paper focuses on analyzing the phrase "it's giving X".

In general, "it's giving X" can either take a direct object or not. However, it is difficult to determine the sentence pattern of "it's giving X" in the context of

slang. To resolve this issue, it is necessary to observe how the modifier "X" behaves in a sentence pattern. Sentence patterns consist of phrases and clauses, and at least have a subject and a verb. In the case of "it's giving X", it seems to conform to either a subject-verb-indirect object-direct object (S-V-IO-DO) or subject-verb-direct object (S-V-DO) sentence pattern, for which clarification is needed through a syntactic distribution test.

The empirical goal of the present study is to perform a syntactic distribution test and conclude whether the modifier "X" in the slang phrase "it's giving X", aligns with traditional sentence patterns: subject-verb-indirect object-direct object (S-V-IO-DO), or simply S-V-DO. As such, two hypotheses and predictions are proposed:

> *Hypothesis 1:* The modifier "X" of "it's giving X" operates as a descriptor influencing the overall expression.
> *Prediction 1:* If "X" of "it's giving X" operates as a descriptor influencing the overall expression, then it is likely to behave grammatically in an S-V-IO-DO pattern.
>
> *Hypothesis 2:* The modifier "X" of "it's giving X" operates as a direct specifier of the subject.
> *Prediction 2:* If "X" of "it's giving X" operates as a direct specifier of the subject, then it is likely to behave grammatically in an S-V-DO pattern.

Proving a hypothesis true would fulfill the present study's empirical goal, offering a clearer understanding of the syntactic behaviour of "it's giving X".

Methodology
Participants
Three participants judged the grammaticality of the sentences, all of whom are highly proficient (at least 15 years of lived experience) speakers of Standard Canadian English. They use their own introspective judgment to determine if the phrases created are grammatically correct. They are also born within the same generation known as "Gen Z" (roughly between the years of 1997 and 2012), who confirmed their daily usage of modern slang. Two participants (Participant 1 and Participant 2) are a male and female in their early 20's who have a background in linguistics, and are also both affiliated with the same linguistics writing class at the time of the study. The remaining participant (Participant 3) is a female in her late

teens and has limited experience in the field of linguistics. In addition, Participants 2 and 3 are sisters.

Materials

The list of 9 tokens (modifiers of the direct object) in Table 1 and Table 2 below were developed by the author. The (row) sections of both tables are divided into syntactic categories of the tokens as Noun, Adjective, and Verb, whereas the (column) sections are divided into Subject "it's", Verb "giving", Indirect Object "me", Modifier of Direct Object (tokens), Direct Object "vibes", and Grammaticality by all three participants, which are evaluated with checkboxes. However, the difference is that Table 1 includes both Indirect object and Direct object, while Table 2 does not, which is indicated by a strikethrough.

Table 1. Syntactic Distribution Test with S-V-IO-DO

Syntactic Category of Direct Object	Subject	Verb	Indirect Object	Modifier of Direct Object	Direct Object	Grammaticality by Participant 1	Grammaticality by Participant 2	Grammaticality by Participant 3
Noun	it's	giving	me	winter	vibes	☐	☐	☐
	it's	giving	me	alien	vibes	☐	☐	☐
	it's	giving	me	yoga	vibes	☐	☐	☐
Adjective	it's	giving	me	purple	vibes	☐	☐	☐
	it's	giving	me	silly	vibes	☐	☐	☐
	it's	giving	me	hungry	vibes	☐	☐	☐
Verb	it's	giving	me	write	vibes	☐	☐	☐
	it's	giving	me	dance	vibes	☐	☐	☐
	it's	giving	me	sleep	vibes	☐	☐	☐

Table 2. Syntactic Distribution Test with S-V-DO

Syntactic Category of Direct Object	Subject	Verb	~~Indirect Object~~	Modifier of Direct Object	~~Direct Object~~	Grammaticality by Participant 1	Grammaticality by Participant 2	Grammaticality by Participant 3
Noun	it's	giving	~~me~~	winter	~~vibes~~	☐	☐	☐
	it's	giving	~~me~~	alien	~~vibes~~	☐	☐	☐
	it's	giving	~~me~~	yoga	~~vibes~~	☐	☐	☐
Adjective	it's	giving	~~me~~	purple	~~vibes~~	☐	☐	☐
	it's	giving	~~me~~	silly	~~vibes~~	☐	☐	☐
	it's	giving	~~me~~	hungry	~~vibes~~	☐	☐	☐
Verb	it's	giving	~~me~~	write	~~vibes~~	☐	☐	☐
	it's	giving	~~me~~	dance	~~vibes~~	☐	☐	☐
	it's	giving	~~me~~	sleep	~~vibes~~	☐	☐	☐

Procedure

The process of testing the syntactic distribution of "X" of the phrase "it's giving X" requires plugging it in into S-V-IO-DO, as well as S-V-DO sentences, and determining whether or not it behaves grammatically, more or less. The grammaticality of each token is independently evaluated with a checkbox by each participant in their respective column; having a box checked off signifies that it is judged as grammatical to that participant, while having a box left empty signifies that it is judged as insensible to that participant.

Results

Overall findings, which can be viewed in Figure 2 below, show that "X" of the phrase "it's giving X" conforms to both S-V-IO-DO and S-V-DO sentence patterns. However, such findings also indicate that the majority of tokens has been judged as grammatical for nouns and adjectives, while not so much for verbs.

Specifically, according to Table 3 below, 66.6% (2/3) of sentences with an indirect object, direct object, and nouns as modifiers were agreed upon as grammatical by all three participants, with the sentences with noun modifiers were evaluated as 88.8% (8/9 tokens) grammatical overall. 66.6% (2/3) of sentences with adjectives as modifiers were also agreed upon as grammatical, with the sentences being evaluated as 88.8% (8/9 tokens) grammatical overall. Although no sentences with verbs as modifiers were agreed upon as grammatical by all participants, the sentences were evaluated as 22.2% (2/9 tokens) grammatical overall. Altogether, all sentences with an indirect object, direct object, and either kind of modifier in Table 3 were judged as 66.6% (18/27 tokens) grammatical.

Table 4, on the other hand, shows that 66.6% (2/3) of sentences without an indirect object, direct object, but does include nouns as modifiers, were agreed upon as grammatical by all three participants, with the sentences with noun modifiers were evaluated as 88.8% (8/9 tokens) grammatical overall. 33.3% (1/3) of sentences with adjectives as modifiers were agreed upon as grammatical, with the sentences being evaluated as 77.7% (7/9 tokens) grammatical overall. No sentences with verbs as modifiers were also agreed upon as grammatical by all participants, but the sentences were evaluated as 22.2% (2/9 tokens) grammatical overall. Altogether, all sentences with either kind of modifier, excluding an indirect object and direct object in Figure 2 were judged as 63.0% (17/27 tokens) grammatical.

Table 3. Syntactic Distribution Test with S-V-IO-DO

Syntactic Category of Direct Object	Subject	Verb	Indirect Object	Modifier of Direct Object	Direct Object	Grammaticality by Participant 1	Grammaticality by Participant 2	Grammaticality by Participant 3
Noun	it's	giving	me	winter	vibes	☒	☒	☒
	it's	giving	me	alien	vibes	☒	☒	☒
	it's	giving	me	yoga	vibes	☐	☒	☒
Adjective	it's	giving	me	purple	vibes	☒	☒	☒
	it's	giving	me	silly	vibes	☒	☒	☒

Syntactic Category	Subject	Verb	Indirect Object	Modifier	Direct Object	P1	P2	P3
	it's	giving	me	hungry	vibes	☒	☐	☒
Verb	it's	giving	me	write	vibes	☐	☐	☐
	it's	giving	me	dance	vibes	☐	☒	☒
	it's	giving	me	sleep	vibes	☐	☐	☐

Table 4. Syntactic Distribution Test with S-V-DO

Syntactic Category of Direct Object	Subject	Verb	~~Indirect Object~~	Modifier of Direct Object	~~Direct Object~~	Grammaticality by Participant 1	Grammaticality by Participant 2	Grammaticality by Participant 3
	it's	giving	~~me~~	winter	~~vibes~~	☒	☒	☒
Noun	it's	giving	~~me~~	alien	~~vibes~~	☒	☒	☒
	it's	giving	~~me~~	yoga	~~vibes~~	☐	☒	☒
	it's	giving	~~me~~	purple	~~vibes~~	☒	☒	☐
Adjective	it's	giving	~~me~~	silly	~~vibes~~	☒	☒	☒
	it's	giving	~~me~~	hungry	~~vibes~~	☒	☐	☒
	it's	giving	~~me~~	write	~~vibes~~	☐	☐	☐
Verb	it's	giving	~~me~~	dance	~~vibes~~	☐	☒	☐
	it's	giving	~~me~~	sleep	~~vibes~~	☐	☒	☐

Figure 2. Syntactic Distribution Test with S-V-IO-DO and S-V-DO

Syntactic distribution

■ S-V-IO-DO   ■ S-V-DO

Number of Tokens (per syntactic category)

	Nouns	Adjectives	Verbs
S-V-IO-DO	8	8	2
S-V-DO	8	7	2
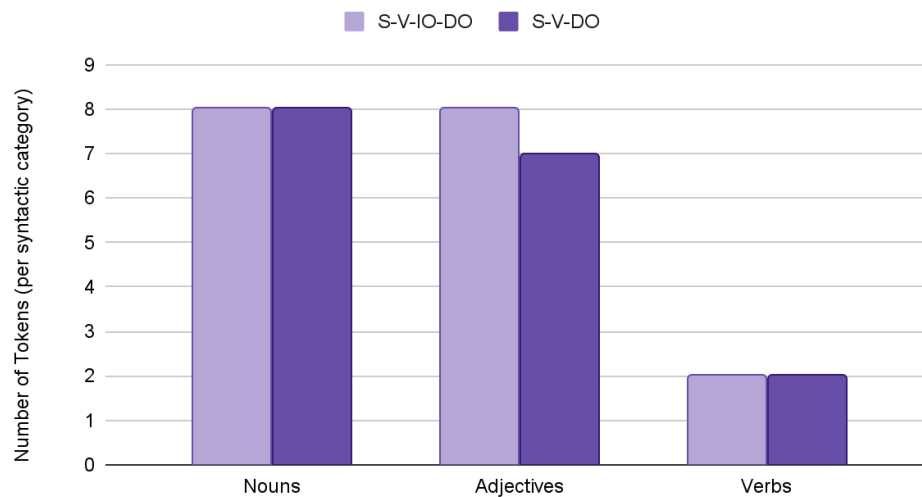
Discussion

The objective of the current study is to determine whether the slang phrase "it's giving X", aligns with traditional sentence patterns: subject-verb-indirect object-direct object (S-V-IO-DO), or simply S-V-DO. Based on the results, "it's giving X" adheres to both S-V-IO-DO and S-V-DO sentence patterns, fulfilling both hypotheses and demonstrating its variability in syntactic structures. The present results are consistent with Pei et al.'s (2019) work that deals with slang detection and identification, in that they discovered that "a prominent feature of slang is the surprising use of words across syntactic categories or syntactic shift (e.g., verb→noun)". Such findings suggest that "it's giving X" exhibits syntactic flexibility.

One limitation of this study is the lack of tokens presented as material. The syntactic distribution test covered multiple syntactic categories, however only a few tokens were present for each category. Another limitation is the low number of participants that can allow for a stronger, more varied judgment about the grammaticality of tokens. This was due to the limited scope of research for the paper, as well as the amount of time and resources. Although the present research cannot rule out these explanations, it seems useful to point out issues that may conflict with these results.

In terms of future research, it would be useful to extend the current findings by examining the semantic nuances associated with different modifiers in

the slang phrase "it's giving X" and exploring how these variations contribute to the overall meaning and interpretation of the expression. In addition, investigating the sociolinguistic aspects in the usage of this slang expression could provide valuable insight into its evolution and cultural significance.

Conclusion

In summary, the present study expands upon the research of many scholars on the syntactic analysis of modern slang. The results indicate that slang is not fixed but dynamic, which reflects changes in society and language norms. As such, the findings contribute to a growing body of evidence of the syntactic shift of slang and its evolving structures within contemporary language use.

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