

## Diachronic pertinacity of light verbs

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Received 24 January 2011; received in revised form 18 October 2012; accepted 8 November 2012

Available online 13 February 2013

### Abstract

We contrast the historical data with respect to light verbs and auxiliaries in Indo-Aryan and show that light verbs are comparatively stable and unlikely to be subject to reanalysis or restructuring. We propose that there is a very tight connection between a light verb and its corresponding main verb, and that this connection differs markedly from the relationship an auxiliary bears to the main verb it is derived from. In particular, we depart from the received view that the existence of a light verb is due to a historical process of semantic bleaching. We instead propose that synchronically there is a single underlying lexical entry which tightly binds light verbs to their corresponding main verb. This proposal accounts not only for the simultaneous synchronic uses of light and main verbs, but also for the historical data.

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**Keywords:** Urdu; Bengali; Auxiliaries; Historical pertinacity; Light verbs; Complex predicates; Reanalysis; Grammaticalization

### 1. Introduction

Complex predicate formation is an integral part of South Asian languages (see Chatterji, 1926; Masica, 1976 on South Asia as a linguistic area). We concentrate on V–V complex predicates of the type in (1).<sup>1,2</sup>

- (1) a. nadya=ne xat lik<sup>h</sup> di-ya  
Nadya.F=Erg letter.M.Nom write give-Perf.M.Sg  
'Nadya wrote a letter (completely).' (Urdu)
- b. nadya a ga-yi  
Nadya.F.Nom come go-Perf.F.Sg  
'Nadya has arrived.' (Urdu)

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<sup>1</sup> The list of abbreviations used in this paper is as follows: A = Atmanepadam, Acc = Accusative, Aug = Augment, Caus = Causative, Cl = Classifier, Compl = Complement, Dat = Dative, Dem = Demonstrative, Emph = Emphatic, Erg = Ergative, F = Feminine, Fut = Future, Gen = Genitive, Imp = Imperative, Impf = Imperfect, Ind = Indicative, Inst = Instrumental, M = Masculine, Nom = Nominative, Obl = Oblique, Obj = Objective, Opt = Optative, P = Parasmaipadam, PP = Past Participle, Perf = Perfect, Pl = Plural, Pres = Present, Pron = Pronoun, Ptcp = Participle, Redup = Reduplication, Rel = Relative, Sg = Singular, Top = Topic, Voc = Vocative, W = Weak. A '·' indicates a morpheme boundary, a '=' a clitic boundary.

<sup>2</sup> Note that this is a revised and updated version of a paper whose previous incarnations were called 'Historical stability vs. historical change' and 'Verbal Passepartouts'.

In Urdu the form of the first verb is identical to the stem form and never carries any inflection in the V–V construction. This is the main or full verb. The second verb carries tense/aspect marking and is inflected according to the standard paradigms governing simple verb inflection. This verb is *light* in the sense that although it is form-identical to a main verb (and hence glossed with the main verb meaning in the close gloss), the predicational contribution is not that of a main verb (cf. Jespersen, 1965, who first coined the term *light verb*). Rather, it serves to modify the main verb semantics by expressing such notions as completion, inception, benefaction, forcefulness, suddenness or volitionality (Hook, 1974). The parameters of completion and inception are responsible for the pervasive notion in the literature that these light verbs are aspectual (e.g., Hook, 1991; Singh, 1994).

We concentrate on the South Asian languages Urdu/Hindi<sup>3</sup> and Bengali in particular (see Zbavitel, 1970; Hook, 1974; Ramchand, 1990; Singh, 1994; Butt, 1995 among others).<sup>4</sup> Some Bengali examples are shown in (2). The form of the first verb in the sequence carries what has often been dubbed “perfective” morphology. We gloss this morpheme as a participle, which reflects its Old Indo-Aryan origin.<sup>5</sup>

- (2) a. ram            bag<sup>h</sup>-ṭa-ke    mer-e p<sup>h</sup>el-l-o  
       Ram.Nom tiger-Cl-Acc hit-Gd throw-Past-3  
       ‘Ram killed the tiger.’ (Bengali)
- b. ram            ef-e            por-l-o  
       Ram.Nom come-Gd fall-Past-3  
       ‘Ram arrived.’ (Bengali)

The first verb in the sequence is again the main verb. The second verb carries tense marking and is inflected according to the standard paradigms governing simple verb inflection. Bengali light verbs in V–V constructions function like the Urdu ones in terms of syntax and semantics.

In this paper, we argue that there is a very tight connection between a light verb and its corresponding main verb, and that this connection differs markedly from the relationship an auxiliary bears to the main verb it is derived from. We depart from the received view that the existence of a light verb is due to a historical process of *semantic bleaching* (e.g., Hopper and Traugott, 1993; Hook, 1991) and instead propose that there is a single underlying lexical entry, which can account not only for the simultaneous synchronic uses of light and main verbs, but also for the historical data.

Section 2 first revisits the evidence that light verbs form a syntactic class that is distinct from auxiliaries and main verbs. We establish that light verbs are characterized by the following properties: they co-predicate with a main verb in a syntactically monoclausal construction and they serve to semantically modulate or structure the event predication of the main verb. In contrast to auxiliaries, they do not situate the event predication temporally or aspectually, i.e., they cannot be seen as instances of I or T, but must be analyzed as a subclass of V. We thus work with a narrower, but more precise understanding of light verbs than is often assumed in the literature.

Section 3 presents historical evidence showing that light verbs tend to be stable or *pertinacious* in diachronic terms. This is again a property that sets light verbs apart from auxiliaries, which in contrast are very mutable across time. In section 4, we discuss our proposals with respect to the single underlying lexical entry that accounts for the form-identical light and main verb uses synchronically and across time. Section 5 provides a comparative look at data from other language families and discusses existing views which contrast with ours. Section 6 concludes the paper.

## 2. Syntactic status

There are several important points to be made about the syntactic status of light verbs. For one, light verbs enter into a copredicational domain with the main verb. That is, the main verb and the light verb together function as the predicate of the clause. Butt (1995) presents detailed argumentation involving anaphora resolution, control, and verb agreement which shows that the V–V constructions examined here are monoclausal in the sense that the clause contains only a single subject, a single object, etc. This contrasts with constructions as in (3), which are similar, but consist of a main verb (‘go’) and an embedded clause (‘having written a letter’).

<sup>3</sup> The South Asian languages Urdu and Hindi are closely related. Both are among the 18 official languages of India and are spoken primarily in the north of India. Urdu is the national language of Pakistan. The data presented in this paper are drawn primarily from the dialect of Urdu spoken in Lahore, Pakistan, as well as from examples cited in the literature on both Urdu and Hindi.

<sup>4</sup> Note that while complex predication exists in Dravidian languages, the morphosyntax of those constructions differs quite markedly from that of the Indo-Aryan languages. It is not possible to address these issues competently within the scope of this paper and we therefore concentrate exclusively on examples from Indo-Aryan.

<sup>5</sup> The ancestral construction functioned like a participial and was dubbed a gerund in the Western tradition of Sanskrit scholarship.

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