

## The diachrony of English light verbs

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**Proposal:** This talk proposes a synchronic and diachronic analysis of English light verb constructions, concentrating on those consisting of a light verb and an indefinite deverbal nominal complement, e.g. *give/have a moan, take/make a bow*. The analysis tackles two controversial issues in the literature on light verbs: 1) their categorial status; 2) their historical development.

**Problem:** 1) Central to the discussion of the properties of light verbs, which are a pervasive phenomenon cross-linguistically, is their categorial status: are they functional, semi-lexical, or lexical elements? On the one hand, their semantically bleached nature (1a) suggests functional status, but on the other hand, their syntactic behaviour, which is much like that of full (i.e. lexical) verbs (1b-c), suggests lexical status.

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|-----|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| (1) | <i>light verb</i>     | <i>full verb</i>          |
| a.  | take a bow            | take a biscuit            |
| b.  | He didn't take a bow. | He didn't take a biscuit. |
| c.  | *He tookn't a bow.    | *He tookn't a biscuit.    |

In Chomsky's (1995) Minimalism, the structural correlate of light verbs is the category little *v* above VP, which is likewise variously viewed as functional, semi-lexical or lexical in the literature and which introduces the external argument. 2) The categorial status of light verbs ties in directly with another controversial issue, which concerns the diachrony of light verbs. The central question is whether light verbs are a(n optional) stage in a grammaticalisation cline from full verb to auxiliary verb (Hopper and Traugott 1993: 108).

- (2) full verb > (vector verb) > auxiliary > clitic > affix

In this type of approach, grammaticalisation involves a simplification of structure. Roberts and Roussou (2003) and Roberts (2010), for example, offer an account of grammaticalisation as upward reanalysis in the syntactic tree. Butt (2003) argues against the view that light verbs follow a grammaticalisation cline, because light verbs are consistently form-identical to lexical verbs cross-linguistically.

**Analysis:** The analysis proposed here argues that English light verbs are not instantiations of *v*, because they contribute more than just the external argument: together with the nominal predicate, the light verb expresses a measured-out event. Light verbs are not completely empty of meaning, but they lack the semantic force and argument structure of a full verb. The proposed syntactic structure of English light verb constructions (a type of complex predicate) contains an articulated VP including an Aspectual Phrase (AspP) (see Travis 2010, among others).

- (3) a. John took a walk.  
b. [<sub>TP</sub> John T [<sub>VP</sub> [<sub>V</sub> took] [<sub>AspP</sub> [<sub>NP</sub> a walk] t<sub>Asp</sub> [<sub>VP</sub> Ø<sub>V</sub> t<sub>NP</sub>]]]]

The light verb occupies the Asp head which selects a VP complement headed by an abstract V (cf. Diesing 1998). Asp contains the feature [+telic] which is checked by movement of the indefinite nominal predicate to SpecAspP, yielding the aspectual (measure) semantics. The

diachronic development involves grammaticalisation from full verb to light verb, which is interpreted as a change from V > Asp (Move) to Asp (Merge) (grammaticalisation = change from Move > Merge, Roberts and Roussou 2003; Roberts 2010). It is argued that English light verbs have not (yet) undergone full upward reanalysis from V > Asp > v. The analysis is supported by synchronic and diachronic evidence, the latter from Brinton and Akimoto 1999, supplemented by data from the *Penn Parsed Corpora of Historical English* (YCOE, Taylor et al. 2003; PPCME2, Kroch and Taylor 2000; PPCEME, Kroch et al. 2004; PPCMBE, Kroch et al. 2010).

- (4) a. there he had a grete falle  
 ‘There he had a big fall’ (cmmalory, 663.4718)
- b. in w=ch His Grace at first made an ingenuous confession.  
 (1673-1675, AUNGIER-E3-P2,170,A.18)
- c. My wife, my daughter, and herself, were taking a walk together.  
 (1766 O. Goldsmith, *Vicar of Wakefield*, II. ix. 137)

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