

LEXICAL VERSUS LIGHT VERBS IN ENGLISH. A CASE STUDY INVOLVING THE VERB GIVE

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to discuss different properties of lexical and light verbs in English. The focus is on the verb give. We notice that, at least, in English, both lexical and light verb give are ditransitive verbs; that is, a triadic verb which takes three-arguments. Moreover, the light verb give can optionally take only two arguments, so it is ditransitive but it can become transitive; a dyadic verb. Furthermore, the light verb give can only be a transitive verb when it has just two obligatory arguments.

Key words: lexical verb, light verb, deverbal nominal, ditransitive verb, transitive verb, unergative verb

1. INTRODUCTION

In this section, in the first place, we will define lexical verbs, and discuss the properties of lexical categories because verbs are lexical categories. Then we will show the classification of lexical verbs according to the number of arguments they take: monadic verbs (one-argument verbs or intransitive verbs; they are ergative verbs and unergative verbs), dyadic verb (two-argument verbs or transitive verbs) and triadic verbs (three-argument verbs or ditransitive verbs). In the second place, we will define the terms of: light verb and deverbal nominal. Then we will discuss the properties of light verb constructions.

1.1. Defining lexical verbs

A lexical verb is the main verb from a clause or sentence. Crystal (2008, p.278) defines the term lexical verb as: “a term used in grammar for a verb which expresses an action, event or state; also called a full verb. The ‘main verb’ of a verb phrase is always a lexical verb”.

1.1.1. Properties of lexical verbs

Lexical verbs are part of the lexical categories, because verbs are lexical categories.

According to Cornilescu (2006, pp.203-207) and Avram (2006) lexical categories have the following properties:

(a) Lexical categories are open sets; that is, they can be continuously enriched by internal (derivation) or external (borrowing).

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| (1) | a. Bill gave Sue a gift. | (Double Object Construction; DOC) |
| | b. Bill gave a gift to Sue. | (Prepositional Dative Construction; PDC) |

This first property refers to the facts that there are many verbs in English and that new verbs can be coined.

(b) Lexical categories have infinite number; that is, their number is so large that a competent speaker doesn't have to know all the items in one language.

This second properties refers to the fact that no one can know all the verbs from English. For example, I, as a native speaker of Romanian, don't know all the Romanian verbs, because some verbs have rare, exceptional or metaphorical uses.

- (2) a. Her dress was smeared with blood.
b. He smeared the wall with paint.

(c) Lexical categories represent content words; that is, they have descriptive content (meaning). This property refers to semantic-selection (s-selection). Items are selected only after taking their meaning into consideration. This may refer to: + or – Animate feature of the verb.

- (3) a. John killed Mary.
b. *John killed the door.

From example (3 b) we can notice that the verb *kill* has to take a + Animate determiner phrase (henceforth DP) like *Mary*, but not like *the door*, which is – Animate.

(d) Lexical categories have categorial selection (henceforth c-selection); that is, an application of the subcategorization rules. Moreover, they participate in c-selection and X'-Theory.

- (4) Tom punched Charles.

In example (4 a) we notice that the lexical verb *punch* c-selects a DP, *Charles*.

According to Cornilescu (2006, pp.98-104) and Avram (2006, pp.170-183) there is another classification that deserves to be taken into account.

Classification of lexical verbs according to the number of arguments they take:

- (a) Monadic verbs are one-argument verbs.

- (5) a. He danced.
b. The lake froze.

They are ergative (/ unaccusative) or unergative verbs. According to Avram (2006, p.170) "Perlmutter (1978) was the first to distinguish between two types of one-argument verbs, unaccusatives and unergatives".

(a') Ergative verbs are verbs that do not have an external noun phrase (henceforth NP); the external NP is the subject. They do not assign the Accusative case. Because NP (the direct object; henceforth DO) cannot receive case from the verb, it will become the subject in Nominative. According to Cornilescu (2006, p.167) "the external argument is always the most prominent argument in the a-structure, therefore it must always be the last, to be satisfied outside the compound".

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| (6) | a. She sent a letter. | (Transitive verb; two-arguments). |
| | b. A letter arrived. | (Ergative verb; one-argument; DO). |

Because the subject position is free, they allow *There*-Insertion:

- (7) There arrived a man.

Ergative verbs allow the Past Participle Test; they can use past participles as adjectives combining them with the former objects:

- (8) An arrived letter.

According to Cornilescu (2006, p.99) “unaccusative (ergative) verbs tend to be change-of-state verbs”. Ergative verbs express states (e.g.: *be, seem, stand, lie*, and so on) and changes of states – achievements usually referring to impersonal NPs (e.g.: *melt, freeze*).

States are static, durative and atelic: *be, love, live, stand, lie, know the answer, be tall, desire, want* and so on. Their key preposition is *FOR*. (See also Cornilescu 2006, pp.160-161)

Achievements are dynamic, telic and almost instantaneous (e.g.: *find, discover, freeze, die, reach the top, win the race, arrive, leave, recognize, notice, find a penny, miss the target, lose the watch, remember, break* and so on). Their key preposition is *IN*.

Ergative verbs do not imply cause; their NP is assigned the Theme/Patient role.

- (9) a. My brother broke the window. (Transitive verb: *break*).
My brother = the subject (the Agent); *the window* = the direct object (the Theme/Patient).
b. The window broke. (Ergative verb: *break*).
The window = the direct object (the Theme/Patient).

(a'') Unergative verbs are verbs that take an external NP; that is the subject. They imply cause/causation; the subject being the causer; they assign to the subject the Agent role.

- (10) a. Mary laughed.
Mary = the subject (the Agent).
b. Sue coughed.

Unergative verbs can assign the Accusative case to cognate objects: to dance a dance, to dream a dream, to walk a walk and so on.

- (11) Jane danced a dance.

According to Cornilescu (2006, p.99) “unergatives (unergative verbs) tend to be activities”. Unergative verbs express activities: *run, laugh, walk, fly* and so on.

- (12) Anne walks every morning to school.

Activities or processes usually imply motion (are dynamic), are durative and atelic (e.g.: *work, laugh, walk, he swam/slept/strolled in the park, the ball rolled/moved, it rained for hours, the jewels glittered* and so on). Their key preposition is *FOR*. (See also Cornilescu 2006, p.161).

Unergative verbs do not allow *There*-Insertion:

- (13) a. **There worked a man.*
b. **There danced Mary.*

Unergative verbs do not allow the Past Participle Test:

- (14) **a recently worked man.*

Moreover, ergative and unergative verbs are intransitive verbs. They have just one argument, either an object (ergative verbs) or a subject (unergative verbs).

(b) Dyadic verbs are two-argument verbs; they are also called transitive verbs.

- (15) a. *Mary read the article.*
Mary = the subject (the Agent); *the article* = the direct object (the Theme).
b. *Paul fought with his brother.*

(c) Triadic verbs are three-argument verbs; they are also called ditransitive verbs.

- (16) a. *They gave the book to Mary.* (Prepositional Dative Construction; PDC)
They = the subject (The Agent); *the book* = the direct object (the Theme); *to Mary* = the indirect object (the Goal).
b. *They gave Mary the book.* (Double Object Construction; DOC)

1.2. Defining light verbs

Jespersen (1965, volume VI, p. 117, apud Butt 2010, p.1) is generally credited with first coining the term *light verb*, which he applies to “English verb plus noun phrase constructions” as in (17):

- (17) “*have a rest, a read, a cry, a think*
take a sneak, a drive, a walk, a plunge, a photograph
give a sigh, a shout, a shiver, a pull, a ring, a smile”

(Butt 2010, p.1)

1.2.1. Properties of light verb

A light verb is a verb that is obligatorily followed by a deverbal nominal. A deverbal nominal is a nominal that comes from a lexical verb. Generally, the thematic structure of the construction is the one of the deverbal nominal; it comes from the main verb from which the deverbal nominal is derived.

- (18) a. (To) hit = lexical verb
b. (to) give a hit = light verb constructions
c. a hit = deverbal nominal

Cattell (1984, p.2) says that: “the words *make*, *give*, *have*, *take*, and *do* seem semantically very ‘light’ and they mean very little more than that a verbal action occurred. This action is spelt out in the nominal that follows. *Make*, *give*, *take* and *do* seem to do only a little more than provide the verb-function and carry the signification of tense and number”.

2. CONSTRUCTIONS WITH THE VERB GIVE

In this section, in the first place, we will present the verb *give* as a lexical verb. We will show that *give* as a lexical verb it takes three-arguments; so it is a ditransitive verb. In the second place, we will describe *give* as a light verb. *Give* as a light verb appears in three situations: (1’) when the lexical verb and the light verb share the same three-arguments, in this case *give* is ditransitive, (1’’) when the light verb can appear with only two-arguments because the third argument is only optional, *give* is transitive and (2) the light verb *give* appears with only two arguments; so *give* is transitive.

2.1. Give as a lexical verb

Give as a lexical verb takes three-arguments: the subject (henceforth; SU), the direct object (DO), and the indirect object (henceforth; IO); so it is a ditransitive verb.

According to Avram (2006, p. 133) a verb like *give* “denotes a state of affairs that may involve three participants whose roles are: Agent, Patient/Theme and Goal”:

- (19) “a. John gave the hand-out to his friend. (PDC)
b. *John* = Agent (SU); *the hand-out* = Patient/Theme (DO); *to his friend* = Goal (IO).”
(Avram 2006, p.133, her example number 2).

According to Cornilescu (2006, p.135) an Agent is “the typically animate participant who is the initiator or doer of the action; he must be capable of volition (desire) or deliberate action and is usually responsible for the action”. In this example *John* is the Agent because he is the doer of the action.

Moreover, Cornilescu (2006, p.136) defines a Theme as “occurring only with a verb of motion or location. With a verb of motion, the Theme is what moves. With a verb of location, the Theme is the entity whose location is being described”. In this example *the hand-out* is the Theme. Furthermore, Cornilescu (2006, p. 136) defines a Patient as “a subtype of Theme. It is an entity which suffers an action, undergoes a change”. We will use the generic term Theme for all DOs even if there is a Patient role involved.

With respect to the Goal role, Cornilescu (2006, p.135) defines it as “a Goal is the entity toward which motion takes place”. In our example, *to his friend* is the Goal.

- (20) a. Jack gave Jane a toy. (Lexical verb: *give*; three-arguments; DOC).
b. Jack gave a toy to Jane. (Lexical verb: *give*; three-arguments; PDC).
c. *Jack gave a toy.
d. Jack gave a toy to someone.

From this example, we can conclude that *give* as a lexical verb; it obligatorily takes three-arguments, because without the indirect object (IO) the sentence isn't complete.

2.2. Give in light verb constructions

2.2.1. Light verb give as a ditransitive verb

Give as a light verb appears in ditransitive constructions and in transitive constructions. Light verb *give* behaves as lexical verb *give* in taking three-arguments: a subject (an Agent), a direct object (a Theme/Patient) and an indirect object (a Goal).

- (21) a. Bill kicked the dog. (Lexical verb: *kick*)
b. Bill gave the dog a kick. (Light verb: *give (a kick)*; DOC)
c. *Bill gave a kick to the dog. (Light verb: *give (a kick)*; PDC)

(Example are taken from Cattell 1984, p.6; his example number 17).

From this example, we can notice the fact that the light verb *give* takes three-arguments just as the lexical verb *give* does. *Bill* is the subject (the Agent), *a kick* is the direct object (the Theme), *the dog/to the dog* is the indirect object (the Goal). Moreover, we can observe that the lexical verb *kick* is a transitive verb, it has only two arguments: *Bill* is the subject (the Agent) and *the dog* is the direct object (the Theme/Patient).

There are also situations when the indirect object (IO) is only optional, for example:

- (22) a. Bob shouted. (Lexical verb: *shout*; unergative verb; just one argument)
b. Bob shouted to Lenny.
c. Bob shouted something (to Lenny).
d. Bob gave Lenny a shout. (DOC)
e. Bob gave a shout (to Lenny). (PDC)
f. *Bob gave Lenny a shout of something.
g. *Bob gave a shout of something (to Lenny).

(Examples are taken from Cattell 1984, pp.71-72).

Only in the prepositional dative construction (PDC) the light verb *give* obligatorily takes only two arguments and the third one is only optional. In example (22 e), it is clear that *Bob* is the subject (the Agent), *a shout* is the direct object (the Theme), while *to Lenny* is the indirect object (the Goal), which is only optionally expressed.

In the double object construction (DOC) the light verb *give* obligatorily takes three-arguments in order for the sentence to be grammatical.

The lexical verb *shout* obligatorily takes two arguments: the subject is *Bill* (the Agent) and the direct object is *something* (the Theme/Patient), while the third argument is optional; *to Lenny* is the indirect object (The Goal).

2.2.2. Light verb *give* as a transitive verb

The light verb *give* can also appear as a transitive verb, so taking only two arguments; it is a dyadic verb.

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| (23) | a. He sighed. | (Lexical verb: <i>sigh</i>) |
| | b. He gave a sigh. | (Light verb: <i>give</i> (<i>a sigh</i>)) |
| | c. *He gave Mary a sigh. | (DOC) |
| | d. *He gave a sigh to Mary. | (PDC) |

The light verb *give* is transitive, it can only take two arguments: the subject (which is an Agent) *He*, and the direct object (which is a Theme) *a sigh*.

The lexical verb, *sigh*, is intransitive (it is a one-argument verb; a monadic verb); moreover, it is in the class of unergative verbs. Its single argument is the subject (which is an Agent) *He*.

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

So, we can conclude that the verb forms from light verb constructions are, on the one hand, semantically bleached, but, on the other hand, the verb may also function as the one that assigns thematic roles and/or cases to its DPs. This can be noticed by the fact that both, that is, the lexical verb *give* and the light verb *give*, have the same argument structure and so, they can assign the same thematic roles and/or cases. Both lexical and light verb *give* are ditransitive verbs, with one exception, the case when the light verb is only transitive. In other words, light verbs may license those categories (that is, NPs or DPs) and also theta mark them. From a syntactic perspective, the light verb syntax is identical to that of the lexical or full verb from which the light verb derives from, because the light verb determines which morphological cases are realized.

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