

Types of nominalized verbs in light verb constructions*

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SUMMARY

This paper reports an initial examination of the the light verb DO, especially in terms of its telicity features and which deverbal nouns it can combine with to form a complex predicate. The resulting structures have telic interpretations, and those which correspond to atelic heavy verb predicates adapt a performative interpretation. This paper presents an additional examination into the use of the light verbs HAVE and DO in English as probes into the telicity of deverbal nouns.

RÉSUMÉ

Une exploration initial du verbe légère DO en Anglais, surtout au sujet du télécité des noms déverbaux, et les traits des noms déverbaux qui peuvent former un prédicat complexe. Les structures résultantes sont compris comme télécité, et ceux qui correspondent au prédicats au verbes atélécité gagne une interprétation performative. En plus, une discussion de l'utile des verbes légères HAVE et DO en Anglais pour la sondage du télécité des noms déverbal.

1 INTRODUCTION

Light Verb Constructions (LVCs) are complex predicates which are found in many of the world's languages in at least some form, as first discussed in a modern context in Jespersen (1933). They pose an interesting challenge to semantic analysis, especially at the syntax-semantics interface, due to their structures. A broad and general definition used by many researchers (e.g. Wierzbicka (1982); Kearns (1988); Seiss et al. (2009); Butt (2010)) is that an LVC is a $V + N$ complex predicate where:

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- (1)
- the verb has a semantically “bleached” or weakened meaning
 - the verb contributes to the case or arrangement of the arguments, and may place restrictions on the subject
 - the noun is an indefinite deverbal noun (dvN) which is zero-derived from some inflection of the verb
 - the overall meaning of $LV_1 + a + dvN_{(N \leftarrow V_2)}$ denotes an event equivalent to V_2 alone

So for example, this is the difference between *to nap* and *to have a nap* or *to take a nap*. Overall, LVCs have the same general meaning as their “heavy” counterparts – or at least they denote the same situation of a napping, in this case. The subtle differences in meaning between LVCs and their equivalent lexical verbs is an ongoing research project. Some researchers may loosen one or several of these constraints and look at a larger set of possibilities, although I’ve decided to err on the side of caution here and approach it from the most conservative point of view available.

There are several additional constraints and properties observed with these constructions; the contribution of the light verb to the interpretation of the predicate is either minimal, abstract, or poorly understood. The amount of content it contributes and the nature of that content depends on the light verb, and it depends on the language (discussed in more detail in Butt (2003)). The primary morpho-syntactic contribution of a light verb to a sentence is its effect on the case structure. For example; although there are subtle and difficult-to-pinpoint differences in meaning between *John and I had a hug* and *I gave John a hug*, the clearest difference is that GIVE permits a ditransitive case structure, whereas HAVE requires a commitative, if both agent/themes are to be expressed. There are other poorly understood semantic restrictions – such as why you can *have a snack* but not *take a snack*, even though most deverbals you can HAVE you can also TAKE.

In more conservative analyses, notably that of Kearns (1988), the deverbal noun heading the DP also has additional restrictions. These DPs need to be indefinite, so for example although *We had . . . the talk* or *The baby had her nap already* pattern like a light verb construction, the use of a definite article or possessive pronoun, respectively, excludes them from consideration under Kearns’ treatment. The deverbal noun itself needs to be zero-derived from its heavy verb, and match at least some inflection of the verb. In English, the deverbal nouns pattern the same as the infinitive.

Construction with Anglo-Saxon derivations such as [yus] instead of [yu:z] are therefore excluded, and any sentence with $V + [a \text{ yus}]$ is not considered a light verb construction. Because [a yu:z] is not permitted in English, the verb *to use* cannot appear in any English light verb constructions¹. Likewise, deverbal nouns with nominalizing morphology – such as *an argument* or *an election* – are also excluded since they’re not zero derived. Following Kearns (1988), those examples that do not satisfy these constraints are considered vague action verbs (VAV), a different class of construction with many overlapping properties.

The motivation for this distinction is that constructions that satisfy these constraints have different properties from those that do not. Below ((2) to (5)) are Kearns’ four tests which demonstrate

¹ In personal communication with Rachel Nordlinger of the University of Melbourne, I have been assured that *have a [yu:z] of* is an acceptable and common construction in Australian English. Meanwhile, many of the data provided in this and other sets, including *have a [yus] of*, would typically be rejected in Australia. It must be noted then that all judgments in this paper are those of a Canadian English speaker, and cannot be treated as universal observations of LVCs in general

the different syntactic tests which can distinguish VAVs from LVCs.

- (2) TLVs resist passivization, VAVs do not;
- a. *A groan was given by the man on the right.
 - b. *A pull was given on the rope.
 - c. A demonstration of the new equipment will be given on Monday.
 - d. An inspection was made some time last week.
- (3) TLVs are wh-extraction islands, VAVs are not;
- a. *Which groan did John give?
 - b. *Which pull did John give the rope?
 - c. Which offer did the finance company make?
 - d. ??The groan (which) he gave startled me.
 - e. The offer (which) the finance company made was surprisingly generous.
- (4) The nominal complement of a TLV cannot be pronominalized;
- a. *I gave the soup a heat and then Bill gave it one too.
 - b. ??The deceased gave a groan at around midnight, and gave another one just after two.
 - c. If you can give a presentation after lunch, I'll give one/mine after yours.
- (5) The nominal complement of a TLV must be indefinite, VAVs tolerate definite compliments;
- a. *Who gave the groan just now?
 - b. ??Who gave that groan just now?
 - c. The representative who gave the demonstration left his card.

(All data from Kearns (1988))

These constraints that differentiate VAV constructions from TLV constructions are only applied to English data in the literature. They have not yet been shown to be cross-linguistic, although there are no constraints against this being possible.

2 THE LIGHT VERB DO

A semantic analysis of LVCs provides an interesting challenge as the event-argument structure of the predicate is fully realized through noun phrases, leaving a bleached or “light” verb at the head (see especially Grimshaw and Mester (1988)). By especially investigating the relationship between the light verb and its deverbal noun direct object, there are some interesting puzzles and apparent inconsistencies in the deverbal noun phrases – not only in the syntactic properties and constraints noted by Kearns, but also in the semantic contribution of the light verb to the interpretation of these constructions. Although Wierzbicka (Wierzbicka (1982)) had much to say of the light verb HAVE, especially of its telicity features and argument constraints, little analysis to date has been dedicated to English LVCs using DO. One notable exception is that of Thomas Stroik, although this was largely an examination of the light verb DO in the context of constructions such as “do so (too)” Stroik (2001).

Notably here, Wierzbicka provided an analysis of the telicity of the light verb HAVE, with some

commentary on TAKE. She observed that LVCs headed by HAVE are necessarily atelic, and also generally resist end points, goals, or purposes. So for example, *I had a drink of the wine* is fine, though **I had a drink of the whole bottle the wine* is bad.

- (6) have a drink
 *have an eat
 have a try
 *have a manage
 have a look (for)
 *have a find
 have a scribble
 *have a write

(From Wierzbicka (1982))

- (7) Other examples:
 *have a fix (of the faucet)
 *have a repair (of the door)
 *have a hem (of the skirt)

Now an important note of the data in (6) is that all of the starred examples have two things in common: the first is that these are all deverbal nouns derived from telic verbs, and the second is that all of them, with the exception of *a find*, would be rejected outside of these constructions to begin with². The rejection of **have an eat* reasonably follows from **an eat*. Though *a find* is acceptable, though only when *a find* describes the found object and not the act of finding. Additional examples not provided by Wierzbicka are provided in ((7)), where these are ungrammatical if these are taken to mean the event of hemming, of fixing, or of repairing – and not of knowing of a hem, a fix, or a repair (e.g. *I have a fix for that* ≈ *I know of a fix for that*).

Importantly here, not only does the interpretation of the whole LVC with HAVE need to be atelic, but the light verb specifically needs to combine with a deverbal nouns with an atelic reading. This accounts for why you can *have a look* for something, but not **have a find*, or why you can say you *had a climb* but not **have an exit*. Examples in ((8)) show two examples with atelic verbs in combination with HAVE which both combine with *for* but not with *in*.

- (8) a. Down on the beach we had a stroll *in/for an hour or two.
 b. On her day off, Liv had a bath *in/for an hour or so.

Therefore activities and states (Vendler (1957); Comrie (1976)), and non-iterative semelfactives (Comrie (1976)) combine with HAVE where telic events do not. To contrast this, the light verb DO only combines with telic verbs and produces telic readings, as in ((9)), and with full examples in ((10)) showing the in/for telicity test (Verkuyl (1972); Dowty (1986)). So in ((9)), we could say *I*

² It is worth making mention of the fact that Anna Wierzbicka has carried out the body of her research on the topic at Australian National University, meaning there is almost definitely a conflation of sociolinguistic variation in addition to these issues of grammaticality.

did a fix or *I did a hem in a minute* – where FIX and HEM are both telic – but not **I did a drink in a minute* or **I did a listen in a minute*.

- (9) *do a drink
 *do a try
 *do a look
 do a scribble
 do a fix
 do a repair
 do a hem

(10) Full examples:

- a. The teacher quickly did an experiment in/*for a minute.
 b. With the headsets, you can do a tour of the gallery in/*for an hour.

Unfortunately, something that needs to be accounted for are examples such as *I did a scribble in an hour*, which are to be addressed below. First however, it is important to note the IN/FOR telicity test itself. In ((9)), there are examples which can combine with both IN and with FOR, but surely these cannot be both telic and also atelic.

We can account for this given Harley Harley (1999), where she notes many such examples. Examples she gives are like those in ((11)), where both *Susan watered the garden in an hour* and also *Susan watered the garden for an hour* are both acceptable. In Harley's account, when some VPs combine with certain spatially bound objects, they can combine with both the IN and FOR adjuncts. In these cases, they should be taken as being telic. In the case of *watering the garden*, if you do it *in* an hour, then you reach the end point and the whole garden is watered. If you do it *for* an hour, then it has an incomplete reading – that you watered the garden, but not all of it, and it took one hour to water as much as you did. Given these data, testing telicity with IN is more reliable than testing with FOR.

- (11) a. Susan watered the garden in an hour/for an hour.
 b. Jill painted the wall in an hour/for an hour.

(From Harley (1999))

This can also be used to explain why some telic predicates do not combine with the FOR adjunct. For the more grim accomplishments and achievements such as *dying*, *drowning* and *bursting*, if you only partly or somewhat die or drown or burst, you cannot really have died or drowned or burst – you need to reach the culmination for it to count. This is why unlike watering gardens or painting walls, you can burst *in* a moment, but not *for* a moment.

3 LIGHT VERB CONSTRUCTIONS AS A TEST FOR TELICITY

Given what has been shown so far, we can now see that light verbs are a useful tool in that we can use the light verb construction as a probe to examine the telicity of deverbal nouns, where those that combine with HAVE are atelic, and those that combine with DO are telic. The data below in (12)

to (14) show a comparison of lexical verbs relative to the deverbal form in both a HAVE-LVC and a DO-LVC.

- (12) a. I ran for/*in an hour
 b. I had a run for/*in an hour
 c. I did a run for/in an hour
 d. I ran the race for/in an hour
 e. *I had a run of the race
 f. *I did a run of the race
- (13) a. I scribbled for/*in a minute
 b. I had a scribble for/*in a minute
 c. I did a scribble for/in a minute
 d. I scribbled a drawing *for/in a minute
 e. *I had a scribble of a drawing
 f. *I did a scribble of a drawing
- (14) a. I talked for/*in a minute
 b. I had a talk for/*in a minute
 c. I did a talk for/in a minute

Focusing on (12), (12a) shows that run combines with FOR but not IN, meaning the verb RUN is atelic under the IN/FOR test. From (12b) we can see that when you combine RUN with HAVE into a light verb construction, it stays atelic, just as Wierzbicka predicts. In (12c), *I did a run* is good both with *for an hour* and also with *in an hour*, but as mentioned earlier with the Harley data this can be accounted for by assuming that *a run* in this case is telic, and that a run for an hour is an incomplete event with a known culmination of some form. Additional examples of these DO and HAVE combined forms are in ((15));

- (15) do/have a call
 do/have a claim
 do/have a debate
 do/have a dig
 do/have a dip
 do/have a drive
 do/have a fight
 do/have a debate

Here we have a puzzle to address; what does it mean to be *a run* and yet also be telic? Especially given that the heavy verb equivalent to *run* is atelic, as in (12a).

4 PERFORMANCES AS A CLASS

My proposal is that there are two different kinds of RUN in (12), defined in part by a difference in telicity. Specifically, the atelic reading, as in *I had a run* depicts a more general act of running. On the other hand, with *I did a run*, this kind of run has a telic reading and therefore needs some kind of culmination, by definition. This kind of run is a “known run” – a run for a period of time or one that is spatially bound, as per Harley (Harley (1999)). This run is bound in space, like the known path one takes on a daily jog, or a run for charity. The key here is that this second kind of *a run*, the telic kind of a run, is a “performance”. The act is bound by space or time or by social convention, and has some point where you know yourself to be done.

What this analysis wins us is a mechanism for explaining where these differences in meaning come from, and contributes to an understanding of the additional information gained by using a LVC instead of a lexical verb. Given examples such as *a fight* – which can be either a conflict between two people that goes on for as long as it has to, or, it can be something that has an audience and rules and a set winner where the fight is a performance as in a boxing match – we can predict certain properties. For example, the addition of *in an hour* will force the telic/performance reading, though the addition of *for an hour* may still be ambiguous between the two interpretations. We can also predict that combining *fight* with the light verb HAVE will force an atelic reading, as it will force a telic one when combined with DO. The same can be said for *a debate* – like *I had a debate* or *I did a debate*, as in (16). If we consider one form to be an atelic reading and one form to be a telic reading, then we can account for this change in meaning.

- (16) a. The teams had a debate for an hour / *in an hour
 b. The teams did a debate for an hour / in an hour

This situation can result in ambiguities. For example, given a friend who is an avid runner, and who constantly trains for marathons, if they were to say to you *I had a run on Saturday*, there are two possible interpretations. The first possibility is that they ran, as per usual – *a run*, the atelic form, plus HAVE as a light verb, to form *have a run* as in the light verb version of *to run*. The second potential interpretation is that there was an event, like a race or a marathon on the Saturday, and the friend attended it. In this case, first we have *a run* in the telic form, it cannot combine with the light verb form of HAVE since HAVE only combines with atelic deverbal nouns, so in this case we can just interpret HAVE not as a light verb, but rather as an existential, as in; there was a run on Saturday and the friend attended it. Two different telicity values for the DP *a run* can result in two possible different interpretations. A few more examples are provided in ((17)).

- (17) a. have a walk (in the morning) / do a walk (for charity)
 b. have a dance (on the weekend) / do a dance (for an audience)
 c. have a talk (over coffee) / do a talk (at a conference)

The examples in ((17)) show that even though deverbal nouns may encode verbal semantic features like lexical aspect, which lexical aspect features a deverbal noun has when in the object position of a light verb construction can only be disambiguated by the light verb. Additionally, there is a constraint against adding the kinds of arguments that would normally indicate a change in telicity.

The DPs that combine with light verbs into a light verb construction do not follow the same known rules or have the same properties of clausal DPs – or at least that they cannot possibly share all of their properties.

This implies a special subcategory within lexical semantic typing; *Activities* which are given culminations and which are made into *Accomplishments* are here described as *Performances*. In general, performances are no different from other achievements and have no particular properties except that they can be ambiguous between their activity and achievement readings, but only in certain specific environments. A summary of the above arguments are provided in (18)– (19), demonstrating these properties.

- (18) a. Stavros [napped]_{activity}
 b. *Stavros napped the baby.
 c. Stavros [had_{LV} a nap]_{activity}
 d. *Stavros did a nap.
- (19) a. Hannah [ran_(-telic)]_{activity}
 b. Hannah [(ran a race)_(+telic)]_{accomplishment}
 c. Hannah had a run
 (i) Hannah [had_{LV} (a run)_(-telic)]_{activity}
 (ii) Hannah had (a run)_(+telic) ≈ There was a run/a race and Rachel attended it.
 d. Hannah [did_{LV} (a run)_(+telic)]_{accomplishment}

The examples in (18) show that activities which cannot take on extra arguments and convert to accomplishments more strongly resist ambiguity, and do not combine into a DO-LVC, unlike the examples in (19).

5 THE UNDERSPECIFIED TELICITY OF GIVE AND TAKE

So far the focus has been on DO and HAVE, largely since telicity features of HAVE constructions are well-documented in the literature, although the analysis here of DO is my own. There are analyses on GIVE and TAKE to at least some degree available in the literature (Brugman (2001); Butt (2003); Seiss et al. (2009); Wierzbicka (1982); Hiroe (2006)), though little if any mention has been made with regards to the telicity and interactions of these LVs. Here, a brief word on the light verbs GIVE and TAKE.

5.1 TAKE

It was noted above that there is a poorly understood relationship between HAVE and TAKE – that many, though not all, of the deverbal nouns in HAVE LVCs are also found with TAKE. Also, HAVE and DO both resist the kinds of additional arguments that might change telicity, in the manner that a direct object can change the telicity of a predicate. This restriction is not found reliably with TAKE.

For example, in Wierzbicka (1982) **have a walk to the post office* is given as an example of an unacceptable sentence. This is consistent with the data provided so far, as the phrase *to the store*

would change the telicity of the verb to walk from atelic to telic and therefore would not combine with HAVE. This contrasts with light verb constructions with TAKE, as in (20). In fact, looking at these examples, overall it seems that if deverbals can combine with TAKE at all, they pattern more like their heavy verb equivalents than like the LVCs discussed so far.

- (20) I walked for/*in an hour
 I took a walk for/*in an hour
 I walked to the post office in/*for an hour
 I took a walk to the post office in/*for an hour
- (21) I swam *in/for an hour
 I took a swim *in/for an hour
 I swam to the shore in/*for an hour
 I took a swim to the shore in/*for an hour
- (22) I drank *in/for a minute
 I took a drink *in/for a minute
 I drank the wine in/for a minute
 I took a drink of wine *in/for a minute
- (23) I ran *in/for a minute
 I took a run *in/for a minute
 I ran the race in/*for an hour
 I took a run of the race

The restrictions with regards to telicity-changing arguments does not apply to TAKE as it does to DO and HAVE. Even so, the main examples with RUN as in (12) – using *run* without and without *a race* – fails this in (23d). So *I took a run* is acceptable where **I took a run of the race* is not. Also, in (23c), **I took a drink of wine in a minute* is not acceptable, and doesn't pattern like the other telic predicates with temporally or spatially bound objects, as per Harley. This could be a matter of *of wine* having a partitive-like effect, which makes the whole predicate no longer bound. Discussion of the light verb TAKE has relatively little presence in the literature, and few generalizations have been drawn, though the data above indicate that the LV TAKE has no features of note with regards to telicity.

5.2 GIVE

The general properties of the LV GIVE is that a ditransitive structure can be used to add a theme or a beneficiary/goal, depending on the example. In (24b), **have a bite of the pen* is less good though acceptable, where (24c) is much better, as is (24d). More telling here, transitives which are outright unacceptable in (25) are permitted with the LV GIVE in (25d). When comparing various LVCs

to their “heavy” equivalents, the light verb GIVE is more “transitive-friendly”, for lack of a better term.

- (24) a. Ana bit the pen *in/for a minute
 b. Ana had a bite of the pen *in/for a minute
 c. Ana took a bite of the pen *in/for a minute
 d. Ana gave the pen a bite *in/for a minute
- (25) a. Marc bathed the baby in/for an hour
 b. *Marc had a bath of the baby
 c. *Marc took a bath of the baby
 d. Marc gave the baby a bath in/for an hour
- (26) a. I walked the dog in/for an hour
 b. *I had a walk of the dog
 c. *I took a walk of the dog
 d. I gave the dog a walk in/for an hour

Another use is as a causative with an added benefactive or malafactive – whether as a MAKE- or LET-causative. Looking at (27), the HAVE- and TAKE-LVCs are acceptable in (27b) and (27c), respectively, as is (27d) which shows the GIVE-LVC. Unlike the data above as in (26), the data in (27) denote the same general situation, although this is simply explained as a reinterpretation of the heavy verb arguments which combined with GIVE, and not the addition of new ones.

- (27) a. I looked at Mike *in/for a minute
 b. I had a look at Mike *in/for a minute
 c. I took a look at Mike *in/for a minute
 d. I gave Mike a look *in/for a minute

One more possible interpretation is that you benefited someone by permitting them to act, as in (28b) – essentially “I gave Mike a turn at looking”, though “I gave Mike a look” can also mean “I looked at Mike”. There’s a convergence of forms, in other words, and a sentence with the LV GIVE simply has far more interpretations available to it, and like TAKE none of these interpretations are restricted or defined by their telicity, unlike HAVE or DO.

- (28) a. I let Mike look at my book
 b. I gave Mike a look (i.e. at my book)

6 CLOSING REMARKS

What this means is that the conclusions drawn from analyzing HAVE and DO – that plain deverbal nouns can change telicity even in the presence of a ban on additional arguments – do not seem to be true of TAKE and GIVE, and thus cannot be said to be a general property of LVs in English. Additionally, because of the constraints that these LVs impose on their complements, the light verbs HAVE and DO can be used as probes into the telicity of deverbal nouns.

These generalizations cannot be confidently said to be a general property of English yet due to the unresolved issue of variability in acceptability judgments. Not only do LVCs spread across an acceptability gradient, there is also much sociolinguistic variation to be explored.

One final puzzle is the matter of acceptability judgments in context, and the effect of context on acceptability. In isolation, I suspect most would reject *to give someone a nap*, and yet, *I gave the baby a nap at noon* is unexceptional. I have even spoken with colleagues who were not sure if they judged *Liz had a walk* to be acceptable, and yet found no issue with *Liz had a walk yesterday*, or that *to have a sing* was unacceptable to all of my informants, though they accepted *We all had a sing at the pub*.

As a result, I have come to frame all acceptability judgments in terms of full sentences with time or location adjuncts, which sometimes changes responses. Why and how an adjunct effects the acceptability of the VP, and which adjuncts have what kind of effect, remains to be addressed.

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