Light Verbs are Just Regular Verbs

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1 Introduction

Light verb constructions are illustrated by the following examples from English and Farsi:

(1)   a. She had a bath.
      b. Take a look at this!
      c. She put the blame for the accident on him.
      d. She gave a sigh.
(2)   a. Tim-e   mâ unâ-ro   shekast dâd.
          team-EZ we they-OBJ defeat   give.PAST.3SG
          'Our team defeated them.' (Folli et al. 2005:1376, (18a))
      b. Ali bâ   Babak harf zad.
          Ali with Babak word hit
          'Ali talked with Babak.' (Goldberg 2003:122, (2))

The defining property of a light verb construction is that the verb contributes relatively little to the meaning, while its complement, an NP in the examples above, provides the bulk of the semantics. So, for example, *take a look at* is more or less equivalent to the simple verb *look at*. Non-NP complements are also possible, as in the PP examples from English below, and an AP from Farsi:

(3)   a. The water came to a boil.
      b. The excavations brought to light the remnants of an ancient civilization.
      c. The monster came to life.
(4)   Rostam piran-esh-o   xoshk kard.
      Rostam shirt-his-OBJ dry   do.PAST.3SG
      'Rostam dried his shirt.' (Toosarvandani 2009:69, (27))

I will concentrate on NP complements to light verbs here.

It is commonly claimed that the argument structure properties of light verb constructions are determined not by the verb, but by its complement NP (e.g., Jackendoff 1974, Grimshaw and Mester 1988, Butt 1995, among many others). For instance, the verb *give* normally takes two NP objects, but light verb *give* takes two only if the noun is the type of noun that has a logical object. For instance, *kick*, *massage*, and *pat on the back* take such objects, and so another NP appears as the object of *give*, apparently functioning as the argument of the noun:

(5)   a. She gave him a kick.
      b. She gave him a massage.
      c. She gave him a pat on the back.

In contrast, nouns like *sigh*, *lurch*, *grunt* do not have logical objects, and they do not seem to appear with another NP object with light verb *give*:

(6)   a. She gave a sigh.
      b. The table gave a lurch.
      c. He gave a grunt.

Accordingly, most theoretical approaches to light verb constructions posit some kind of complex predicate formation. For example, Jackendoff (1974) posits a Complex Predicate Rule that combines the verb and its complement into a single predicate. Grimshaw and Mester (1988) propose an operation of Argument Transfer that transfers the arguments of the noun to the light verb, which is viewed as "thematically incomplete." In a similar analysis, Butt (1995) says that light verbs

are "incomplete predicates," which combine with their complements by an Argument Fusion operation. Goldberg (2003) gives a Construction Grammar analysis where the V + NP forms a V. In the analysis of Culicover and Jackendoff (2005), the light verb contributes just a syntactic frame, while the meaning of N "unifies" with V. For Hale and Keyser (1993), light verbs are *v*, while regular verbs are V. All of these analyses (and others not listed) treat light verbs as special in some way. Other than the last, every analysis proposes some kind of complex predicate formation.

In contrast, I argue for what I consider to be the default hypothesis, that light verbs are just regular verbs, albeit ones with fairly little semantic specification. Their complements are just regular complements. We only need two things to account for light verbs, and these are independently needed: the fact that NPs can be eventive; and the acknowledgement that the logical arguments of NPs can be controlled. On this view, light verbs are nothing more than members of a subcategory of obligatory control verbs.

2 Arguments for the Default Hypothesis

The default hypothesis is supported by numerous facts, most of which indicate that light verbs act in every way like other verbs, while their complements have the same properties that they have in other contexts.

2.1 Butt's Generalization

The first argument is Butt's Generalization. In a typological survey, Butt (2010) finds that light verbs are always identical in form to regular, non-light verbs. That is, there is no language where a light verb use of a verb differs in form from the form of the same verb used in non-light uses. This follows if they *are* regular verbs. It does not follow in any of the theories listed above, where light verbs are special in some way.

2.2 The NP is Just an NP

The NP of a light verb construction appears to be a normal NP in every way, and can appear in other NP positions with different verbs:

(7)   a. She gave him a pat on the back/a kick in the teeth. (light verb)
      b. A pat on the back is better than a kick in the teeth. (non-light verb)
(8)   a. She gave a sigh. (light verb)
      b. She heaved a sigh. (contentful verb)
(9)   a. Take a careful look at this! (light verb)
      b. I recommend a careful look at this. (contentful verb)

The NP is typically indefinite, but this is not necessary:

(10) a. She gave the kind of sigh that is the result of extreme disappointment.
      b. She gave many sighs as they parted.
      c. Most of the sighs that she gives are obviously affected.
      d. She gave her most put-upon sigh and said...

It is sometimes claimed that the NP cannot undergo processes that regular NPs can, like passivization (Dixon 1991:345), but this is not correct:

(11) a. A deep sigh was given as she slowly lay in the sand.
      b. So many showers were being taken at once that the hot water ran out.
      c. ...forgot to mention a most psychadelic piss was taken after waking up in the middle of
          the night...(internet)

Note also example (10c), where the NP has been relativized. There is nothing that distinguishes the NP with a light verb from other NPs as objects (or subjects) of verbs.

2.3 Light Verbs with No Heavy Verb

There are light verb constructions with no corresponding simple verb:

(12)   a. take a gander at
       b. take a leak
       c. take potshots at
       d. take a break
       e. take a moment
       f. take a stab at (not the same as *stab*)
       g. give a standing ovation
       h. have an affair

By itself this might be expected by complex predicate analyses: an NP plus light verb could exist with no corresponding heavy verb. However, in all but the most idiomatic cases (*take a gander at*, *take a leak*), these NPs are independent from the light verb, and can occur without it:

(13)   a. George Will's Potshots at Bernie Sanders Won't Deter Him From a Possible Presidential
           Run (headline)
       b. We need a break.
       c. A moment is all I need.
       d. His stab at humor resulted in a fit of coughing.
       e. Standing ovations were the order of the day.
       f. An affair can ruin a politician's career.

This is *not* expected by complex predicate analyses, which might expect complex predicates to have meanings not inherent in their component parts. In contrast, on the view here, the meaning of a light verb construction is just the meaning of the NP as object of a fairly bleached verb. In every case (except phrasal idioms), the meaning is inherent in the NP itself.

2.4 Modification

In complex predicate formation analyses, we might expect modification possibilities to mirror those of verbal predicates. However, it has long been noted that the NP in a light verb construction can be modified as an NP in ways that are not available to the corresponding verbal predicate (e.g., Huddleston and Pullum 2002):

(14)   a. She gave him a well-earned pat on the back.
       b. *She patted him on the back well-earnedly.
(15)   a. They gave her a round of applause.
       b. *They applauded her roundly/in a round.
(16)   a. He is taking another of his seemingly frequent showers.
       b. *He is showering again seemingly frequently.

Other examples can be paraphrased with a verbal predicate, but the result is not really synonymous with the NP modification:

(17)   a. Simon couldn't resist taking another of his patented shots at the internet on his way out
           of the door.
       b. Simon couldn't resist shooting again at the internet in his patented way on his way out
           the door.
(18)   a. The President took another of his carefully orchestrated trips outside Washington.
       b. The President traveled outside Washington again in his carefully orchestrated way.

In every case this modification is available to these NPs, independently of their occurrence in a light verb construction:

(19) a. His well-earned pat on the back was not forthcoming.
        b. A round of applause should last at least five seconds.
        c. His patented shots at the internet are getting old.
        d. The president's carefully orchestrated trips outside Washington are paying dividends.

This same modification is also possible with other NPs that are not typically viewed as light verb constructions, like *have a well-earned glass of champagne* or *engineer some carefully orchestrated TV appearances*. These modification possibilities follow if the NPs in light verb constructions are just like other NPs. If instead the NP combines with the verb in some kind of complex predicate formation operation, we might not expect that the modification possibilities would be those of an NP and not the corresponding simple verb (or something else entirely).

2.5 Conflicting Adverbs

Additionally, all of the operations of complex predicate formation that have been proposed have the result that a light verb plus its NP are equivalent to the corresponding simple verb in being a single event or single predicate. However, light verb constructions permit conflicting adverbs that are not permitted with the corresponding simple verb:

(20) a. The man's wings slowly gave a quick flap. (internet)
        b. *The man's wings slowly flapped quickly.
(21) a. She deliberately put the accidental blame for the accident on Johnson.
        b. *She deliberately accidentally blamed Johnson for the accident.
(22) a. She wholly put partial blame for the accident on Johnson.
        b. *She wholly partially blamed Johnson for the accident.

This indicates that the NP denotes an event separate from the verbal event.

2.6 Aspectual Properties

Light verb constructions and the corresponding simple verb have different aspectual properties, as has been pointed out before (e.g., Huddleston and Pullum 2002):

(23) a. He gave a scream. (bounded and probably short event)
        b. He screamed. (potentially unbounded)

This follows if the NP is an event-denoting nominal in the count domain (e.g., Krifka 1989; Chierchia 1998). The NPs are enumerable:

(24) a. He slowly gave two quick grunts.
        b. The President took another of his carefully orchestrated trips outside Washington.

The modifiers *two* and *another* treat the events as countable entities. Countable entities are necessarily bounded. At the same time, *quick* and *carefully orchestrated* indicate that these bounded objects are events. The aspectual properties follow: they are bounded events. Note that the same aspectual interpretation obtains with the same NP outside a light verb construction, as in *a scream burst out of him*, where *a scream* is again bounded.

    Nominalizations, which can also be NPs in light verb constructions and are more clearly eventive, share the same properties of being bounded, enumerable events:

(25) a. He gave the tables two quick scrubbings each.
        b. She gives each dog two thorough brushings a day.

But again, these nominalizations occur in NP positions outside of light verb constructions (e.g., *a good scrubbing will help*; *I recommend two thorough brushings a day*).

2.7 Eventive NPs

To summarize, the NP denotes a separate event from the light verb. The NP is a count NP and is enumerable. We know independently that NPs can denote enumerable events (Bolinger 1967; Vendler 1968; Larson 1998):

(26)   a. She had [three quick espressos] and then left the coffee shop.
          b. [Three quick espressos] and she left the coffee shop.
          c. [Two short side trips] is all we have time for.
          d. He sat down for [a leisurely beer or two].

The modifiers here indicate that these NPs denote events, not objects. Clearly, NPs can be eventive; but they can be eventive on their own, without any light verb. That is all we need to get the light verb use. We do not need a special grammatical operation just for light verbs.

2.8 Determinants of Argument Structure

Above we noted that argument structure appears to be partially determined by the complement in light verb constructions:

(27)   a. She gave him a kick. (*kick* has logical object)
          b. She gave a sigh. (*sigh* does not have logical object)

This is not correct, however. In fact, all light verb constructions with *give* allow an indirect object, even when the noun does not have a logical object (contra Huddleston and Pullum 2002:293):

(28)   a. She turned and gave the audience a deep sigh.
          b. Come on, give us a vomit.
          c. The baby gave us a giggle.
          d. . . . but I couldn't help it and I gave them a gasp and looked to the floor.
          e. The lanky youngster in the stained apron behind the counter gave them a grunt as the couple left.
          f. She blushed and gave us an embarrassed laugh.
          g. She blanched and gave us a horrified shudder.

Conversely, nouns that do take a logical object can appear without the indirect object:

(29)   a. She gave one violent kick and broke free.
          b. She gives massages all day long.
          c. Tink the horse gives kisses for treats.

This is true even when the corresponding verb takes its object obligatorily:

(30)   a. This doctor gives very thorough examinations.
          b. This doctor examines *(patients) very thoroughly.
(31)   a. She gave many unearned pats on the back that day.
          b. She patted *(people) on the back that day many times.

    The verb *give* has a regular use as a simple transitive verb meaning 'produce':

(32)   a. Cows give milk. ($\approx$ Cows produce milk.)
          b. The whole paper only gives two examples. ($\approx$ The whole paper only produces two examples.)
          c. The output only gives one result. ($\approx$ The output only produces one result.)

This seems to be the meaning of light verb *give* when it lacks an indirect object (e.g., *she gave a sigh $\approx$ she produced a sigh*).

It therefore does not appear to be true that the argument structure of the light verb construction is determined by the noun; rather, it is determined by the verb, as we would expect if light verbs are like regular verbs. This is especially evident when we consider *give* versus *take*, occurring with the same noun. With a noun like *a punch*, *take* only permits a PP and does not allow an indirect object, while *give* does not allow a PP and only allows an indirect object:

(33) a. She took a punch at him.
      b. *She took him a punch.
(34) a. She gave him a punch.
      b. *She gave a punch at him.

If the NP was what determined the argument structure, *take* and *give* should have exactly the same argument structure when they combine with the same NP. It should be noted that *take* does permit an indirect object in other uses:

(35) a. She took him a drink.
      b. She took him his tea.

Take permits an indirect object, just like *give*; if the argument structure of light verb constructions were determined by the noun, *give a punch* and *take a punch* should have exactly the same argument structure. They do not.

In this respect *take* is acting like fully verbal *take*. *Take* only allows an indirect object on its use as a verb of physical transfer:

(36) a. She took him a drink.
      b. She took (*him) a moment.
      c. She took (*him) the responsibility.
      d. She took (*him) dictation/a memo.

Take on its light verb use is not a verb of physical transfer, so an indirect object is not allowed (see Norvig and Lakoff 1987 on meanings of *take*). The important thing here is that it is the verb, *take* or *give*, that is determining argument structure, not the noun.

In addition, with *give*, the indirect object often does not seem to correspond to any argument of the noun. In some cases, an oblique relation with the corresponding verb may be appropriate, as with *give us a shout* ('shout to') and *give us a smile* ('smile at'). However, no oblique relation seems appropriate with *give us a vomit* or *give us a laugh/giggle/gasp*: with *give us a vomit*, the vomit does not stand in any spatial relation with *us*; with *give us a laugh*, there does not appear to be any appropriate prepositional paraphrase: none of *laugh at/to/with* is the right semantics. Similarly for *my phone will only give you one short ring*: there really is no PP that goes with the verb *ring*. A paraphrase with *for* is most appropriate for all these cases, but this is a regular meaning of an indirect object, again indicating that argument structure is determined by the verb (or verbal construction), not the noun.

This observation is not completely new. Brugman (2001) says that light verbs retain the semantics of the corresponding heavy verb. Newman (1996) and Karimi (1997) show that it is the light verb that determines whether the construction takes an agent. Folli et al. (2005) say that the light verb (partially) determines aspectual properties. Wittenberg et al. (2014a) find that light verb *give* primes syntactic structure just like regular verb *give*, and they conclude that the syntactic structure must be the same. Nevertheless, all of these works still treat light verbs as special in some way. They do not take the logical next step of considering them to be no different from other verb-object combinations.

2.9 Summary

In this section, we have seen that there is really nothing special about light verb constructions. The NP is just an NP and has all the properties of an event-denoting count noun. The argument structure is not determined by the NP, but is determined by the verb (or possibly other verbal heads, if those

are what add arguments like indirect objects). In the next section I will argue that the NP appears to play a role because of control: its arguments are controlled by the arguments of V. However, control into nominals is again something we see outside of light verb constructions.

3 Control

It does seem that in a light verb construction like *X gives Y a kick*, X and Y have argument roles related to an event of kicking (X is the kicker and Y is the kickee). I suggest that this is the same phenomenon as control into non-finite clauses. With non-finite clauses, certain verbs enforce obligatory control, while other verbs do not. For instance, *decide* requires that its subject control the subject of the non-finite clause that is its complement, as shown by anaphoric possibilities in the lower clause:

(37) a. Did you decide [to portray yourself/*oneself/*herself as a victim]?
      b. I believe it would be a mistake [to portray yourself/oneself/herself as a victim].

In contrast, *be a mistake* does not enforce control, and the subject of the non-finite clause is determined by context.

Exactly the same thing can be observed with the NP *a kick in the teeth*. As object of *give*, the logical arguments of *kick* are controlled by the arguments of *give*, but in a different context they are determined by the discourse context:

(38) a. She gave him a kick in the teeth. (kicker = she, kickee = him)
      b. I think a kick in the teeth is warranted. (kicker and kickee determined by context)
(39) a. She gave the tables a good scrubbing. (scrubber = she, scrubbee = the tables)
      b. A good scrubbing will make a huge difference. (scrubber and scrubbee determined by context)

The same holds for *a good scrubbing*.

However, control into nominals is not particular to light verbs. We see the same obligatory control with other verbs, as well:

(40) a. She gave a sigh. (agent of give = agent of sigh)
      b. She heaved a sigh. (agent of heave = agent of sigh)
(41) a. She gave him a swift kick in the head. (agent of give = agent of kick)
      b. She aimed a swift kick at his head. (agent of aim = agent of kick)
(42) a. John gave a good account of himself. (agent of give = agent of account)
      b. John managed to produce a good account of himself. (agent of produce = agent of account)
(43) She performed the operation on him. (agent of perform = agent of operation)

That is, we do not need to build a theory of control into nominals just for light verb constructions. We need such a theory anyway, and again light verbs are acting just like other verbs.

I do not have space here to build a theory of control into nominals, but I will say what facts such a theory needs to account for. Note in doing so that I do not commit to viewing the logical arguments of the noun as being syntactically present; it is possible that they are, but they could also be present only semantically.

First, if the light verb has an underlying external argument, that argument obligatorily controls the logical external argument of the nominal. In *X gives Y a kick*, X is the external argument of *give* and controls the external argument of *kick*. In *X takes a shower*, X is the external argument of *take* and controls the external argument of *shower*.

Second, if the light verb does not have an underlying external argument (it is unaccusative), then the external argument of the nominal is left uncontrolled and unspecified. Examples of this are *get* and *have*, which lack underlying external arguments (they are unaccusative verbs). In *X got a kick in the head*, the kicker is left unspecified. That is, the logical external argument of *kick* is left uncontrolled. In *X had a massage*, the massager is left unspecified (it is not controlled).

Third, if the light verb has an underlying indirect object and the nominal has a logical internal argument, the underlying indirect object will control the internal argument of the nominal. So in *X gives Y a kick*, Y is the one kicked. I also analyze *get* as an unaccusative version of *give*, so that the surface subject of *get* is the underlying indirect object. This results in X in *X got a kick* being the one kicked. Ditto for *have*, so that in *X had a massage*, X is the object of *massage*. The verb *take* can either have an external argument or lack one, so that in *X took a punch at Y*, X is the puncher, but in *X took a punch from Y*, X is the one being punched. I analyze the latter as an unaccusative, with X an underlying indirect object.

If the light verb has an indirect object but the nominal has no logical internal argument, then the indirect object controls nothing and is simply interpreted as a benefactive. This is the case in *the baby gave us a giggle*. (I would further claim that this interpretation is there even when control obtains, so that X in *give X a kick* is simultaneously a benefactive in the verbal event and the kickee in the kicking event. Once again this is just like control, where the controller fills two argument roles.)

With *give*, we then see two overlapping control relations:

(44)   She$_i$ gave him$_j$ [a KICKER$_i$ kick KICKEE$_j$ in the teeth].

Existing theories of control, designed for non-finite clauses, do not permit overlapping control. The movement theory of control (Hornstein 1999, 2001) explicitly bans this sort of overlapping control. It might be possible to modify the Agree theory of control (Landau 2004, 2006, 2008) to permit two overlapping control relations by relativizing Agree, but I will not attempt to do that here. Whatever the right theory of control into nominals is, it needs to permit two overlapping control relations.[1]

To summarize, the complement of the light verb seems to be playing a role in the argument structure of the clause, but this is because its own arguments are controlled by the arguments of the verb. This control is something we see outside of light verb constructions, and is not something that we need to build a theory of just for light verbs.

4 Conclusion

In this paper I have argued for what ought to be the default analysis of light verb constructions: that they are just regular verb-object combinations. The verb has its usual argument structure and interpretation (which is often quite unspecified); its complement has the same interpretation it has elsewhere. We only need two things to account for light verb constructions: the fact that NPs can be eventive; and control into NPs. Both of these are needed anyway, outside of light verb constructions. We can therefore dispense with "light verb" as a grammatical category. What light verbs actually are is a subcategory of obligatory control verbs. We already have the category of obligatory control verbs in our model of grammar, and light verbs will not be the only ones in the subcategory that obligatorily controls into nominals: as we saw above, *perform (an operation)* and *heave (a sigh)* are also obligatory control verbs with NP complements. We can do without complex predicate formation in its various theoretical guises in the analysis of light verb constructions, which is a considerable simplification in the model of grammar. We also need a better theory of control that can capture the facts of control with light verbs like *give*.

I have addressed only English here, and it remains to be seen whether the default analysis can be maintained for other languages as well. Butt's Generalization, discussed above, seems to indicate that the default analysis must be correct across languages. Nevertheless, there are numerous

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[1]There is one complication to the control facts described in the text, which is that there are also light verbs with a causative interpretation. With these, the indirect object is not the logical internal argument of the nominal, but the logical *external* argument:

(i)   a. That gave us a laugh! (laugher = us)
       b. That gave me a shudder! (shudderer = me)
       c. I gave Mary a lick of my lollipop. (Dixon 1991:343)

Such examples will require a different analysis.

complications that must be accounted for in languages like Japanese and Farsi. In Japanese, for instance, the case endings that appear on arguments of the light verb appear to be determined by the noun (Grimshaw and Mester 1988). This is problematic if those arguments are actually arguments of the verb, as the control analysis requires. However, the same seems to be true with other obligatory control verbs (see Matsumoto 1996). Again, this indicates that light verbs are just a subcategory of control verb. Yet there are also differences between light verbs and other obligatory control verbs, for instance in the ability to form long passives (Yokota 2005). There are ways to reconcile these differences (for instance, the availability of a long passive probably depends on how much functional structure is present in the complement of the obligatory control verb), but I leave it to future research to determine whether the default analysis can be maintained across the numerous languages that have light verb constructions.

Finally, the account of light verbs proposed here makes a testable psycholinguistic prediction that is different from all other accounts. Some recent processing studies of light verbs (Wittenberg and Piñango 2011, Piñango et al. 2014, Wittenberg et al. 2014b) have found that light verbs are processed more slowly than non-light verbs with the same noun (*give a summary* versus *copy a summary*) and more slowly than the same verb in a non-light use (*give a summary* versus *give a pen*). This finding is consistent with the account proposed here: the processing slowdown is plausibly due to the need to process the eventive NP with control. Unlike all other accounts of light verbs, the control account predicts that *give a sigh* and *heave a sigh* will be processed in the same manner, since both involve control verbs with eventive nouns. The same is predicted for pairs like *give a kick* and *aim a kick at*. In the account proposed here, these are all verbs that control into eventive nouns. In all other accounts, light verbs are special, and these pairs are predicted to be processed differently. I offer this prediction in the hope that someone will test it in the near future.

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