

The concept of *lightness*: new perspectives and applications.

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Introduction.

The term *lightness* was first coined by Jespersen in relation to English verbal constructions formed by “an insignificant verb, to which the marks of person and tense are attached, before the really important idea” (Jespersen, 1954: 117-118). In other words, lightness was first detected as a property of general English predicates (i.e. *to make*, *to have*, *to give*, *to take*) when found in combination with a *nomen actionis* (Nickel, 1968) or, following a more recent definition, an eventive deverbal noun (Kiefer & Gross, 1995; Kiefer, 1998), as in the case of *to make a call*, *to give a talk*, *to take a walk*, *to have a row*. These examples represent a verbal construction in which the predicate is devoid of its literal meaning through a process of “predicate bleaching” (Szabolsci, 1986). As a consequence, the verb turns into a mere syntactic device (sometimes serving as an aspectual element too), while the noun undertakes the main semantic content of the construction (i.e. *to make a call* means “to call”; *to give a talk* means “to talk”, and so forth).

Since then, the so-called Light Verb Constructions (LVCs) have been a highly debated topic in literature, and have been the object of research in a number of different languages, such as German (cf. Helbig, 1979, 1984; Hoffmann, 1996), Spanish (cf. Alonso-Ramos, 1997; Bosque, 2004; de Miguel, 2008), Italian (cf. Cantarini, 2001; Alba Salas, 2002; Gaeta, 2002; La Fauci & Mirto, 2003; Mastrofini, 2004; Jezek, 2004), English (cf. Wierzbicka, 1982, 1988; Cattell, 1984; Dixon, 1991; Stein, 1991; Kearns, 2002; Butt, 2010; Tu & Roth, 2011; Mastrofini, 2013; Giparaité, 2016), Japanese (cf. Grimshaw & Mester, 1988; Dubinsky, 1997; Miyamoto, 1999), and French (cf. Vives, 1983, 1998; Giry-Schneider, 1987; Gross M., 1981, 1996; Gross G., 1996, 1999).

State of the art.

There have been many varied approaches to the study of LVCs, ranging from morphology (Helbig 1979, 1984) to syntax (Cattell, 1984; Grimshaw & Mester, 1988; Kearns, 2002), and semantics

(Wierzbicka, 1982, 1988; Stein, 1991), just to name a few. Nevertheless, many aspects seem to be unsolved. The first question concerns the methodology: using a single level of analysis (morphological *vs.* syntactic *vs.* semantic) has shed some light on the properties of the verb or of the noun, but failed in considering the phenomena of interface underlying the construction as a whole. Secondly, the criteria used to determine what is a LVC from what is not are not universally recognized in literature. The most exhaustive taxonomy of parameters was developed by French

scholars (Giry-Schneider, 1978, 1987; Daladier, 1978, 1992; Vives, 1983, 1998; Gross M., 1996; Gross G., 1994, 1996, 1999) within the works carried out by the L.A.D.L. (Laboratoire d'Automatique Documentaire et Linguistique) and the L.L.I. (Laboratoire de Linguistique Informatique). It includes both syntactic and semantic parameters according to which a LVC behaves differently from other formally similar V+N constructions. The main ones are:

- the impossibility of nominalising the verbal component (**The giving of a cry; *The making of a call*), or for the nominal component to be the focus of a WH-question (**Which cry did she give?*);
- the impossibility of making the object the surface subject of a passive (**A row was had by Sarah and John; *A cry was given by me*);
- the possibility of extracting the object (*It is a cry she gave; it is a call she made*), and cancelling the verb without a significant semantic loss (*John gave a speech → John's speech*).

Duly, apart from the first parameter which seems to be paramount for any LVC considered¹, the others are applicable only to some LVCs and not to others, as emerged in more recent studies. Kearns (2002) suggests a distinction between Truly Light Verbs and Vague Action Verbs, which allows for the passivization in *An inspection was made. The cry given by Mark scared me* is also acceptable since the object is definite and not indefinite.

Considering what Butt² calls “Complex Predicates”, that is a monophrasal and a multiword predicate (i.e. *to take into account, to fall in love, to look forward to*), the extraction of the object is not possible. Moreover, several studies (Gross G., 1981; Cicalese, 1999; Jezek, 2011; Mastrofini, in press) detected lightness in full lexical predicates when found in specific syntagmatic environments. This construction has been named Light Verb Extension (LVE), since it shares semantic and syntactic similarities with traditional LVCs. Like LVCs, LVEs contain a bleached predicate, and the noun carries the semantic content of the pattern. Unlike LVCs, the verb functions as an aspectual device (i.e. *to nourish resentment; to launch a project; to run a risk; to break a relationship*). Lastly, Simone & Masini (2014) proposes a scale of “nouniness” including designative nouns (i.e. *spoon*), classifiers (i.e. *spoonful*), quantifiers (i.e. *plenty*), qualifiers (i.e. *type*), approximators (i.e.

¹ “Les transformations morphologiques (nominalisations, adjectivations, verbalisations) sont le fait des prédicats. **Les verbs supports ne peuvent faire l'objet d'un changement de catégorie**” (Gross G., 1996: 55).

² “The term *complex predicate* designates a construction that involves two or more predicational elements (e.g., nouns, verbs and adjectives) which predicate as a single unit, i.e., their arguments map onto a monoclausal syntactic structure” (Butt, 2010: 49).

sort), and light nouns (i.e. *act* of courtesy, *fit* of crying, *burst* of laughter), suggesting the idea that lightness is not only a verbal feature.

Aim of the workshop and research questions.

Our workshop proposal wants to bring together scholars working on lightness from any type of perspective ranging from syntax to semantics, in English, or even better in a cross-linguistic perspective. Diachronic, typological, and corpus-based approaches are welcome. The aim is to find an answer to the following unsolved questions:

What is a LVC and what is not? Should we consider “light” only the prototypical instances retrieved by Jespersen or postulate different degrees of lightness in verbal constructions? And, if so, how, and by which parameters is lightness assessed?

Would it be plausible to say that any lexical predicate may turn “light” under specific syntagmatic conditions? If so, which ones?

Is lightness only a verbal property?

Can lightness in LVEs be the result of a metaphorical shift? If so, could a semantic cognitive approach be relevant?

How can lightness be considered from a Cognitive Linguistics approach? Is it a matter of conceptual metaphor extension (Lakoff, 1990; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, 2003)?

When did lightness emerge, in a diachronic perspective? Can we apply Prototype Theory to distinguish LVCs from LVEs?