

How light are North Australian ‘Light Verbs’?

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Light verb workshop, 11th November, 2002.

1 Introduction

- **Light Verbs:** ‘Lexically deficient’ ~ ‘semantically empty’ ~ a type of complex predicate.
- Does Bardi have light verbs?
- Are light verbs semantically empty?
- Conclusions:
 - Bardi has complex predicates: Uninflecting preverb + light verb
 - Light verbs are not semantically empty

Roadmap

- details of the language
- some definitions of complex predicates
- further justification of Bardi preverb + inflecting verb = complex predicate;
- Butt and Geuder 2001:337:
 - What is the interpretation of the light verb construction as a whole?
 - what is the semantic contribution of the light verb itself, and what is the mode of composition between light verb and full verb?
 - how is the interpretation of the light verb connected to the lexical meaning of the corresponding full verb use?

1.1 The language

- Bardi, spoken at the tip of the Dampier Peninsula in North-Western Australia
- Part of the Nyulnyulan family, and participant in the North-West Australian linguistic area¹

2 Verbal predicate types

Simple Predicates:

- verb root inflected with prefixes and suffixes.²

¹This is work in progress, part of my PhD on a comparative grammar of Bardi. Most of this talk is based on data gathered while on fieldwork funded by AIATSIS grant G2001/6505 ‘Recording Bardi Social History’ (awarded to Claire Bower and Bessie Ejai). Thanks to the Kimberley Language Resource Centre and to One Arm Point Community for their hospitality, and especially to Nancy Isaac, Jessie Sampi and Bessie Ejai, for their time and willingness to talk about their language. All examples from my fieldwork are reproduced with permission from the speakers. Thanks also to Gülşat Aygen for discussion of the issues in this paper.

²Abbreviations: Asp, aspect; cont, continuous; DO, direct object; fut, future; IO, indirect object; mid.perf; middle perfect; perf, perfective; pl, plural; pst, past; rec.pst, recent past; refl, reflexive; sg, singular; val, valency; 1, first person; 2, second person; 3, third person.

(1) Verb Template

SUBJ. AGR/TENSE/TRANSITIVITY — **Root** — TAM SUFFIXES — DO, IO CLITICS

- Verb roots are a **closed class** (220 attested roots).

(2) a. *nganamboogal* ‘I hit (him).’ (Root: *-boo-* ‘hit’)

nga- na- m- boo -gal

1 trans pst hit pst

b. *imarra* ‘it’s cooking.’ (Root: *-marra-* ‘cook’)

i- marra -∅

3 cook -pres

Complex Predicates:

- An uninflecting *preverb* which immediately precedes an inflecting verb root. The inflecting verb hosts agreement and tense/aspect morphology;

(3) a. *garr nganamboogal* ‘I rubbed him.’

Preverb: *garr* ‘rub’

Inflecting verb: *-boo-* ‘hit’

entire predicate means: ‘to rub (something)’.

b. *roowil innyagal* ‘He was walking.’

Preverb: *roowil* ‘walk’

Inflecting verb: *-nya-* ‘pick up, catch’

Entire predicate: ‘to walk’

- Preverbs are an open word class.
- 30 inflecting verbs can occur with a preverb.
- 80% of preverb-inflecting verb constructions are accounted for by 10 inflecting verbs.
- 20 additional inflecting verbs are attested with one preverb each.

(4) Bardi roots that take preverbs:

-Root-	Gloss of main verb	%age of preverbs
<i>-joo-</i>	do, say	40
<i>-ma-</i>	put	17
<i>-∅-</i>	give	12
<i>-(i)nya-</i>	catch	9
<i>-ar-</i>	spear lice	7.5
<i>-gal-</i>	move	4
<i>-boo-</i>	hit	3.5
<i>-jiidi-</i>	go	3
<i>-ga-</i>	take, carry	2.5
<i>-ni-</i>	be located	2

- Simple and complex predicates fill the same functional slot.

- (5) *Arralanba booroo arralan. Alandanba baali arramoogoon, arralanjardirr*
 1PL-look at camp 1PL-see. 1DL-sit down camp 1PL-make, 1PL-see-OUR
jamoo gamarda, nyirramorryi ingarrananamoordoo agal barni
 maternal grandmother maternal grandfather, on what road 3PL-give-PAST-1PL and TELL
ingirrinanajard.
 3PL-SAY-PAST-1PLIO.

‘We look for a place, we look for it. We sit down in camp which we made, and we see our grandparents, what way of life they put us on and told us [about]’. (*nyirramorryi* ‘on what way’ goes with both verbs.)
 (D.W. ‘Life on Sunday Island’, ln 43.)

3 More on complex predicates and light verbs

3.1 Definitions

- Light verb constructions are a type of complex predicate which consists of a main verb in combination with a lexically defective verb. (Butt and Geuder 2001:325)
- Butt’s features of complex predicates (extracted from Butt and Geuder (2001:323-327); Butt (1995):
 - multi-headed; argument structure is complex
 - composed of more than one grammatical element, each of which contributes part of the information normally associated with a head.
 - grammatical functional structure is that of a simple predicate
 - can be formed lexically or syntactically
- Complex predicates have properties that are both lexical and phrasal (eg Lin 2000).
- Light verbs are usually treated as being semantically empty — there as a host for morphology (eg Grimshaw and A.Mester 1988).

3.2 Australian treatments of similar constructions

- Auxiliaries, ‘double-unit’ verbs, preverbs are adverbial, lexical compounds.
- McGregor (2002:262ff) argues that these constructions are not complex predicates, because
 - either one part or the other (or neither) is identified as the head, not both, according to different tests;
 - idea of a head is vague and problematic
 - units do not jointly determine clause structure
 - historically they were never complex predicates (McGregor 2002 derives them from ideophone + main verb)
- ‘classifier verbs’.

3.3 Composition of Bardi complex predicates

- Sources of preverbs:
 - nouns (*girringg* ‘a cough’; *girringg -ar-* ‘to cough’)
 - adjectives (*ngaada* ‘short’; *ngaada -joogooloo-* ‘to break in half’)

- adverbs (*angan* ‘closeby’; *angan -ganyi-* ‘to come up close’)
 - loans from other languages (*boojoom* ‘push ’im’ (Kriol); *boojoom -ma-* ‘to push off (a boat)’)
 - no cognates in other word classes – function only as preverbs. (*marl -joo-* ‘to stop’)
 - In Bardi, preverbs CANNOT be used without an inflecting verb. This is different from some other North Australian languages (eg, Yawuru, according to Hosokawa 1991, or Wagiman (Wilson 1999)).
- inflecting verb
 - all but one also used independently (*-ganyi-* “come/climb up”)
 - the most frequent inflecting verbs (used in preverb+inflecting verb constructions) are the same verbs implicated in light verb constructions in other languages. (Butt 1995:144).
 - * ‘go’, ‘give’, ‘take’, ‘come’, ‘put’, ‘hit’, ‘fall’.
 - semantics
 - (6) unpredictable semantics
 - a. *liyan -ma-* ‘to want’ (*-ma-* ‘put’)
 - b. *liyan -ga-* ‘to carry a grudge’ (*liyan* ‘heart, spirit’; *-ga-* ‘carry’)
 - (7) no readily apparent difference in meaning
 - a. *joorroor -ø-* ‘poke something into a hole’ (*-ø-* ‘give’)
 - b. *joorroor -bi-* ‘poke something into a hole’ (*-bi-* ‘poke, spear’)
 - (*joorroor* = ‘rheumatism’)
 - c. *boorrm -(i)nya-* ‘gut’ (*-(i)nya-* ‘catch’)
 - d. *boorrm -jooloo-ng-* ‘gut’ (*-jooloo-ng-* ‘collect’)
 - (*boorrm* has no independent function.)
 - (8) predictable semantics³
 - a. *niyarra -(i)nya-* ‘to taste’ (*niyarra* = ‘taste’ (n); *-(i)nya-* ‘catch’)
 - b. *oona -ma-* ‘to defecate’ (*oona* ‘excrement’ (n); *-ma-* ‘put’)
 - Many preverbs can be used with more than one inflecting verb.⁴
 - (9) *dirray* ‘turn’
 - a. + *-banji-* ‘turn around’
 - b. + *-ar-* ‘rotate something’
 - c. + *-boo-* ‘turn into something’
 - d. + *-jiidi-* ‘swing about’
 - e. + *-ø-* ‘swing about, turn back’
 - Preverb+inflecting verb combinations are not usually predictable. Certain patterns of multiple class membership occur but there are many exceptions.

³There are reasons for thinking these are syntactically formed rather than lexically formed.

⁴I am vague on the numbers because it keeps going up — on my last field trip I found 20 new verb roots, 500 new preverbs and about 200 new preverb-inflecting verb combinations, and I’m still processing the data.

4 Tests for headedness

- Fairly uncontroversial: θ -role assignment, clausal transitivity and clausal aspect are determined by the head of the predicate (Aktionsart also a property of the predicate).
- So, if we can isolate what determines these, we have a test for what the head is.
- I do this with a series of syntactic minimal pairs.

4.1 θ -role assignment

- θ -role assignment is determined by a combination of:

– verb morphology

- (10) a. *diird -joo-* ‘run away’ (-*joo-* ‘do/say’)
b. *diird -joo-ng-* ‘go with someone’ (-*ng-* is the applicative suffix)

– the light verb

- (11) a. *abarrabarr -ma-* ‘to be careless’
b. *abarrabarr -ga-* ‘to lead someone astray’
cf *abarrabarrgij* ‘difficult’

– the preverb

- (12) a. *niyarra -(i)nya-* ‘taste something’ (experiencer)
b. *-(i)nya-* ‘catch something’ (agent)
- (13) a. *anggoorr -ma-* ‘mourn for someone’ (experiencer)
b. *anggoorranggoorr -ma-* ‘comfort someone’ (agent)

- These pairs highlight the fact that θ -role assignment can be determined by several parts of the predicate. No single part of the predicate assigns θ -roles. Good evidence that the construction is a complex predicate.

4.2 Aspect/Aktionsart

- Aspect is marked in the predicate by one or more of:

– verb morphology

- (14) *Aaman roowil ngannyan, gala inngoorroobinnngay iilanim.*
as soon as WALK 1SG-‘CATCH’-CONT, right then 3SG-chase-1SG dog-ERG
‘As soon as I go for a walk, the dog chases me.’

- (15) *Moonboorran roowil innyij.*
towards speaker WALK 3SG-CATCH-PERF
‘He is coming towards me.’

– the light verb

- (16) *joornk innyana*
RUN 3SG-‘PUT’-PAST
‘He ran away (quickly).’

- (17) *joornk injarralana*
 RUN 3SG-‘RUN’-PAST
 ‘He took off with speed.’

– the preverb

- (18) *bany inamana boorroo*
 SHOOT 3SG-‘PUT’-PAST kangaroo
 ‘He shot the kangaroo.’

- (19) *banybany inamana*
 SHOOT-REDUP 3SG-‘PUT’-PAST
 ‘He kept on shooting (it).’

- Several parts of the predicate determine aspect.

4.3 Valency and transitivity

- transitivity is determined by

– verb morphology (eg, reflexive morphology)

- (20) a. *barn injoogaljarrngay*
 TELL 3SG-‘SAY’-IMPERF-1SG-DO
 ‘He told me to do something.’
 b. *barn ingim.inyjigal*
 TELL 3SG-PST-REFL-‘SAY’-REFL-IMPERF
 ‘He thought about it.’

- (21) a. *diird -joo-* ‘go away’
 b. *diird -joo-ng-* ‘go with someone’

– the light verb

- (22) a. *boorroolboorrool oonkara oola*
 BOIL-REDUP 3SG.FUT-‘SPEAR’-FUT water
 ‘The water will boil.’
 b. *boorroolboorrool oonkama oola*
 BOIL-REDUP 3SG.FUT-‘PUT’-FUT water
 ‘He/She’ll boil the water.’

- (23) a. *goojaj -joo-* ‘to feel weak’ (one argument)
 b. *goojaj -ma-* ‘to make someone weak’ (two arguments)

– the preverb

- (24) a. *-ma-* ‘to put’ (2 obligatory arguments)
 b. *jiibard -ma-* ‘to sneak up’ (1 argument)
 c. *niya -ma-* ‘to rest’ (1 argument)
 d. *oona -ma-* ‘to defecate’ (1 argument)

- (25) a. *-(i)nya-* ‘to catch’ (2 arguments)

- b. *ngalar* -(i)nya- ‘to have one’s eyes open’ (1 argument)
- c. *marrmarr* -(i)nya- ‘to flash’ (1 argument)
- d. *galgooriny* -(i)nya- ‘to swim breaststroke’ (1 argument)

- It would be possible to argue that the preverb fills an argument slot of the inflecting verb for some of the above, but it is a very forced interpretation in many cases.
- Better to argue that the valency of the predicate is determined by the predicate as a whole, not by one part of the predicate or another.⁵

5 The classifier analysis

- First published in Nicolas (1998, 2000): data scanty and faulty; overall conclusions wrong but idea probably right. Analysis for most of North Australia in McGregor (2002).
- The inflecting verb acts as a classifier of the preverb, indicating the type of event the preverb refers to.
- A classifier analysis would give us a path to understanding how complex predicates in Bardi are formed.
- This gives us an idea of the type of meaning that the inflecting verbs brings to the complex predicate; for example

– *-ar-* ‘spear lice’ is used with actions which occur around a point and have a defined trajectory:

- (26)
- a. *dirray* -*ar-* ‘rotate something’
 - b. *jiin* -*ar-* ‘point at something’
 - c. *jibiny* -*ar-* ‘thrust a spear’
 - d. *joorr* -*ar-* ‘drip’
 - e. *janngal* -*ar-* ‘cut across the tide’ (14 metre tides tend to push one off course..)

– *-banji-* ‘exchange’ is used with reciprocal actions:

- (27)
- a. *baad* -*banji-* ‘wrestle’
 - b. *banggili* -*banji-* ‘paint one another’
 - c. *loorrbloorrb* -*banji-* ‘argue with each other’

6 Back to Butt and Geuder’s questions:

- Butt and Geuder 2001:337:
 - What is the interpretation of the light verb construction as a whole? [a single predicate, same as simple predicates.]
 - what is the semantic contribution of the light verb itself, and what is the mode of composition between light verb and full verb? [light verb acts like a classifier]
 - how is the interpretation of the light verb connected to the lexical meaning of the corresponding full verb use? [defective semantics; light verb has some features of the full verb but not all.]

⁵I have other reasons for wishing to consider predicate valency and clausal transitivity as begin determined by different parts of the clause, as does Margetts (1999). This is only indirectly relevant to this paper, however.

7 Conclusions

- Light verb constructions in Bardi work the same way as simple predicates.
- The light verb makes a semantic contribution; it describes the type of event referred to by the preverb;
- As such, it has an effect on θ -role assignment, valency/transitivity, trajectory and other things.
- Therefore, light verbs are not semantically empty.

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