

# **Where have all the verbs gone?**

## **Remarks on the organisation of languages with small, closed verb classes**

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Do languages with small, closed verb classes exhibit common principles of semantic and grammatical organisation in their verbal lexicon that distinguish them from open verb class languages? This paper begins to tackle this question by comparing three unrelated languages – two with small, closed verb classes (Kalam, of the Trans New Guinea family and Jaminjung, of north central Australia) and one with an open verb class (English).

All three languages show certain striking similarities: (i) Fewer than 40 verb roots make up more than 50 percent of verb root tokens that appear in text as lexical verbs. (ii) The 20 most common verb roots show a number of correspondences in basic meanings and frequency rankings across the three languages. (iii) High frequency verb roots tend to be much more polysemous than less frequent verb roots. These commonalities may be proposed as universals.

Besides having a small closed verb class, Jaminjung and Kalam share certain characteristics apart from English: (iv) The 10 most common verb roots make up around 80 percent of verb root tokens in discourse. (v) They make extensive use of complex predicates in which a verb root is paired with a ‘verb adjunct’ (or ‘coverb’), where the verb root serves as an event classifier or generic and the verb adjunct provides more specific information, e.g. about manner of motion, kind of sound emission, spatial configuration, or kind of mental or bodily process.

However, Kalam uses a wider range of complex predicate constructions than Jaminjung. The most important distinction in Kalam is between serial verb constructions (SVCs) and verb adjunct constructions (VACs). There is a clear semantic basis to the distinction. Whereas VACs denote a single event broken down into generic and specific components, prototypical SVCs encode a sequence of discrete acts performed by the same actor, or successive phases of a single activity. In Kalam SVCs of the ‘narrative’ type, up to nine consecutive events are represented in a single complex predicate, corresponding to elements in a narrative. Jaminjung lacks serial verb constructions. It compensates in part by using VACs to represent sequences of two discrete events performed by the same actor or successive phases of a single activity.