Light verbs as copulas with additional arguments
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A claim frequently made in syntactic literature is that some verbs, such as English be, have, and do, have little lexical semantic content, being essentially bundles of features. If this is true, it implies that these verbs are closer to functional than to lexical items. At the same time, however, we are faced with the fact that these verbs possess an argument structure, a property that we associate more with lexical items (Corver & van Riemsdijk 2001, Karimi-Doostan 2005).

I present findings from the Dene language Tłı̨chǫ Yatìì (aka Dogrib: NWT), showing that in this language there is a rich assortment of light verbs that appear to differ from copulas and from each other only in argument structure. For example, the verbs hǫt’e and at’ı̨ are both often translated as be, but in context it is apparent that the latter, but not the former, can take an agent argument.

(1) a. Meè ah-t’e. b. Sı̨ ah-t’ı̨. (MLBW 2011)
   Mary 1SG-HQT’E 1SG 1SG-AT’I
   ‘I’m Mary.’ (as an introduction) ‘It’s me.’ (at the door, on the phone)

   At’ı̨ is also frequently translated as do, in common with the verb ale. However, these verbs also differ in their argument structure: ale, but not at’ı̨, is employed as a causativizer and can select an accusative argument.

(2) a. eyits’ǫ dǫ k’aát’ı̨i age-le ha go-ghâhôp̣q̣o. (DTC 2003)
   and person be.well 3PL-ALE FUT 3PL-be.instructed
   ‘and he gave them authority to heal sickness.’
   (Lit., ‘they were instructed to make people well.’)
   b. *Dǫ k’aát’ı̨i age-t’ı̨ ha go-ghâhôp̣q̣o. (MLBW 2015)
   person be.well 3PL-AT’I FUT 3PL-be.instructed
   (Intended: ‘they were instructed to make people well.’)
   c. Sets’ǫ fǫǫ ane-le. (Jaker et al. 2013)
   my phone 3PL-ALE
   ‘Call me.’

The light verbs of Tłı̨chǫ Yatìì give an unusually clear picture of argument-structure distinctions in the absence of further lexical semantic content. I adduce evidence from fieldwork and textual sources to demonstrate the following argument structure for five light verbs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>hǫt’e</th>
<th>gërłį</th>
<th>at’ı̨</th>
<th>elų</th>
<th>ale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>internal thematic argument</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>external thematic argument</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>spatiotemporal argument</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>accusative argument</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>other complement</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td>(CP)</td>
<td>(AP)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I suggest that their lexical entries therefore consist solely of selectional features, preserving the view of light verbs as both functional feature bundles and lexical items selecting arguments. I argue that all of these verbs are instantiations of the category v (Chomsky 1995), and function to allow various non-verbal categories to be predicates, a role that has previously been asserted for copulas in Dene languages (Wilhelm 2014); further, that they are distinguished from each other wholly by their selectional features and serve as last-resort spellouts for argument structure in the absence of a lexical verb.
References


