Rethinking the light verb category: evidence from Cameroon Pidgin English
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As Seiss (2009) observes, while it is relatively straightforward to identify cross-linguistic criteria for distinguishing light verbs from auxiliary verbs, it is less obvious what cross-linguistic criteria distinguish light verbs from serial verbs.

Auxiliary verbs add temporal/aspectual/voice information to the event semantics of the main verb and occupy the opposite pole of the grammaticalisation continuum to lexical verbs.

In contrast, light verbs and serial verbs are less clearly distinct, since both can function as independent lexical verbs, and both participate in forming complex predicates within monoclausal structures. Furthermore, Butt (2010) describes light verbs as modifying the main verb’s event semantics by contributing meanings including causative, resultative, benefactive, agentive, meanings that are coextensive with those of serial verbs.

However, while light verbs are form identical to full verbs, resisting grammaticalisation and remaining stable in terms of frequency of use (Butt 2010, Traugott 1999), serial verbs have a tendency to grammaticalise into prepositions (Lord 1993).

We present a case study focusing on five high-frequency verbs in Cameroon Pidgin English (CPE), based on a small (100,000-word) corpus of consisting of (i) spoken CPE (Ayafor, Green and Ozón, in prep.), (ii) existing published sources (Ayisi & Longinotto 2005; Bellama et al. 2006; Todd 1979), and (iii) elicited examples.

Focusing on the verbs ‘make’, ‘do’, ‘give’, ‘get’ and ‘take’, we find evidence for a productive light verb strategy and observe that, due to the high degree of multifunctionality in a contact language, a subset of these high frequency verbs participates both in light verb constructions (LVCs) (1) and in serial verb constructions (SVCs) (2). We also find evidence for the grammaticalisation of mek ‘make’ as a marker of deontic modality.

(1) no bi man di mek babisita, de wuman di mek babisita
   NEG COP man IMPF make babysitter DEF woman IMPF make babysitter
   ‘It's not the man who babysits, the woman babysits.’

(2) dem don kam lait lam gif wi
   they PF come light lamp give us
   ‘They came and lit lamps for us.’

Our findings indicate that while light verbs and serial verbs share some overlapping properties (semantic bleaching, resistance to formal reduction, contribution of arguments), they are distinguished by (a) the ability of light verbs to co-occur with non-verbal predicates, and (b) their position on the grammaticalisation continuum:
References


