

On the Difference between Auxiliaries, Serial Verbs and Light Verbs

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Constructions which would seem to be syntactically and semantically quite similar have been analyzed as significantly different constructions crosslinguistically (or at least, have been labeled differently). The aspectual constructions involving posture verbs in (1), for example, have been called auxiliary constructions ((1a)), serial verbs ((1b)), and complex predicates ((1c)), respectively.

- (1) a. *Ik stond te wachten.*
I stood to wait-INF
'I was (standing and) waiting.' (Dutch, Lemmens 2005:184)
- b. *tuiri-kere na-hwa nema.*
bird-island 3PL-stay 3PL-stand
'They stayed at the Bird Island for a long time.' (Tariana, Aikhenvald 1999:480)
- c. *Ali kitabi okuyup turdu.*
Ali book-ACC read-GER 'stand'-PST
'Ali kept on reading a book.' (Turkmen, Bower 2004:253)

The overall state-of-the-art with respect to analyses involving multiverb constructions is confusing and unnecessarily opaque. Terms are applied quite freely (e.g. Kuteva 2001). If features or definitions are given, they often do not serve to distinguish between different monoclausal multiverbal constructions (e.g. Aikhenvald 2006, Crowley 2002, Heine 1993). Anderson (2006) even suggests that it is unnecessary to distinguish between these constructions. It thus seems that Sebba's (1987) criticism on the lack of a clear definition of serial verbs still holds today, not only for serial verbs, but also for auxiliaries and light verbs. This paper argues for the need to distinguish and correctly identify auxiliary constructions, serial verbs and complex predicates crosslinguistically. Using Ngan'gityemerri as a case study, I seek to establish a list of crosslinguistically valid criteria.

Ngan'gityemerri is a polysynthetic language of the Northern Territory, Australia. As many other Northern Australian languages, it has a small closed set of inflecting verbs (including posture verbs) and an open class of uninflecting coverbs. These form a verbal complex as illustrated in (2a) or (2b). Up to the 1990s, these combinations have been considered auxiliary plus main verb constructions (e.g. Hodinott and Kofod 1988). However, it has been argued successfully by different researchers (e.g. Bower 2004 for Bardi) that coverbs plus inflecting verbs make up complex predicates. A second kind of verbal complex can be found, too. Posture verbs can cliticize on to complex predicates to encode aspectual information. An example of this type of construction is given in (2c).

- (2) a. *winni-pappup-tye.*
3.PL.S.sit.PI-climb-PAST
'They were sitting up on top (having climbed up).' (Reid 2002:252)
- b. *Ngerim-wurity yawul.*
1SG.S.hands.PR-make spear
'I'm making a spear / I make spears' (Reid 2002:262)
- c. *Ngerim-wurity-ngirim yawul.*
1SG.S.hands.PR-make-1SG.S.sit.PR spear
'I'm engaged in making a spear now' (Reid 2002:262)

To test whether the clitic in (1c) can be analysed as a serial verb is a difficult task as there is no consensus in the literature on the definition of serial verbs. According to Crowley (2002) and Aikhenvald (2006), serial verbs have to be lexical items which can occur on their own. Stewart (2001) additionally requires serial verbs to share their objects. Encliticized posture verbs have main verb counterparts which are lexical items which can occur on their own. However, the clitics themselves are not purely lexical items and cannot occur on their own. They do not share objects with the complex predicate construction either.

Butt (forthcoming) lists some differences between auxiliaries and light verbs in Urdu, e.g. light verbs are always form identical to main verbs whereas auxiliaries do not have to be. Auxiliaries, in contrast to light verbs, may also display a defective verbal paradigm. Unfortunately, these features do not apply here. The clitic is always form identical to the main inflecting verb. It also does not display a defective verbal paradigm as it has to agree in tense, number and person with the inflecting verb. However, Butt also claims that “light verbs exhibit subtle lexical semantic differences in terms of combinatorial possibilities with main verbs” (Butt forthcoming:14). The clitic is not very restricted in its combinatorial possibilities. It can cliticize on to any complex predicate which is not formed with an inflecting posture verb.

Further differences between auxiliaries and light verbs exist. Auxiliaries mainly provide information about tense and aspect. This is the case for the Ngan’gityemerri clitic. In some rare cases, the clitic also specifies the position of the actor as in (3). This kind of information can be considered similar to the information contributed by posture verbs used as Dutch auxiliaries (Lemmens 2005) or in some cases of the English *going-to-future*. In contrast, inflecting posture verbs in complex predicates may contribute more semantic information (e.g. as in (2a)).

- (3) *Yawul karrityinmade ngebem-wurity-ngerim/-ngibem tyatma.*
 spear bent 1.SG.S.bash.PR-fix-1.SG.S.sit.PR/-1.SG.S.lie.PR straight
 ‘I’m sitting / lying straightening this bent spear.’ (Reid 2002:257)

An important difference between complex predicates and the clitic construction is the ability of the posture verb to change the valency of a verbal complex. Light verbs and coverbs combine to make up the valency of complex predicates. For example, in (4) the coverb *tum* ‘bury’ is bivalent and the inflecting verb monovalent, resulting in a monovalent complex predicate. On the other hand, cliticized posture verbs cannot change the valency of their hosts.

- (4) *ngirim-tum.*
 1.SG.S.sit.PR-bury
 ‘I’m sinking’ (Reid 2000:347)

In these and further tests, posture verbs in complex predicates behave differently from posture verbs used as clitics. While posture verbs in constructions such as (2a) can be analyzed as light verbs, the clitic in (2c) is best analyzed as an auxiliary. Thus, even similar looking constructions in one language involving the same kind of verbs may behave differently. It is therefore necessary to look at the constructions carefully and compare them to similar constructions in other languages. Expanding on the features exemplified in the Ngan’gityemerri data, I present a list of syntactic as well as semantic criteria to distinguish auxiliaries, light verbs and serial verbs crosslinguistically.

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