Pertinacity in Light Verbs Revisited

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Originally interested in tracing the origin of the ubiquitous New Indo-Aryan aspectual V-V complex predicates as in (1), Butt and Lahiri (2013) found that there was no stage of Indo-Aryan in which a V-V complex predicate could not be detected. They therefore concluded that as a possible syntactic configuration, V-V complex predicates have been historically pertinacious across the ages. They also noted that light verbs are always form-identical with a main verb, showing no change in overt form (phonology/morphology) that is independent of historical changes undergone by the main verb. They therefore proposed that the light verb and main verb versions be derived from the same underlying entry, as sketched in (2) and that any reanalysis into auxiliaries and from there potentially to tense/aspect morphology takes place with respect to the main verb version.

(1) a. nadya=ne   xɑt   **lɪkʰ** **di-ya**
         Nadya.F=Erg letter.M.Nom write give-Perf.M.Sg
         'Nadya wrote a letter (completely).'   (Urdu/Hindi)
     b.   rɑm   bɑgʰ-ʈa-ke **mer-e**   **pʰel-l-o**
         Ram.Nom tiger-Cl-Acc hit-Gd   throw-Past-3
         'Ram killed the tiger.'   (Bengali)

This was and is a rather startling claim that runs counter to much of thinking in the grammaticalization literature (e.g., Hopper and Traugott (1993), Bybee et al. (1994), Hook (1991, 2001)). However, there is a set of supporting evidence. For example, the modern Indo-Aryan morphological causative is not much different from how it was over 2000 years ago (Butt 2003, Jamison 1976, Speijer 1886) and Davison (2014) notes that the complex predicate permissive with 'give' also already appears to have existed in Old Indo-Aryan. Beyond Indo-Aryan, there is crosslinguistic evidence that light verbs indeed tend to be historically stable (cf. Bowern 2008, Brinton and Akimoto 1999, Klumpp 2013).

More recently, Slade (2013) and Ittzés (2022) have taken issue with Butt&Lahiri's claim as to the historical pertinacity of light verbs. In this talk, we go through the claims and data of each of these papers in some detail and show that Butt&Lahiri's claim as to the pertinacity of light verbs not only holds up, but is confirmed by the data adduced in both Slade (2013) and Ittzés (2022).

Slade (2013) concentrates on examining evidence for grammaticalization from verbs that he assumes to be light verbs. However, a close look at the data shows that Slade does not carefully distinguish between light verbs, modals and auxiliaries (cf. Butt 2010) and that all of the examples adduced seem to either involve an auxiliary developing from a main verb (e.g., progressive *rah* from 'stay/remain', cf. Bybee et al. 1994 for instances of this well-established type of change) or modals (e.g., *sak* 'can/be able to'). We show that once this analytical confusion is sorted through, the data does not run counter to Butt&Lahiri's claim.

Ittzés (2022) looks at Sanskrit (and Vedic) N-V formations in the context of the grammaticalization of the perfect in Indo-Aryan. However, the modern Indo-Aryan perfect/perfective arose from the adjectival past participle in *-ta* and the picture of the distribution and properties painted by Ittzés (2022) of the Old Indo-Aryan N-V combinations is very much like the structure and properties described and analyzed by Mohanan (1994) for modern Hindi N-V complex predicates. Furthermore, there are three major light verbs involved: 'do', 'be', 'become', which each show constraints on permissible combinations and frequency effects. This is exactly what is found for Urdu/Hindi in a corpus study conducted by Ahmed and Butt (2011). Thus, rather than adducing evidence against Butt&Lahiri's claim as to the pertinacity of light verbs, Ittzés (2022) provides more evidence for Butt&Lahiri's claim from the domain of N-V combinations.

In conclusion, we show that even in the face of the critical discussions in Slade (2013) and Ittzés (2022), overall Butt&Lahiri's central claim continues to hold up — there are no instances of auxiliaries that have developed from light verbs.

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