LIGHT VERBS IN STANDARD AND EGYPTIAN ARABIC

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1. **Actualizing Nouns: A Quick Survey**

One of the main issues in modern linguistics, regardless of the theoretical framework, is to explain how a language achieves its predication, that is its *ʔisnaad* or *ʔixbaar* . Since the work done for over a century in the various fields of typology, has become widely known, and at least in its broad outlines recognized, it is admitted that the main tool of predication ranges from the verb, a category common to almost all languages and for some the only one noticed by the grammatical tradition of Indo-European languages, to almost any grammatical category as it has been shown by Michel Launay (1992, 1994, 2003, and in press) for what he called "omnipredicative languages" like Classical Nahuatl.[1]

However, the precise way in which new information, a predicative association, a genuine *ʔixbaar* or *ʔisnaad* is brought to discourse, even with the verb being the main category to do so, has often been and still is, a controversial issue. As noted by W. Wright:

> "Every sentence which begins with the subject (substantive or pronoun) is called by the Arab grammarians a nominal sentence. Wether the following predicate be a noun, or a preposition and the word it governs or a verb is a matter of indifference... What characterizes a nominal

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[1]The Uto-Aztecan language of the Nahuatl people in Southern Mexico and Central America.

sentence, according to them, is the absence of a logical copula expressed by or contained in a finite verb." (1874:Vol. II, 251)

Therefore, the differences between the way predication works when centered on a verb and the way it works when centered on a noun has never, as long as we know, been studied except for a discussion about the status of the copula, and more generally, what has been called *defective verbs* ʔal-ʔafʕaal ʔal-naaqiṣa.[2]

As a matter of fact, copulas and light verbs have sometimes been mixed up, probably because in almost all languages where both can be found, light verbs have at least two properties in common with copulas. First, they are much more of a link or a support for predication than a genuine predication. Second, they do not constitute a lexically independent category. One can say about them what Ide (1975) wrote in his grammar about copulas:

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"All of the thirteen verbs of this section are used both as defective or complete verbs except three of them: *laysa*, *zaala* and *fatiʔa* which can only be defective." (Ide 1975:251)

The question could have been raised within the broader discussion around two problems: the first is the nature and the number of items that can be attached to a predicate be it verbal or nominal; the second is the nature and the effects of the opposition between *intransitivity* and *transitivity*   . It seems it would very quickly be dealt with under the assumption that *transitivity* could hold for the   *maṣdar,* called sometimes   ʔism ħadaθ "event nominals," in almost all cases and with the same effects that it does for the verb, and that therefore the same item that could be attached to the predicative noun could also be attached to the verb.

Nevertheless, a Tunisian researcher (Achour 1999:464) pointed out that   *Al-Mubarrad* (or *Al-Mubarrid*), while arguing in his *Al-Muqtadʼab* why an intransitive verb still, from the point of view of the agent, describes a transitive process, writes:

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[2]For instance, see Cohen (1985).

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"When you say Zayd stood up it is as if you said made a standing up. You know that this occurred in the past, that it took place somewhere and had a shape." (Al-Mubarrad, Vol. 3:187-190).

Unfortunately, *Al Mubarrad* (826-900) did not elaborate. Actually, by paraphrasing the intransitive verb *yaquumu* with the complex or composite predicate *yuħdithu qiyaman* he was putting his finger on a phenomenon described for the first time in English by Poutsma (1914-26), that is more than 1,000 years later, when he wrote:

> "There is a marked tendency in Modern English to express a verbal idea by means of a combination consisting of a verb with a vague meaning and a noun of action. (...) [to give or to make an answer or reply; to pay or to give attention ; to pay, to give or to make a call; to give, to raise, to set up or to utter a cry; to drop or to make a curtsy; to make or to give a promise; to make or to pay a visit.] (...) The latter is then the real significant part of the predicate, while the former mainly serves the purpose of a connective (...) The grammatical function of the nouns in these connections is mostly that of an effective object...but owing to the connective verb having only a vague meaning, the whole combination may, from a semantic point of view, be regarded as an intransitive verb-group." (Poutsma 1914:394-6)

Poutsma's expressions "verb with a vague meaning" and "combination" will become the "light verb" and "complex predicate" of modern English Linguistics, the "verbe support" and "prédication nominale" of modern French Linguistics and the "Funktionsverbgefüge" of modern German Linguistics. We will call them respectively in Arabic   *rakiiza fiʕliya* or *diʕaama fiʕliyya* and   *ʔisnaad ʔismii*.[3]

As far as we know, we can say of most if not all languages what was pointed out by Ray Cattell (1984) about English when he wrote:

> "It is extraordinary how little attention was given to the 'light' verbs in English by grammarians of the past. Krusinga (1932, Vol. 3:96) makes the

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[3]Light verb is also called *ʔal-fiʕl ʔal-ʕimaad* by Kchaou (2003).

following statement 'The absence of almost all formal distinctions in present-day English between the parts of speech makes it easy for a word to be used in different functions. Thus, although dig is generally a verb, we can say to give a person a dig in the ribs. In the latter expression dig is used as a noun, so that the verb dig has been converted into a noun. The speaker of Modern English, however, still feels that the word is 'properly' a verb'. Apart from providing a few examples a little later, he appears to say little else about the phenomenon in a three-volume work running to some 1500 pages." (Cattell 1984:20)

2. First Analysis and Basic Properties

In English, the term light verb was first coined by Otto Jespersen (1965, Vol. 6:11):

"The most usual meaning of sbs [substantives] derived from and identical in form with a vb [verb] is the action of an isolated instance of the action. This is particularly frequent in such everyday combinations as those illustrated in the following paragraphs after have and similar 'light' verbs. They are in accordance with the general tendency of Mod E [Modern English] to place an insignificant verb, to which the marks of person and tense are attached, before the really important idea. [**have a** care, look (peep) at, chat, wash, shave, swim, drink, smoke, ... **make a** bolt, plunge, ... **give a** sigh, groan, laugh, shout]."

But as pointed by Cattell (1984:20), there was "no further characterization or analysis of the 'light' verbs."
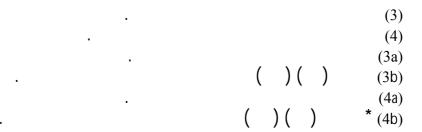
The first in-depth and extensive analyses of the phenomenon, following Cattell's doctoral thesis (1969) on *give,* took place in French in the seventies within the *argument/operator transformational* framework of Harris (1968, 1970, 1988) and the *lexique-grammaire* framework of Gross (1976, 1981, 1996). A now classical reference paper of the latter (1976) became the starting point for an intensive lexical and syntactic investigation of the phenomenon that achieved an impressive coverage, first of French and Romance languages, then of a number of languages of other language families.[4]

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[4]For an extensive bibliography of works done within the framework of the Lexique-grammaire and, partly, within that of the Lexical Functional Grammar, see Ibrahim (1996, 2002) and Butt (1995).

Gross's paper points out to a property of light verbs unnoticed before: the possibility of a *double analysis* of their complements, which distributional verbs,[5] in corresponding structures, do not allow. Furthermore, this property ranges over a certain number of transformations, the main one being the passive as shown, for English, in the examples below:

(1) The coalition launched an attack on a group of civilians.

(2) The coalition monitored an attack on a group of civilians.

(1a) **An attack on a group of civilians** was launched by the coalition.

(1b) **An attack** was launched by the coalition **on a group of civilians.**

(2a) **An attack on a group of civilians** was monitored by the coalition.

(2b) ***An attack** was monitored by the coalition **on a group of civilians**.

The same phenomenon, which we shall call *ʔal-taħliil ʔal- muzdawaj*, can be stated in Arabic in spite of the differences between English or French and Arabic regarding the passive:

.   (3)

.   (4)

.   (3a)

.   ( )( )   (3b)

.   (4a)

.   ( )( )   * (4b)

The light verb *yašunnu* "launch" allows a double analysis of the complements *hujuumun waħšiyyun* "a savage attack" and *ʕala majmuʕatin min ʔal-madaniyin* "on a group of civilians" since (3a) and (3b) are equally grammatical while the distributional verb *yutabiʕu* "follow" does not, since (4b) is not grammatical.

This property leads to another, perhaps even more obvious, when considering Arabic than it is when we limit our scope to Indo-European languages. It is that of the very strong appropriateness *tajaanus* between the light verb and its object which makes the latter look

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[5]That is, verbs that are fully predicative have a plain meaning, suffice to build an autonomus utterance and are always the core of the argument structure of an utterance. For a thorough distinction between distributional, operator, auxiliary, light or support, set and pro-verbs, see Ibrahim (2000).

semantically as a *cognate object*, that is a   *mafˤuul muṭlaq*:
šanna hujuuman waḥšiyyan is a synonym of
. *hajama hujuuman waḥšiyyan.* This equivalence entails another syntactic property: the necessary coreference between the agent of the light verb and the agent of the process expressed by the noun. With a distributional verb one can say:

(5) The coalition monitored an attack by a militia on a group of civilians

(5)

where it is clear that the agent of the monitoring and that of the attack in both languages are different (in English "the coalition" and in Arabic   *ʔal-taḥaaluf* for the *monitoring* and in English "a militia" and in Arabic   *quwwaatin ɣayra niẓaamiyyatin* for the "attack"). But it cannot be said with a light verb. Examples (6) and (7) are not grammatical:

*(6)

*(7)

* The coalition launched an attack by a militia on a group of civilians

We find that the same constraint holds between a verb and its cognate object.

3. Light Verbs Constructions as a Source for Other Equivalent Utterances

This equivalence is one of the most striking features of Arabic light verbs but it could also be the reason for which traditional Arabic grammarians did not notice or pay much attention to the light verbs phenomenon. Instead of explaining   *qaama* by   *ʔaḥdaθa qiyaaman* Al Mubarrad could have said   *qaama qiyaaman.* The difference lies only in that the light verb more precisely shapes its object from a semantic and aspectual point of view, and that was indeed what Al Mubarrad wanted to show. Thus, compare examples (8) and (8a):

(8)

"I advised him often"

(8a)

"I often gave him advice"

where *yusdii* has a light verb function, and try to investigate the semantic difference, however small it could be, between (8) and (8a).[6] Ibn Manzour's *Lisaan ʔal-ʕarab* elaborates:

(…)

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"*sada, yasdu* to stretch one's hand towards something as children do when playing whith walnuts and throwing them into a little hole (...) the she-camel *tasduu* that is slows its pace and widens her steps. *ʔal-sadw* is the widening of the steps of the she-camel possibly with some sort of kindness and smoothness." (Vol. 3:1977-78)

Ibn Manzour tries to describe here the details of a very specific kind of movement. When you give advice to somebody you do not really *give* him something, but you act as if you did. When used with a predicative noun, *yusdii* loses most of its original lexical meaning but keeps, as a memory of this plain meaning, the general kinetic shaping of the process.

Actually, in most, if not all, light verbs we do find this kind of persistent meaning as a residue of an original plain lexical meaning, since it seems most of these verbs have undergone a grammaticalization process. If you return to *yusdii* and try to put together some of its different meanings, their origins and evolution, we find, for instance, that it is linked to another verb   *nasaja* "to weave" which also acts as a light verb in the context of other noun predicates. One of the meanings noted for *yusdii* by   the dictionary of the Egyptian *Arabic Language Academy* is:

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[6]These analysis can be generalized to most speech acts. For instance   *yuħaðð̣ir*

"to warn" or   *yuħaddidu* "to threaten"   /   *yuwajjihu taħð̣iran/ tahdiidan* "to give a warning/ a threat" with the light verb *yuwajjihu* instead of *yusdii*. For an open list of Arabic light verbs, see Ibrahim (2002).

sadaa the garment - *sadaa sadyan*: he stretched its *sadaa* - the *sadaa* of a garment are the threads of the tissue that can be stretched in length. (Part 1:440)

In other words, *sadaa* and *nasaja* can both mean "to weave" via the word and notion of ʔaṭraaf "fringes" we find in the expression *tajaaδub ʔaṭraaf ʔal-ħadiiθ* "to pull together the fringes of conversation." Actually both words are linked and their evolution explained in another place in *Lisaan ʔal-ʕarab*:

"If a human weaves words or facts between people we say *sadaa* between them. The tailor *yusdii* the garment and *yatasadda* to himself. Regarding ʔal-tasdiya it can be for him or for somebody else. ʔasda between them a conversation means he weaved it. Within the sayings of the Prophet we find 'the one who ʔasda to you that which is good reward him' – ʔasdaa means "give." (Ibn Manzūr, Vol. 3:1978)

Thus, between two fairly equivalent sentences, the one that includes a light verb will always be less ambiguous and more accurate descriptively than the other. Furthermore, we can say that the sentence containing the light verb subsumes the one without it. For instance, if we compare the following:

(-) " " (9)
"Oh my God, do protect me from a nature never satisfied"

(- -) " " (10)
"Messenger of God! We eat but are not sated"

(11)

"The governor of Egypt sent a present to the Prophet consisting of Coptic Mary and a doctor. The Prophet accepted all the elements of the present except the doctor to whom he told "Go back to your people we are from those who do not eat unless they are hungry and when they eat they do not get sated.""

In (9) *laa tašbaʕ* and in (10) *laa našbaʕ* mean *laa yaʔtiihaa/ laa yaʔtiinaa –l šabaʕ* "satiety does not come to it/to us/ not fulfilled with satiety" or *laa tašʕuru / laa našʕuru bil šabaʕ* "it does/ we do not feel satiated" while in (11) it means something completely different: *laa nantaẓiru ħatta našʕuru bi ʔal-šabaʕ* "we do not wait until we feel satiated." The semantic difference between (9) and (10) on one hand and (11) on the other is entirely accounted for by the difference between *yaʔtii* or *yašʕuru* on one hand and *yantaẓiru ħatta yaʔtii* or *yantaẓiru ħatta yašʕuru* on the other.

The light verb can therefore be deleted, because it is subsumed under the predicative noun. The light verb is so subsumed that its presence in some contexts may be felt as redundant. This may not be the case when this context allows an overt kind of ambiguity or calls for a definition, a legal statement or an emotional description. In all cases, it is one of the main tracks for the building of meaning. You cannot speak of or understand what you hear about *satiety* if you do not take into account that it is something that 'comes' or that you 'feel gradually' and at the same time something that could be desired and 'awaited'.

This is the reason why deletion and realization of light verbs and how their meaning can be recovered from the noun is crucial to dealing with the properties and the usefulness of this phenomenon. Moreover, it seems there are no two languages for which deletion and recoverabilty follow exactly the same tracks:

(12E)   [BE][7]
    Form a queue if you want to be served!   ↔Queue up if..! ↔(In) the queue!
    Stand in the queue if…….!
        [AE]
    (Stand in + Get in + Form) a line if….. ….!   ∅   ↔ (In) the line!
    [BE / AE] Join the queue if …. … !
 (12F)   [F]
    Faites (la +une) queue si vous voulez être servis ! ∅   ↔   (Dans) la queue!
    Mettez-vous dans la queue si vous voulez…   ∅
 (13M) [MSA]
                          !   ( ) ↔

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[7]BE = British English; AE = American English; EA = Egyptian Arabic; F = French; MSA = Modern Standard Arabic.

(13E)   [EA]

$$! \quad (\ ) \leftrightarrow \varnothing$$

In British English, according to the situation, more or less disorder in front of a counter or a ticket office, the light verb is *to form*–if there is no queue or *to stand*–if there is already one but not fully respected. In both cases, the utterance is a regular nominalization of the corresponding verbal sentence. This configuration is unique among the languages observed, including American English. In MSA, the closest configuration to BE, we find an analogous *to stand* in an analogous light verb construction with *yaqifu* but it has, contrary to English and other observed languages, a corresponding derived verbal cognate object construction   *ʔiṣṭaffu ṣaffan* * "rank a rank" which is likewise unique among the languages observed including EA.

Some differences appear quite striking when looking at the distribution of light verbs in this construction among the languages observed. For instance, EA has in common with French, where *faire* "to make" or "to do" is the most common light verb, the use of an equivalent of *to make* or *to do* although *yaʕmal* or *yafʕal* can never have this function in MSA. We can also notice that a kind of light verb allowed in some language may not be allowed in another as it is the case for *to stand* which is not possible in French, or *yantaẓimu* which seems exclusive to MSA.

Another interesting phenomenon is the difference between the degrees of grammaticalization. In our examples, the most advanced is undoubtedly what we find in EA with *get in* and what we could call a *light* name: "line". In EA   *ʔuʔaf* "stand" could be considered a causative verb as in (13E). Yet, it is not, since it can be deleted and reduced to the preposition   *fe* while a causative verb cannot. Deletion or reduction through a process that does not change the meaning of the utterance is one ot the three main properties defining a light or support verb, the two others being appropriatness – to form a queue or a line you need to be standing – and partial loss of plain lexical meaning.

Actually, although nearly every language has a dominant or perhaps a more *generic* light verb--for instance *faire* in French, *ḍarab* in Classical Arabic, *ʕda* [8] in Libyan Arabic, *ᶜamal* in Egyptian Arabic--there are no two languages or even two varieties of a same language that use exactly the same range and the same number of light verbs,[9] thus showing that light verbs are extremely sensitive to the specific properties of the language and its usage. At the same time we notice that many differences between languages arise from the difference of the material that can be deleted or not realized overtly in a particular language. This is indeed a crucial point not only for understanding the nature of the light verbs phenomenon but, in a much wider perspective, for working out a coherent explanation of much of the grammatical differences between languages, since light verbs play a role in introducing and realizing in discourse, one of the most important basic categories in language: nouns.

4. The Specific Features of the Actualizing Process in Arabic

These were the differences within the common ground. What is much more specific to MSA can be summed up in the following points:

1. Light verbs constructions compete with cognate object constructions as seen above.
2. An actualization equivalent to a light verb can hide in the *wazn* "pattern" or "template" under which occurs the predicative noun like in CA *ʔanaa ẓamʔaan* or EA *ʔanaa ʕaṭšaan* "I am thirsty" (Ibrahim 2002:339-341) or have itself the schema of a *masdar* like in *ʔisdaaʔ ʔal-nuṣḥ* "the giving of an advice."

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[8] See *Les verbes supports en arabe classique, arabe moderne et arabe libyen,* Ph.D. thesis under way by Adel Ahnaïba (under my supervision at Université de Franche-Comté).

[9] The first attempt for a precise survey on formal grounds in French (Daladier 1978) counted 14 verbs. The number has increased and is now around 100. Our own attempts on the same grounds for CA, MSA and EA counted about 40 verbs (Ibrahim 2002). Further investigations and the theses under way of Adel Ahnaïba (on CA, MSA and Libyan arabic) and Fayez Naifar (on CA, MSA and Tunisian Arabic) put the figure around 60.

3. The most genereric light verb, in CA and MSA is *ḍaraba*. This seems very specific to CA and MSA may be with the exception of modern spoken Chinese. This point is of some interest in the study of the evolution of the different varieties of Arabic, since it seems that none of the Arabic dialects kept this verb in this function. As described in Ibrahim (2002:328-336) *ḍaraba* is in CA and MSA the light verb that has the widest scope of constructions (sixteen) as well as the widest range of synonymy with other nominal predicate actualizers. This verb did not disapear in other dialects but its scope became narrower while the scope of other verbs arose to the status of a generic actualizer as it is the case with   *ʕamal* in EA, *sawwa* in Levantine Arabic as well in other dialects of the Arabic Peninsula,   *daar* in Libyan Arabic, etc... The study of the evolution of actualization through all the categories of *support items*, due to its strong linkage with grammaticalization, is key to understanding the differentiation of Arabic dialects. Since support items, although different in each dialect all have a living source in CA and MSA, it is possible to analyze and understand the phenomenon by simple comparison.

4. It is frequent that the introduction of the preposition before a noun under the scope of a verb in a direct object construction or the changing of an existing preposition in this position into *be* shifts the given construction to a light verb construction (Ibrahim 2002:341-3). For instance,   *daxala ʔal-ɣurfa* or   *daxala ʕalaa Faaṭima fil ɣurfa* compared to   *daxala be Faaṭima* and in EA   *xarag zay ᶜadtu min el mauďuuᶜ* compared to   *xarag zay ʕadtu be mawďuuʕ gedeed*.

5. Conclusion

The light verbs issue and more precisely the actualization of nouns issue, because of its status between grammar and lexicon, is important to understanding contrasts between contemporary varieties of Arabic. A thorough account of the function of the lexically weak items that shape the likelihood of occurrence of lexically plain items in discourse can help, if we take into account the variety of attested usages and locate the connection between the classical language and the modern dialects.

A the same time, its key role in monitoring the thread language follows to achieve, through appropriate deletion and recovery of items,

its predication, leads us to locate, with a relatively precise tool, one of the main sources of differentiation and evolution of languages.

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