

Introduction to the volume

1 A first approximation to the term ‘light verb construction’

William Croft (2012, 1) writes that “[a] central part of the grammar of every human language is the encoding of events and their participants in a clause.” That this observation is the first sentence of a book titled ‘Verbs’ is not surprising. Verbs denote events – or, more broadly, eventualities¹ – and determine the number and type of participants. In sentences, verbs typically assume the function of the predicate. All languages have expressions that can be used as predicates.

There is, however, no 1-to-1 correspondence between the two categories ‘verb’ and ‘predicate.’ While ‘verb’ is a lexical category, ‘predicate’ refers more to the use of an expression. Which is also evidenced by the fact that nouns and adjectives can be used as predicates as well (*John is a teacher*). In some languages (e.g., Russian), this is possible in certain grammatical contexts (e.g., present tense) even without a verbal element (copula):

- (1) *Ona chorošij inžener.*
3.SG.F good.M.SG.NOM engineer.M.SG.NOM
‘She is a good engineer.’

(Geist, 2006, 133)

In addition to morphologically simplex verbs (such as English *give* or *take* in (2)), many languages also have more complex expressions that fulfill the function of a predicate. Examples can be seen in (3). Here, the verbs *give* in (3a) and *take* in (3b), together with the NPs *a kiss* and *a walk*, form a complex predicate.

- (2) a. *The girl gave the ball to the boy.*
b. *The girl took the ball from the boy.*
(3) a. *The girl gave the boy a kiss.*
b. *The girl took a walk in the park.*

1 The term ‘eventuality’ goes back to Bach (1986) and is a cover term for both states and events.

In (2a) *the girl* holds the role of the giver, *the boy* is the recipient, and *the ball* is what is given (theme or patient role). The verb denotes an event in which a change of possession of the theme from the giver to the recipient occurs. This is different in (3a); here no change of possession occurs. *Kiss* denotes no entity that exists independently of the event and thus can be transferred from one individual to another. Rather, *give a kiss* denotes an event of kissing, with the girl as the one who kisses and the boy as the one who is kissed.

If we replace *kiss* in (3a) with another noun – for example *answer* (4) –, the resulting complex predicate denotes an event of answering instead of an event of kissing. This shows that, in the case of the complex predicates in (3) and (4), the denoted eventuality is determined by the noun and not by the (finite) verbs *give* or *take*. At the same time, we see that the verbs in (3) and (4) do not have the same meaning as in (2). In (2) they designate an eventuality of giving or taking; in (3) the eventuality depends on the noun with which they form a complex predicate. If, on the other hand, in (2a) we replace *the ball* with *the book*, the denoted event does not change – both cases refer to a transfer event. Rather, only what is given changes. This shows that in (2a) the verb, not the noun, determines the denoted eventuality.

(4) *The girl gave the boy an answer.*

The verbs in (3) and (4) carry the same morphosyntactic features as their counterparts in (2). That is, they realize the functional categories commonly associated with verbs in English (tense, subject agreement). Thus, the verbs in (3) and (4) play the same formal role – as bearers of grammatical information – as the verbs in (2). They can thus be seen as the morphosyntactic or grammatical head of the sentence. Semantically, the verbs in (3) and (4) are defective, since they themselves do not make an event predicate (cf. Butt and Geuder, 2001, 356). Following Jespersen (1942), verb usages like those in (3) and (4) are called ‘light verbs.’ According to Jespersen (1942, 117), light verbs are “insignificant verbs to which the marks of person and tense are attached, before the really important idea.” This “really important idea” is what is contributed by the nominal element.

Complex predicates such as *give a kiss*, *give an answer*, and *take a walk* are referred to as ‘light verb constructions,’ ‘stretched verb constructions’ (Allerton, 2003), or also ‘support verb constructions’ (Langer, 2004; Mel’čuk, 2022). There are also other designations, and in particular different specific terms used in different language-specific traditions. For a brief overview, see Riccio’s contribution to this volume (especially page 177). The reader is directed to Heine (2020) and Pompei et al. (2023) for a brief historical overview of debate on light verb constructions.

So far, there is no definition of the term ‘light verb construction’ accepted in the research literature, nor a comparative concept that would allow cross-linguistic

identification of LVCs. Nevertheless, the term ‘light verb construction’ has proven productive for linguistic description, as it is used to refer to a type of complex predicates in typologically diverse and genetically unrelated languages. For the Germanic languages, LVCs are for example assumed in German (e.g., Harm, 2021; Fleischhauer, 2022), Dutch (Everaert and Hollebrandse, 1995), English (e.g., Wierzbicka, 1982; Roman and Schneider, 2015; Mehl, 2017; Stojanovska-Ilievska, 2025; Sundquist, 2025), Swedish (Sundquist, 2018), and Norwegian (Hellan, 2023). For the Romance languages, LVCs are discussed with respect to French, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese (e.g., Alba-Salas, 2002; Staudinger, 2018; Pompei, 2023; Pompei and Piunno, 2023; Wiskandt, 2025). Irish is representative of the Celtic branch, which is said to have light verb constructions (Nolan, 2014). Another Celtic language that is said to exhibit LVCs is Scottish Gaelic (Esteban, this volume). Czech is an example of a Slavic language that is said to possess LVCs (Kettnerová, 2023), but they are also proposed for older Indo-European languages such as Ancient Greek (De Pasquale, 2023), Latin (Di Salvo, 2023; Pompei, 2023), Old Swedish (Sundquist, 2018) and Old West Norse (Boldt, this volume).

Finally, LVCs are assumed to be especially frequent among the Iranian (e.g., Kurmanji Kurdish, Shabaki, Persian, Lari; Haig, 2002; Sultan, 2011; Fleischhauer and Neisani, 2020; Fleischhauer, 2020; Ourang et al., this volume, among others) and Indo-Aryan languages (Hindi/ Urdu, Bengali; e.g., Butt, 1995; Butt and Lahiri, 2013; Mohanan, 2006). Vincze et al. (2013) reports the existence of LVCs in the Uralic language Hungarian. According to Mohanan (2006), LVCs are also found in the Dravidian language Malayalam. LVCs are also proposed to exist in the languages of the Caucasus, e.g., the Nakh-Daghestanian languages Rutul (Maisak, this volume) and Udi (Harris, 2008). Outside of Indo-European, LVCs are assumed to exist in Niger-Congo languages such as Swahili (Olejarnik, 2011), Turkic languages – for instance – Turkish, Uzbek, Kirghiz (Bowern, 2004), Semitic languages such as Standard and Egyptian Arabic (Ibrahim, 2005) but also in East Asian languages like Japanese and Korean (e.g., Grimshaw and Mester, 1988; Matsumoto, 1996; Lee, 2011; Kishimoto, 2025) as well as the Sino-Tibetan languages Mandarin Chinese (e.g., Kuo, 2025) and Tibetan Lai, this volume). For the Austronesian language family, Nugraha (2024) proposes the existence of LVCs in Bahasa Indonesian. Finally, some authors argue for the existence of LVCs in Australian languages such as Nyulnyulan (Bowern, 2008b), Jaminjung (Schultze-Berndt, 2006), Bardi and Wagiman (Bowern, 2010).²

The cited works do not necessarily share the same theoretical conception of ‘light verb constructions,’ so it is unclear whether they really identify the same

² This is not intended as an exhaustive list, but rather aims to illustrate the application of the term in relation to different languages.

grammatical phenomenon in different languages or even within the same language. At this point, we do not want to undertake a comprehensive comparison of different conceptions of the term ‘light verb construction,’ but rather discuss LVCs in more detail from the perspective of one particular approach, namely the one proposed by Ježek (2016). We have chosen this approach, as Ježek presents her conception of LVCs very concisely, thereby providing a good starting point for a critical discussion. At the same time, her approach appears to be representative of other approaches to LVCs (at least for example Germanic and Romance languages). The guiding question in our discussion is to what extent the properties that LVCs are supposed to exhibit under this conception are empirically warranted. Based on our admittedly modest data discussion, we argue that a (cross-linguistically useful) definition of the term ‘light verb construction’ should make as few formal assumptions as possible and define LVCs primarily semantically – through the determination of event reference.

2 Ježek’s conception of light verb constructions

In her volume on the lexicon, Ježek (2016, 204–205) proposes the following characterization of light verb constructions. According to her, LVCs ...

- are a particular type of collocations,
- and consists of a “highly polysemous” light verb and an event noun “preceded by an article and/ or, in a few cases, by a preposition.”

We start with the notion of a light verb. Contrary to Jespersen, many authors (Bonial and Pollard, 2020; Bowerman, 2008a, 2014; Brugman, 2001; Butt, 2003, 2010; Butt and Lahiri, 2013; Fleischhauer and Neisani, 2020; Isoda, 1991; Ježek, 2016, 2023; Pompei and Piunno, 2023; Sanromán Vilas, 2011; Stojanovska-Ilievska, 2025; among others) now assume that light verbs are not semantically empty and do not merely serve to license a noun in predicative use. Rather, it is assumed that they contribute to the LVC’s overall meaning. An illustrative example from German is shown in (5). The three sentences contain different LVCs that differ only in their light verb (*stehen* ‘to stand’ vs. *geraten* ‘to get’ vs. *stellen* ‘to put’ (lit. cause to stand)). While (5a) expresses a state predication (cf. Fleischhauer, 2021a), which can be paraphrased as ‘be in the state of being observed by someone,’ we have an inchoative predication – change from being not observed to being observed – in (5b) and a causative predication – cause to be observed by someone – in (5c). If light verbs were semantically empty, the complex predicates in (5) should not differ semantically.

- (5) a. *Der Verdächtige stand unter Beobachtung durch die Polizei.*
 the suspect stood under observation by the police
 ‘The suspect is under observation by the police.’
- b. *Der Verdächtige geriet unter Beobachtung durch die Polizei.*
 the suspect got under observation by the police
 ‘The suspect came under observation by the police.’
- c. *Das Gericht stellte den Verdächtigen unter Beobachtung durch die Polizei.*
 the court put the suspect under observation by the police
 ‘The court placed the suspect under surveillance by the police.’

Minimal pairs of LVCs, in which only the light verb varies but the meaning of the respective complex predicates differs, can be found in numerous languages (e.g., Italian *avere paura* ‘to be afraid’ lit. have fear vs. *prendere paura* ‘to get afraid’ lit. take fear vs. *fare paura* ‘to frighten’ lit. make fear; cf. Pisciotta and Masini 2025, 138). The semantic function of light verbs includes specifying Aktionsart features (e.g., dynamism, inchoation, causation), volitionality, or even honorificity (cf. Fleischhauer and Neisani, 2020; Lai, this volume). It remains unclear whether light verbs systematically contribute the same meaning across all LVCs or whether their semantic contribution varies from LVC to LVC. Following the use of various authors (e.g., Butt, 2010; Butt and Geuder, 2001; Bonial and Pollard, 2020; Fleischhauer and Neisani, 2020), we speak of a light-verb usage that contrasts with a heavy-verb usage of a lexical verb.³ The underlying assumption is that light verbs and heavy verbs do not constitute formally distinct verb classes, but merely represent different uses of the same lexical verb (e.g., Butt and Geuder, 2001; Butt and Lahiri, 2013).

Ježek’s claim that light verbs are polysemous thus reflects the fact that verbs like English *give* or German *stehen* ‘to stand’ have at least two usage variants: a heavy-verb usage and a light-verb usage. More precisely: Verbs like English *give* and German *stehen* ‘to stand’ display more than one heavy-verb usage (see, for example, Newman, 1996; Butt and Geuder, 2001, 338–343 on English *give*). Possibly the verbs also have multiple light-verb usages (see, for instance, Brugman, 2001 on the issue of polysemy of light verbs).

Ježek designates LVCs as collocations, i.e., as “word combinations on which a restriction applies, for which the choice of a particular word (the collocate) to express a given meaning is influenced by a second word (the base) to which the meaning applies” (Ježek, 2016, 200). In the case of LVCs, the noun imposes a restriction on the

³ To avoid unnecessarily long formulations, we will continue to speak of ‘light verbs’ and ‘heavy verb’, thereby referring to light- and heavy-verb usages of verbs.

choice of the verb. The nominal element of an LVC cannot be combined with every light verb.⁴ Thus, for instance, *unter Beobachtung* ‘under observation’ is compatible with various light verbs (as in (5)), but not with all. Fleischhauer (2021a, 2022) shows that in German there is a series of LVCs of the type *stehen* + *unter* NP ‘stand + under NP’ which have a passive meaning (cf. *unter Beobachtung stehen* in (5a), which means ‘to be observed’). Some of these LVCs take *stellen* ‘put’ (lit. cause to stand) as a causative light verb (5c), while others – as in (6a) – take *setzen* ‘put’ (lit. cause to sit) – but not *stellen* – as a causative light verb variant (6b). This restriction seems to be conventionalized (Ježek, 2016, 204) and – at least to the extent that it concerns the distribution of the causative light verbs *stellen* and *setzen* – not to be motivated by the meaning of the two verbs.

- (6) a. *Das Mädchen steht unter Stress.*
 the girl stands under stress
 ‘The girl is stressed.’
 b. *Die Prüfung setzt/ *stellt das Mädchen unter Stress.*
 the exam puts puts the girl under stress
 ‘The exam puts the girl under stress.’

The second component of an LVC is, in addition to the light verb, a noun. Ježek points out that the noun can occur together with an article and/ or a preposition. A preposition appears, for instance, in the German examples in (5) and (6). Contrary to occasional claims in the research literature (e.g., Heringer, 1968, 41; Helbig, 1984, 165), the preposition is not a purely formal element, but contributes to the meaning of the LVC. This becomes evident when looking at minimal pairs in which the LVCs vary only in the choice of the preposition (7). While *unter Beobachtung stehen* ‘be under observation’ – as noted above – has a passive meaning, *vor der Beobachtung stehen* ‘be close to be observed’ has an aspectual – more precisely prospective – meaning (cf. Fleischhauer and Gamerschlag, 2019; Fleischhauer, 2023b).

- (7) a. *Die Partei steht unter Beobachtung durch den Geheimdienst.*
 the party stands under observation by the intelligence_service
 ‘The party is under observation by the intelligence service.’

⁴ See also Wiskandt (2025) for a comparative study of the combination potential of psych nouns with different light verbs in Romance and Germanic languages. This issue is also taken up in several chapters of this volume. Esteban (this volume) reports it for Scottish Gaelic, Ourang et al. (this volume) for the Aheli dialect of Lari and Lai (this volume) for Tibetan.

- b. *Die Partei steht vor der Beobachtung durch den*
 the party stands in_front_of the observation by the
Geheimdienst.
 intelligence_service
 ‘The party is close to being observed by the intelligence service.’

The choice of the preposition affects the interpretation of the LVC and the choice of affects the denoted eventuality. Thus, it is not only the light verb but also the other components contribute to the meaning of the LVC. This also applies to the articles, as we will see below. In the English examples *give a kiss*, *give an answer* and *take a walk* an indefinite article is present. On the other hand, there are LVCs like German *unter Beobachtung stehen* ‘be under observation’ (5a) and *unter Stress stehen* ‘be stressed’ (6a) in which the noun occurs without any article. Especially in German linguistics, there is no consensus on whether the lack of articles is characteristic for German LVCs or whether there is (more or less) free article variation. A concise summary of the discussion about German can be found in Fleischhauer (2024). We find a similar debate but also concerning English LVCs. While some authors (e.g., Alego, 1995; Plante, 2014) assume that the noun occurring in LVCs appears only with an indefinite article, other authors attest article variation in LVCs (e.g., Bonial and Pollard, 2020; Stojanovska-Ilievska, 2025; see also the results of the contrastive corpus study (English, German, Catalan, and Spanish) in Alvarez-Morera, 2023 and Alvarez-Morera et al., 2025).

The examples in (8) show that *Beobachtung* ‘observation’ as a component of the LVC *unter Beobachtung stehen* ‘be under observation’ can also be used with an indefinite article (8a) and a definite article (8b). We can therefore conclude that the absence of an article – or the fixed use of, for instance, the definite article as some authors claim – cannot be characteristic of LVCs in German. A more detailed data-based argumentation for the fact that German LVCs exhibit free article variation can be found in Fleischhauer (2024).

- (8) a. “*Ich stehe unter einer gewissen besonderen Beobachtung*”, verriet
 I stand under a certain special observation revealed
der 96-Torjäger nach seinem zehnten Treffer [...].
 the 96-goal_scorer after his tenth hit
 “‘I am under a certain special kind of observation,’” revealed the 96-goal
 scorer after his tenth goal.’

(T06/FEB.04902 die tageszeitung, 27.02.2006)

- b. *Der französische Klub steht im Rahmen des Financial Fairplay*
 the French club stands in.the setting the.GEN financial fairplay
unter der Beobachtung der Uefa.
 under the observation the.GEN Uefa
 ‘The French club is under UEFA’s observation as part of Financial Fair Play regulations.’

(SOL15/JAN.01914 Spiegel-Online, 21.01.2015)⁵

For a brief discussion of the issue of in-/definiteness in English LVCs, see Bruening (2015, 52). Riccio’s contribution to this volume presents a very detailed study of the use of indefinite and definite articles in Italian LVCs.

The possibility to vary the articles points to two properties of LVCs that Ježek also notes. First, LVCs exhibit (a certain degree of) syntactic flexibility. The individual components do not necessarily have to be adjacent to each other. In (8a) we see that between the preposition *unter* ‘under’ and the noun *Beobachtung* ‘observation’ there can be not only an article but also two modifiers that modify the noun. Furthermore, the light verb can be separated from the PP by, for instance, adjuncts (8b).

Second, the nominal elements of the LVCs can be used referentially. This is, among other things, evidenced by the fact that they can be anaphorized.⁶ Take (8b) as an example. The PP *unter der Beobachtung* (lit. under the observation) introduces an observation event, which can be picked up anaphorically in a following clause with a demonstrative. In (9) the demonstrative refers to the observation event and predicates how long this observation has already lasted.

- (9) *Der französische Klub steht im Rahmen des Financial Fairplay*
 the French club stands in.the setting the.GEN financial fairplay
unter der Beobachtung der Uefa. Diese dauert nun schon drei
 under the observation the.GEN Uefa this go_on now already three
Monate an.
 months PART
 ‘The French club is under UEFA’s observation as part of Financial Fair Play regulations. This has now been ongoing for three months.’

According to Ježek there is a connection between syntactic flexibility and the referentiality of the noun. She writes: “As it happens, the constructions whose members are not fully flexible syntactically are those in which the noun is non-referential”

⁵ The examples come from the German Reference Corpus (Leibniz-Institut für Deutsche Sprache, 2021) and were extracted during the corpus analysis described in Fleischhauer (2024).

⁶ See Doron (1988) for an intense discussion of criteria distinguishing between referential and predicative uses of nominals.

(Ježek, 2016, 206). That not all LVCs in a language behave uniformly with regard to the feature of syntactic flexibility is also described by Esteban (this volume) for Scottish Gaelic. One consequence is that LVCs either do not represent a syntactically uniform category or that the term ‘LVC’ is restricted to either complex predicates that are syntactically flexible or those that are not. Such an approach is, for example, proposed by Fleißner and Smirnova (2025) for German.

Regarding the nominal component of the LVC, Ježek also makes an assumption that is important to discuss. She writes that the noun is an “event noun” (Ježek, 2016, 204). While non-eventive nouns refer to non-temporal entities (e.g., people, books, or abstract concepts like ‘happiness’), eventive nouns refer to eventualities (see Fábregas et al., 2012; Fábregas and Marín, 2012 for criteria to distinguish eventive nouns from non-eventive ones). The assumption that the noun occurring in LVCs must be eventive is sometimes state in the literature (von Polenz, 1963, 1987; Alego, 1995; Everaert and Hollebrandse, 1995; Helbig, 2006; Langer, 2005; Ronan and Schneider, 2015; Brugman, 2001, 553; Wittenberg et al., 2014a, 61; Wittenberg et al., 2014b, 31; Bruening, 2015, 55; Bonial and Pollard, 2020, 585). Sometimes this claim is also only implicit and follows from assuming that the noun has a deverbal origin (e.g., Wierzbicka, 1982; Dixon, 1991; Shahrokny-Prehn and Höche, 2011; Plante, 2014; Wittenberg, 2016; Giparaitė and Selmistraitis, 2024). Typically, there is no explicit justification for this assumption. However, one possible reconstruction of an argument could be as follows: light verbs are semantically deficient and do not denote an eventuality. A sentence predicate, however, must denote an eventuality. Therefore, the predicative core of the LVCs – the noun – must contribute the eventuality to the predication. As a consequence, the noun has to be eventive.

In many cases, the nominal component of an LVC is indeed an eventive noun, regardless of whether it is derived by conversion (as it is the case with English *kiss*) or derivation (as with German *Beobachtung* (8), which is derived from the verb *beobachten* ‘to observe’ via *ung*-nominalization) or has no deverbal origin (such as the German noun *Stress* ‘stress’ in (6)). However, it is less clear whether constructions with non-eventive nouns should also be classified as LVCs. Ježek, for instance, treats *give an answer* as an LVC, while *give a hand* – which contains a non-eventive noun – is considered to be an idiomatic expression (Ježek, 2016, 204). Idiomatic expressions differ from LVCs concerning their semantic composition. LVCs are “built syntagmatically by means of compositional processes” (Ježek, 2016, 209). That is, the meaning of an LVC can be derived from the meanings of its components (see, for instance, Fleischhauer and Gamerschlag, 2019; Fleischhauer et al., 2019 for a formal analysis of the semantic composition of German LVCs of the type *stehen vor* NP; lit. stand in front of NP). Idiomatic expressions, in contrast, have a meaning that cannot be traced back to their components. The meaning ‘die’, as expressed by *kick the bucket*, cannot be derived from the meanings of the individual parts of the idiom

(e.g., Gibbs et al., 1989; Nunberg et al., 1994; Bonial and Pollard, 2020, 579. With respect to idioms, Nunberg et al. (1994) further distinguish between ‘idiomatic expressions’ like *kick the bucket* on the one hand and ‘idiomatically combining expressions’ on the other hand. Idiomatically combining expressions have components that bear an idiomatic interpretation, but once identified, the overall meaning is derived compositionally from the individual components. Some authors propose that LVCs are either idiomatically combining expressions (Samvelian and Faghiri, 2013a,b, 2014; Fleischhauer, 2020; Fleischhauer and Neisani, 2020; Fleischhauer and Gamerschlag, 2019; Nicoletti, 2025) or another type of semi-compositional construction (Bonial and Pollard, 2020) since they exhibit some flavor of idiomaticity (see also Riccio’s contribution to this volume on this topic).

At this point, let us return to the question of whether the nouns appearing in LVCs must be eventive. Our impression is that such an assumption is primarily made by authors who study specific languages – e.g., Germanic or Romance languages – and thus might be influenced by this selection of languages. A counterargument to the assumption that this is the case could be that non-eventive nouns are also associated with specific events. This is most clearly represented in Pustejovsky’s (1991; 1995) ‘Generative Lexicon theory.’ Pustejovsky assigns a qualia structure to lexical expressions, which is partially illustrated for the noun *violine* in (10).

- (10) a. Formal role: a violine is a MUSICAL INSTRUMENT.
 b. Agentive role: the violine is created through the event of BUILDING or, more generally, CREATING.
 c. Telic role: The violin is created for PRODUCING MUSICAL SOUND.
 (Pustejovsky and Batiukova, 2016, 162)

For a structured meaning representation, several qualia roles are distinguished. Via the ‘Formal role,’ the “basic semantic type, including features that distinguish the object within a larger domain” (Pustejovsky and Batiukova, 2016, 162) is described. For a violin, it is central that it is a musical instrument. The ‘Agentive role’ specifies how an object comes into being. This can be, as with the violin, very general creation events, but it can also be more specific events if a corresponding lexicalization exists (for example in German *töpfen* ‘to do pottery’ in the case of earthenware vessel). The ‘Telic role’ describes the purpose that an object serves. A violin’s purpose is to enable making music with it. As Pustejovsky and Batiukova (2016, 163) write, there are two qualia roles “that encode events, Agentive and Telic [...]”. As the authors explain, the events associated with these roles can be inferred as ‘hidden events.’ They illustrate this with the example *Antonio Stradivari finished the violin*, which is to be interpreted as ‘finished building the violin,’ where a creation event is inferred via the Agentive role. We could similarly assume this for complex predicates like *piga marimba* ‘play

the xylophone' (lit. hit xylophone) from Swahili (11). *Piga* 'hit, beat' occurs with many nouns as light verbs, including various names for musical instruments (e.g., *vigoma* 'tambourine,' *gitaa* 'guitar' and *fidla/ zeze* 'violin;' cf. Olejarnik, 2009, 161). Musical instruments are artifacts and as such do not denote events. However, in all complex predicates where *piga* combines with a noun for a musical instrument, the interpretation is 'play the instrument' (= use the instrument to make music). This yields a regular inference of the event specified in the Telic role (cf. the qualia structure for the musical instrument in (10)).

- (11) *Ni-li-wez-a ku-pig-a marimba kidogo lakini si-ku-wez-a*
 1-PST-can-FV INF-hit-FV 9.xylophone little but 1.NEG-PST-can-FV
ku-pat-a maneno.
 INF-find-FV 6.words
 'I could play the xylophone a little, but I couldn't find words.'
 (Olejarnik, 2009, 161; glossing slightly adopted)

As in the case of unambiguous LVCs such as *give a kiss*, the denoted event is contributed by the noun. The difference between *kiss* and *marimba* 'xylophone' is merely whether the event is denoted directly by the noun itself (as with *kiss*) or inferred from the noun's meaning as a hidden event.

If we say that the noun occurring in LVCs has to be eventive, we take a property of the noun – to refer to eventualities – as definitional. This claim is defensible – see the reconstructed argument above – but still arbitrary. If we do not make this assumption, we do not immediately constrain LVCs to complex predicates with a particular semantic type of noun. For languages like Swahili and Gikūyū (cf. Fleischhauer and Kihara, this volume), this definitional question is central. If we propose an affirmative answer to the question of whether the noun in LVCs must be eventive, then both languages have none – or at most few – LVCs. If we answer it negatively, then both languages exhibit (numerous) LVCs. But also for other languages, such as Persian, the answer to the question is central. The light verb *kešidan* 'pull' occurs with eventive (12a) as well as non-eventive nouns (12b) (see also Family, 2011). With nouns like *sigar* 'cigarette' and other smokeable objects, a use event is inferred (licensed by the Telic role). With nouns like *jâde* 'road,' on the other hand, a creation event is inferred via the Agentive role. With eventive nouns finally, the event is directly contributed by the noun.

- (12) a. *nafas kešidan* 'to breath' (lit. breath pull)
 b. *sigar kešidan* 'to smoke cigarettes' (lit. cigarette pull), *jâde kešidan* 'to build a road' (lit. road pull)

If the notion of an LVC is restricted to complex predicates with eventive nouns, the example in (12a) would be an LVC, but not the two in (12b). If we do not make this assumption, then all the examples in (12) fall under the label ‘light verb construction.’ And as it seems, authors working on languages such as Swahili, Persian or Udi have fewer reservations about extending the term ‘light verb construction’ to complex predicates with a non-eventive nominal element (see, for instance, Folli et al., 2005; Olejarnik, 2009, 2011; Karimi-Doostan, 2011; Family, 2008, 2011; Harris, 2008).⁷

If we do not restrict LVCs to constructions of light verb + eventive noun, that does not mean that the boundary to idiomatic expressions is lost. It would not follow that, for instance, *kick the bucket* is an LVC since the event ‘die’ could not be inferred from the qualia structure of bucket. Neither is the dying event a kind of production of buckets (agentive role), nor is it a telic role associated with buckets.

Ježek’s conception of LVCs captures various properties that are certainly central to LVCs – e.g., syntactic flexibility, referentiality of the noun – but it is not clear whether these are sufficient or even only necessary criteria for identifying a complex predicate as an LVC. Ježek herself points out, as mentioned above, that there is a connection between syntactic flexibility and the referentiality of the nominal element. Thus, it seems that both features are not necessary for LVCs. On the other hand, there is the assumption that the nominal element must be eventive. However, it seems relatively arbitrary to restrict LVCs to complex predicates with eventive nouns.

Many of the assumptions about LVCs that we find in Ježek’s conceptions are also present in the authors gathered in this volume. The idea that LVCs contain a non-eventive noun is explicitly mentioned only by Boldt (this volume). However, it should be noted that Boldt refers to ‘prototypical light verb constructions,’ thereby not excluding the possibility that non-prototypical LVCs with a non-eventive noun may exist.⁸

Greater agreement among the authors and with Ježek’s conception of LVCs can be found regarding the following properties:

- i. LVCs are multi-word expressions consisting of a light verb and another component.

Ourang et al. (this volume) use the term ‘non-verbal element,’ a designation that is particularly common in works on LVCs in Iranian languages. Depending on the language, this category includes not only nouns but also other linguistic units that

⁷ See Lee (2011) for Korean LVCs with non-eventive nouns. For German, the existence of LVCs with non-eventive nouns is stated in Fleischhauer (2023a).

⁸ Similar applies to Wittenberg (2016, 12), who discusses LVCs with deverbal nouns as “the most clear-cut cases of German and English light verb constructions.”

do not behave morphosyntactically like a verb (adjectives (13), adverbs, particles, etc.; see especially the discussion in Maisak, this volume on this issue).

- (13) *pahn kardan* [Persian]
 wide make
 ‘to spread/ to widen’

(Folli et al., 2005, 1370)

It is not surprising that, particularly in analyses on Iranian languages, the assumption that an LVC must contain an eventive noun is not particularly prominent. This is probably because it is generally assumed that expressions of lexical categories not associated with eventivity (i.e., adjectives, adverbs) can also occur as non-verbal elements in LVCs.

- ii. The light verb and the non-verbal element form a joint predication, with the predicative content primarily contributed by the non-verbal element.

Lai (this volume, 119) describes this as follows: “[...] LVCs have a semantically specific noun carrying most of the semantics plus a semantically general verb encoding relatively little information [...]” Riccio (this volume, 180), who limits her analysis to constructions with an NP as the non-verbal element, states that this NP is the semantic head of the complex predicate, while the light verb functions as the syntactic head. In regular predicate-argument constructions, the syntactic head and semantic head coincide, whereas idiomatic expressions have a syntactic head but no semantic head. This results in LVCs having a specific distribution of meaning components that distinguishes them from other predicative constructions (cf. e.g., the discussion in the chapters of Lai and Ourang et al).

- iii. LVCs are a specific type of collocation.

This view is particularly prominent in Lai’s collocation analysis of Tibetan LVCs but also shows up in Riccio’s contribution.

Although the authors gathered in this volume do not explicitly use a common conception of LVCs, we believe that a unified definition can be developed that takes into account the aspects discussed above and allows for an operationalization of the concept of a light verb construction.

3 Towards a definition of ‘light verb constructions’

The brief discussion of Ježek’s conception of light verb constructions has shown that the range of phenomena we capture as LVCs depends strongly on which defini-

tional properties we assign to light verb constructions. Must the nominal element be eventive or not? May the nominal element be referential or not (as claimed by e.g., Langer, 2004; Eisenberg, 2013, 308)? Is article variation within LVCs possible or not? Depending on how we answer these questions, we select different linguistic constructions that exhibit contradictory properties. If, for instance, LVCs do not allow variation of the article, then far fewer linguistic expressions – at least in languages that have grammaticalized articles – fall into the category of LVCs than if we do not make this assumption. The German complex predicates with *stehen* ‘stand’ mentioned above would then not be LVCs. Such a formal criterion can, at most, be useful for a language-specific definition, since it is irrelevant for languages without grammaticalized articles (e.g., Swahili and Gĩkũyũ). Therefore, semantic criteria (referentiality, eventivity) are better suited for a possible definition, as these are independent of which functional categories a language has grammaticalized. Nevertheless, there should be good justification for why such a criterion should be definitional for light verb constructions. It might be more interesting if such properties are not taken as definitional for LVCs but, if at all, emerge as a result of an empirical investigation of LVCs. Then it would also be possible that languages differ with respect to these properties. In some languages, LVCs could be restricted to constructions with eventive nouns, in others not. In some languages, the nominal elements in LVCs could be referential, in others not. Such an approach would allow us to determine which formal properties (if any) LVCs exhibit cross-linguistically and in terms of which features they can vary. This, however, presupposes that we do not already incorporate these properties into the definition of LVCs. A first proposal for such a definition is:

- (14) Light verb constructions are multi-word expressions which form complex predicates consisting of (at least) a light verb and a non-verbal element. The eventuality denoted by the complex predicate is determined by the non-verbal element rather than the verb.⁹

The definition consists of two formal criteria and one semantic criterion. The first formal criterion – LVCs are multi-word expressions (e.g., Masini, 2021) – is used to delimit this type of complex predicates from complex predicates that form a morphological unit. This second type is represented, for example, by prefixed verbs (e.g., English *outperform*), verbal compounds (e.g., English *proofread*), and morphological noun incorporation (15), which – as Mithun (1984, 2010) correctly states – can also be considered a specific type of compounding.

⁹ A similar definition is proposed in Fleischhauer (2020, 4), Fleischhauer (2021b, 34–35) and Fleischhauer and Turus (2021, 76).

- (15) *wa-hati-itsi-a-ient-a'n-e'* (Mohawk < Iroquoian)
 FACTUAL-M.PL.AGT-fish-LK-have-INCH-PERF
 'They caught much fish.'
 (Mithun, 2010, 40)

Composition and, in particular, incorporation play a central role in the discussion of LVCs. Various authors see parallels between compounds on one side and LVCs on the other (e.g., Ghomeshi and Massam, 1994; Vahedi-Langrudi, 1996; Mahmoodi-Bakhtiari, 2018, but also see Goldberg, 1996; Müller, 2010 on this issue). As already discussed above, it is sometimes claimed that the nominal element occurring in LVCs is not referential and, accordingly, is not – or at least only very limitedly – combinable with articles, and also exhibits other restrictions regarding functional morphology (such as number and case) that strongly resemble the semantic and grammatical behavior of incorporated nouns (See Massam, 2001 and Borik and Gehrke, 2015 for an overview on the semantic and grammatical properties of (pseudo-)incorporated nouns. For a discussion of the differences between (Persian) LVCs and pseudo-incorporation constructions see Fleischhauer, 2020, 2021b). Generally, however, LVCs do not form a single word like compounds do; instead, they constitute a multi-word expression. This can be observed in that the components of an LVC do not have to be adjacent to each other but can be separated by linguistic expressions that clearly have word status. This has already been shown above using German language data, but for illustration also see the Persian language data in (16).

- (16) *mesâl e xub-i zadan*
 example EZ good-INDEF hit
 'to give a good example'
 (Fleischhauer and Neisani, 2020, 47)

The second formal criterion within the definition states that LVCs consist of at least one verb and a non-verbal element. As we have seen, it is possible – although not mandatory – for articles and prepositions to be part of an LVC. The definition also allows a light verb to combine with an adjective or some other element which is not a verb. Excluded by the definition are all constructions in which a verb with another verb¹⁰, for example in the form of serial verb constructions.

As a semantic criterion, the definition relies on the fact that the denoted event is determined by the noun and not by the verb. Thus, LVCs differ on the one hand from

¹⁰ By 'verb' it is meant of clear (language-specific) instance of the lexical category verb but not a deverbal noun or a participle, i.e., items which are derived from nouns but do not behave like (regular) nouns morphosyntactically (cf. the discussion on verbal nouns in Scottish Gaelic by Esteban, this volume, 29).

regular predicate-argument constructions (e.g., *to give someone something*), since in those the verb denotes directly. They also differ from idiomatic expressions, since in those the denoted event is not determined by either the verb or the noun (cf. the discussion of *kick the bucket*). However, expressions with eventive nouns (e.g., *give a kiss*) fall under the definition just as those with non-eventive nouns (e.g., Swahili *piga marimba* ‘play xylophone’), because in both cases it is the noun that determines the denoted eventuality. Either directly, since the noun denotes the eventuality, or indirectly, since the denoted eventuality is inferred from the noun.

The property that the verb is semantically defective, i.e., it does not denote an eventuality of its own (e.g., Butt and Geuder, 2001, 356), is shared by light verbs, among others, with auxiliary verbs (cf. Mohanan, 2006, 481). It is therefore not surprising that some authors view ‘light verbs’ as a transitional step in auxiliarization (e.g., Hook 1991, Bernander 2024). The definition in (14) is not yet sharp enough to delineate LVCs from auxiliary verb constructions, since some (quasi-)auxiliary constructions satisfy the same conditions.¹¹ An illustrative example, again from Swahili, can be seen in (17).

- (17) a. *Baba y-angu a-na-tak-a ku-j-a.*
 1.father 9-1SG.POSS 1-PRS-want-FV 15-come-FV
 ‘My father wants to come.’
 b. *Mi-ti h-uu u-na-tak-a ku-anguk-a.*
 3-tree DEM.PRX-3 3-PRS-want-FV 15-fall-FV
 ‘The tree is about to fall.’

(Narrog and Heine, 2021, 62; glossing slightly changed)

The verb *taka* means, in its use as a lexical heavy verb, ‘want, like’ (17a). In an auxiliary use it is used with a nominalized infinitive and serves to express prospective aspect (cf. Heine, 1994; Narrog and Heine, 2021, 62). While in (17a) the eventuality – a state of wanting – is denoted by the lexical verb, the verb in (17b) contributes a perspectivization of the event denoted by the noun. Quasi-auxiliaries as in (17b), according to the definition in (14), constitute LVCs. This raises the question whether LVCs and quasi-auxiliaries as in (17b) can be distinguished at all, and if so, by which properties. Fleischhauer and Kihara (this volume) address this question for the Bantu

¹¹ We have not discussed the delimitation of LVCs from, for example, periphrastic causative constructions, or, in general, from raising and control constructions. Such a discussion is given in detail by Butt (2010), who identifies monoclausality as the relevant feature for delimiting LVCs from the other mentioned syntactic constructions (see, also, Mohanan, 2006, 471).

language Gikūyū and argue that both exhibit different grammatical properties, which is due to quasi-auxiliaries showing a more advanced grammaticalization than LVCs.¹²

The definition in (14) explicitly refers to the fact that LVCs consists at least of a light verb and a non-verbal element. If we regard light verbs as desemanticized verbs – as opposed to the verb's heavy verb usage – that show no signs of decategorialization, we can distinguish them from (quasi-) auxiliaries, which we define by definition as desemanticized (in comparison to the heavy verb usage) and at least partially decategorialized (this is basically in line with Bower's (2004) claim that auxiliaries but not light verbs have defective paradigms in Turkish and other Turkic languages). Thus, (17b) would no longer fall under the notion of a 'light verb construction'.¹³

Even though the definition in (14) is not explicitly endorsed by the authors gathered in this volume it nonetheless captures the essential common features that the authors rely on for LVCs in their investigations, and can thus be presented as an implicit frame of reference for the conception of LVCs used here (without implying that all authors would also necessarily accept this definition.).

4 Overview of the volume

The contributions in this volume address many of the topics mentioned above. These include questions regarding the role of the separability of the components of an LVC for the analysis of LVCs. Another question that is explored is whether the nominal element is referential and what this implies for the analysis of LVCs. However, the unifying element of the contributions is the question of how LVCs differ from other constructions, including regular predicate-argument constructions, multi-word units, and also compounds.

The contributions, on one hand, develop (language-specific) criteria for the identification of LVCs and their distinction from other predicative construction types. On the other hand, they present language-specific analyses of specific aspects, including the conditions for the emergence of LVCs in Old Norse, the interaction of in/definiteness and LVCs, as well as aspects of their meaning composition. Although

¹² More concretely: LVCs exhibit desemanticization of the verb, but no decategorialization of the noun. Auxiliary verb constructions, in addition to the desemanticization of the verb, it also exhibit a (partial) decategorialization.

¹³ Mohanan (2006, 482) argues that LVCs can be distinguished from auxiliary verb constructions by the fact that the light verb can contribute to argument structure, whereas auxiliaries do not. We think that this might a further relevant property separating these two types of verb usages, however it might follow from the fact that auxiliaries but not light verbs show signs of decategorialization.

the authors primarily address LVCs from a single-language perspective, they also take into account similarities and differences with other languages. In addition to the Indo-European languages Italian (Romance; Riccio), Irish Gaelic (Celtic; Esteban), and Aheli (Iranian; Ourang, Amberber & Deligianni), non-Indo-European languages are also addressed: Kina Rutul (Nakh-Daghestania; Maisak), Tibetan (Sino-Tibetan; Lai), and Gĩkũyũ (Bantu; Fleischhauer & Kihara). The chapters share a common focus on the characteristics of LVCs in the respective languages under investigation. While Italian is among the languages that have been studied more extensively in this regard, the studies on other languages (e.g., Aheli and Gĩkũyũ) represent something new.

How do light verb constructions differ from serial verb constructions and auxiliary verb constructions? **Esteban** addresses this question in his study of LVCs in Scottish Gaelic. Based on the identification of semantic and morphosyntactic characteristics of LVCs, Esteban argues that LVCs represent a heterogeneous type of complex predicates. Nevertheless, uniform functions for the light verb can be identified, which are modeled within a decomposition analysis. Based on the framework of Role and Reference Grammar, the author formulates a syntactic analysis of LVCs in terms of nuclear cosubordination.

Light verb constructions in Aheli, a dialect of the Indo-Iranian language Lari, are the subject of the paper by **Ourang, Amberber & Deligianni**. The authors base their study on works related to the Persian language and argue that LVCs in Aheli can be categorized into several semantic templates. In this way, a systematic contribution of meaning from the non-verbal element is identified. In contrast to Persian, various strategies for forming LVCs are discussed: combination and (pseudo-)incorporation. The authors argue that both strategies are applied in Aheli but lead to different types of LVCs. Additionally, the paper descriptively highlights some differences between LVCs in Aheli and those in Persian.

In their contribution to complex predicates in the Bantu language Gĩkũyũ, **Fleischhauer** and **Kihara** compare different types of verb-noun combinations, in which the verb is semantically reduced compared to its full verb variant. A central result of the study is that light verb constructions do not exhibit significant grammatical differences from regular predicate-argument constructions. In contrast, linguistic units that are more likely to be considered auxiliary verb constructions show grammatical differences that indicate, on one hand, that these constructions are subject to a process of grammaticalization, and on the other hand, allow for distinguishing LVCs from auxiliary verb constructions based on grammatical characteristics.

Light verbs typically combine with a limited number of nouns to form a light verb construction. Statistical methods can be used to conduct collocation analyses. Based on the fact that the association strength between the light verb and the noun is not equally strong, but rather that the light verb attracts the noun more than

vice versa, **Lai** employs unidirectional association measures to explore how LVCs in modern Tibetan can be distinguished from other frequent verb-noun combinations using statistical distributions.

Maisak's paper describes various complex verbs, such as 'noun + light verb' and 'adjective + light verb' combinations in the Kina Rutul dialect, a Lezgian language, where verbs are formed by combining a lexical component with a light verb (e.g., 'do', 'be', 'say'). The author examines the challenges of defining complex verb, noting that while many of these can be analyzed as periphrastic constructions, some, particularly those with acategorical coverbs, function as true complex verbs, where the coverbs convey the primary lexical meaning.

The research conducted by **Riccio** explores the morpho-syntactic flexibility and semantic nuances of Italian light verb constructions, with particular attention to the variation in the use of definite and indefinite articles with event-denoting nouns. Through examples such as *fare una/la doccia* 'to take a/the shower' and *dare una/la opinione* 'to give an/the opinion', the analysis, grounded in the framework of Role and Reference Grammar, shows the intricate relationship between syntax and semantics. The findings reveal that the choice of articles significantly outlines the specificity and interpretation of events within LVCs. Moreover, the noun phrases in these constructions, while closely associated with the light verb, retain their syntactic independence, thereby exhibiting characteristics akin to pseudo-incorporation.

A historical linguistic approach to light verb constructions in Old West Norse, particularly their connection to the weakening of the Germanic weak verb system, leads **Boldt** to reflect on the key features of prototypical constructions in Germanic languages, as well as the semantic features of Proto-Germanic and Old West Norse weak verbs. The study suggests that the instability of the weak verb system led to the rise of light verb constructions in Old West Norse to express specific semantic nuances. It also highlights that certain denominal verbs did not transition into light verb constructions.

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