

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

This thematic issue includes a selection of the papers presented at the workshop *On Light Elements across Languages*, organized at the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures of the University of Bucharest in November 2025. The phenomenon of light elements - primarily light verbs and light nouns, but extending to prepositions, adjectives, quantifiers, and related categories – has long occupied a central place in generative linguistics, where these items are characterized by their reduced semantic content, their role in supporting complex predicate formation, and their interactions with argument structure and event composition. Over the past decades, extensive research within the standard generative framework has illuminated the intricate ways in which light elements deviate from fully lexical categories, often occupying an intermediate status between functional and lexical heads. This complexity manifests across multiple analytical levels: typological variation in their distribution and productivity, morpho-syntactic diagnostics distinguishing them from auxiliaries, serial verbs, or content nouns, semantic bleaching and theta-role assignment, pragmatic contributions, and even psycholinguistic processing effects.

In an effort to bring fresh perspectives to ongoing debates and to explore under-examined facets of light elements across languages, the special issue *On Light Elements across Languages* draws from contributions originally presented at the Workshop on Light Elements Across Languages. The workshop addressed (though was not confined to) key questions such as typological patterns in the realization and behavior of light elements; the interplay between “lightness” and semi-lexicality; diagnostic criteria that reliably separate light verbs from auxiliaries or serial verbs, and light nouns from full content nouns; pathways of grammaticalization; connections to silent syntactic material; implications for theta-role assignment and complex predicate formation; the morpho-syntax of these elements; the nature and extent of semantic bleaching; and pragmatic analyses that capture their discourse functions. The papers assembled here collectively advance our understanding by integrating cross-linguistic evidence, refining theoretical models, and highlighting both convergences and divergences in how languages exploit light elements to structure meaning and form.

Anderson's paper addresses a persistent challenge in linguistic typology and descriptive grammar: the inconsistent and overlapping use of key terms such as serial verb constructions (SVCs), auxiliary verb constructions (AVCs), light verb constructions (LVCs), and related notions like dummy verb constructions across different theoretical traditions. Highlighting how these labels often refer to non-identical sets of multi-verb or composite predicates, despite shared morphosyntactic behaviors and historical pathways, the author argues that semantics provides the most reliable basis for cross-linguistic distinctions. The proposed typology delineates at least four primary subtypes of multi-verb predicates (MVPs): (i) purely lexical/combinatorial SVCs; (ii) AVCs featuring one functional/grammatical and one lexical element; (iii) dummy verb constructions where one verb contributes no lexical or functional semantics beyond instantiating obligatory valence or lexical aspect (and enabling inflection); and (iv) LVCs characterized by obligatory co-lexicalization between elements,

rendering them not strictly syntactic. The discussion underscores continua from lexical to grammatical to null semantics, and from syntactic to more lexicalized formations, while noting frequent form-function mismatches, historical overlaps (e.g., potential reanalysis across types), and the theory/language-specific nature of many existing definitions. Ultimately, the paper advocates for a more fine-grained, consensus-driven framework to enable meaningful typological comparison of MVPs, suggesting that future refinements may require additional subtypes or even acknowledgment that such categories are inherently language-specific, thereby limiting universal dialog.

In the next paper, **Fleischhauer** and **Azar** investigate a previously underexplored phenomenon in Persian light verb constructions (LVCs), traditionally analyzed as comprising a semantically light (typically simplex) verbal element and a phrasal non-verbal element (NP or PP) that together constitute a complex predicate. The authors demonstrate that Persian permits complex LVCs, in which the light (grammatical) head is itself realized by an LVC rather than a simple verb. These complex-headed LVCs function productively both as standalone simple LVCs and as the grammatical heads of higher-order complex LVCs, exhibiting identical behavior with respect to key grammatical properties such as separability. This pattern expands the formal complexity of LVCs in Persian, a language renowned for its extensive inventory of LVCs that compensate for the relative scarcity of simplex verbs, and reveals that the light/heavy distinction – classically applied to individual verbs – can extend to entire LVCs, allowing semantically light LVCs to combine with non-verbal elements (NVEs) to form novel complex predicates.

Through examination of semantic and grammatical criteria, the study establishes that LVC formation proceeds uniformly regardless of whether the head is a simplex light verb or a complex LVC predicate, and that no grammatical distinctions emerge between an LVC's use in simple versus complex-headed configurations. This finding aligns with and extends Butt and Lahiri's (2011) observation that light verbs show no grammatical divergence from their heavy counterparts, applying the principle analogously to light versus heavy usages of LVCs themselves. While the paper provides an initial exploration of the phenomenon – including its implications for the architecture of complex predicates – it acknowledges limitations in scope (e.g., incomplete coverage of modifier potential, detailed head analysis, exhaustiveness of examples, productivity assessment, and eligibility constraints on LVCs as heads) and calls for future research into these areas, as well as cross-linguistic comparisons to determine whether complex LVCs occur beyond Persian. Overall, the work introduces this nested or recursive LVC structure as a novel contribution to the typology of light elements, prompting further inquiry into the boundaries of lightness and complex predicate formation.

Svensson is interested in the grammatical and semantic properties of verbalizing lexical affixes (VLAs, also referred to as verbalizing lexical prefixes) in Takituduh Bunun, an Austronesian language of Taiwan, proposing that these affixes overtly realize the category-assigning functional head *v* in a syntactic framework. Building on prior analyses of VLAs in other languages (e.g., Barrie & Mathieu 2016; Johns 2007), the author argues that the affixes' limited semantic content, restricted inventory, and heavy dependence on the nominal stem for interpretation stem from this status as *v*-heads. The complement of these VLAs is analyzed as a reduced nP (rather than a full DP), which accounts for the nominal stem's visibility in broader syntactic contexts (e.g., referential potential) while blocking modification by adjectives or other elements, as observed in the language. The study details

the argument structure, transitivity patterns, and limited modifiability/referentiality of the nominal stems, positioning these properties as key loci of cross-linguistic variation in denominal verb formation.

As a preliminary investigation, the paper underscores the need for more granular empirical descriptions across languages and for broader typological comparisons of VLA structures, particularly regarding complement size (reduced nP in Takituduh Bunun vs. full DP in languages like Ojibwe), possibilities for stranded modifiers, correlations between modifiability and referentiality, and the internal makeup of large VLA inventories (e.g., in Inuit or Nuuchahnulth languages with over 50 such affixes). It tentatively suggests avenues such as analyzing VLAs as realizations of different "flavors" of *v* (following Harley 2017) to accommodate inventory size without positing lexical roots in the affixes themselves, while distinguishing them from prototypical noun incorporation. By situating Takituduh Bunun within a nascent typology of verbalizing lexical affixes, the work highlights predictive implications (e.g., implications of functional sequence cartography for modifier stranding) and calls for expanded comparative research to refine theoretical models of category conversion and complex predicate formation.

In the next paper, **Carvalho** and **Torquette** explore the syntactic structure of pancake sentences in Brazilian Portuguese (BrP), a type of copular construction characterized by phi-feature mismatch between the (often bare) subject noun phrase and the postcopular adjective (e.g., *Criança-FEM é complicado-MASC* (lit. 'Children is complicated'), paired with a generic situation reading of the subject, roughly paraphrasable as 'Dealing with children is complicated'. Drawing on Josefsson (2009), the authors posit an implicit light verb as the source of this situation interpretation, but diverge from that account by arguing that the light verb carries only minimal grammatical (agentive) features rather than lexically specified content. Possible verbal paraphrases arise pragmatically from context, constrained solely by compatibility with the light verb's featural specification; this mechanism explains the range of evoked readings without requiring identification of the light verb via a specific licenser in the structure.

The analysis reviews prior approaches to the situation reading in pancake sentences, favoring those positing a covert syntactic verbal layer over purely semantic ones, as they better capture the constructions' behavior. By adopting and refining Josefsson's light verb proposal, emphasizing its underspecification and reliance on non-clashing contextual enrichment, the paper illuminates properties of such null light verbs, including how their minimal featural makeup generates interpretive flexibility while ruling out incompatible readings. This contributes to broader understanding of light elements in copular and complex predicate structures, particularly in Romance languages.

Tortérat and **Papahagi** This paper investigates support verb constructions (also known as *verbos de apoyo*, *verbes supports*, or similar terms in Romance linguistics), a subtype of light verb constructions, in four Romance languages: Romanian, French, Spanish, and European Portuguese. Drawing on authentic oral corpora, the study addresses two main issues: first, the syntactic configurations in which support verb constructions (SVCs) occur relative to absolute (single-verb) uses of equivalent lexical verbs (e.g., Sp. *dar respuesta* vs. *responder* 'to answer'; Rom. *a da anunț* vs. *a anunța* 'to announce'), including their relative frequencies; second, the potential equivalence or competition between SVCs and single verbs sharing the same lexical base as the predicative noun (e.g., E.P. *dar o alarme* vs. *alertar* 'to warn'; Rom. *a pune o întrebare* vs. *întreba* 'to ask'). The corpus-driven analysis reveals that

SVCs exhibit greater syntactic diversity in spoken language than typically described in written corpora or dictionary entries, with configurations influenced by contextual and pragmatic factors such as focus, topicalization, and the need for nominal expansion (cf. Torterat et al. 2015). This approach also quantifies noun variation (e.g., in number and determination), showing how such flexibility impacts aspectual readings, while some constructions remain more restricted and advanced along the lexicalization cline (e.g., Rom. *dă comandă*).

From the perspective of individual verbs in each language, the authors map a continuum from fully lexical free combinations to fully opaque, bleached verb-noun idioms, with SVCs occupying an intermediate, gradient zone: some retain partial lexical meaning and compositional variability, while others are more frozen, less compositional, and semantically dependent on the verb's morphosyntactic features alone (e.g., Rom. *a-și da seama*). The degree of frozenness correlates with frequency, aligning with established patterns in grammaticalization and lexicalization (Brinton & Traugott 2005). Regarding speaker choice between SVCs and equivalent single verbs, the paper finds SVCs less frequent overall but occasionally co-occurring or alternating freely. Beyond meaning differences, SVCs' multi-word nature offers discourse advantages, enabling flexible noun determination and internal reordering for pragmatic effects like emphasis, mitigation, or focus.

Pagliara's paper offers a fine-grained pragmatic analysis of Light Verb Constructions (LVCs) in Italian requests, focusing on asymmetric academic interactions marked by power imbalance and social distance. Drawing on a corpus of approximately 100,000 words of authentic academic emails and interviews, the study compares the production of native speakers (L1) and intermediate-to-advanced learners (L2). It moves beyond traditional aspectual or stylistic accounts of LVCs (e.g., *fare una richiesta* versus *richiedere*) to examine their functional role in the speech act of requesting. The central question is whether these constructions primarily serve to foreground new information or to mitigate the imposition of the request through syntactic backgrounding.

The results reveal both convergence and a striking divergence between the two groups. Both native speakers and L2 learners successfully exploit LVCs to place informational focus on the nominal element in rhematic position. However, only native speakers consistently embed these foregrounded LVCs within subordinate clauses, thereby softening the directive force while preserving clarity, which is an elegant strategy that balances politeness and communicative precision. L2 learners, despite having acquired the lexical form of the LVC, show a clear "pragmatic-syntactic gap": they underuse the complex subordination patterns that natives employ for illocutionary mitigation. The study thus illuminates an important interface between syntax and pragmatics in L2 development and outlines promising directions for future research, including larger learner corpora, register comparisons, and longitudinal tracking of this acquisitional trajectory.

In the last paper, **Tănase-Dogaru** examines a highly productive and contemporary pattern of light verb constructions (LVCs) in Romanian, in which English loan words are integrated into the classic light verb + nominal structure, specifically with the converse pair *a da* 'give' and *a lua* 'take'. Drawing on two manually compiled corpora collected over several years from spoken and online interactions, the study focuses on English borrowings from three distinct domains: internet and social media slang (e.g., *ban*, *like*, *ghosting*, *trigger*, *karma*), Kendama players' slang (e.g., *bird*, *lunar*, *lighthouse*), and mountain bikers' slang (e.g., *drop*, *flat*, *whip*). The analysis demonstrates that these English loans function as

(typically frozen) result tokens that receive a bounded or punctual interpretation within the LVC, while occasionally undergoing a process of “unfreezing” that allows them to accept Romanian determiners and plural morphology. Crucially, the alternation between *a da* and *a lua* systematically encodes a semantic-pragmatic opposition: *da* foregrounds agency and successful completion (often with an agentive or causative reading), whereas *lua* conveys affectedness and a malefactive or passive-like experience (frequently marked by dative clitics to emphasize sympathy or victimhood). This opposition, together with the consistent boundedness of the loans, supports the view that the primary function of these light verbs is portioning, i.e., encoding discrete, individuated instantiations of events that would otherwise be expressed by corresponding heavy verbs.

The paper concludes by noting that the ease with which these light verbs accommodate English nominal roots suggests they primarily supply a syntactic frame into which the noun’s meaning integrates, aligning with Culicover and Jackendoff’s (2005) proposal for light verb constructions. While the work provides detailed descriptive and interpretive evidence from modern usage, it leaves open for future research a full syntactic formalization of these constructions and further exploration of their implications for language contact, productivity, and the architecture of light verbs in Romanian.

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