

Copulas and light verbs as a unified category
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A claim frequently made in syntactic literature is that some verbs, such as English *be*, *have*, and *do*, have little lexical semantic content, being essentially bundles of features. If this is true, it implies that these verbs are closer to functional than to lexical items. At the same time, however, we are faced with the fact that these verbs possess an argument structure, a property that we associate more with lexical items (Corver & van Riemsdijk 2001, Karimi-Doostan 2005).

I present findings from the Dene language T̥h̥ç̥ Yatì (aka Dogrib, spoken in the Northwest Territories, Canada), showing that in this language copulas and light verbs form a unified category. All the light verbs of T̥h̥ç̥ Yatì are semantically light items that differ from each other only in argument structure; copulas occupy the low end of a scale of increasing valency.

For example, the verbs *at'ɫ*, *elɫ*, and *h̥ç̥t'e* are all often translated as *be*, but in context it is apparent that the first of these (1a) can select an agentive argument and a Davidsonian event argument to which adverbials can make reference (Kratzer, 1995), the second (1b) selects only an event argument and the third, the pure copula, selects neither (1c).

- (1) a. *Sɫ ah-t'ɫ.* (author's field data)
1SG 1SG-AT'ɫ
'It's me.' (at the door, on the phone)
- b. *Sɫ dz̥ç̥ k'àowo ehɫ.*
1SG now boss 1SG-ELɫ
'I'm the boss now.'
- c. *Sɫ Meè ah-t'e.*
1SG Mary 1SG-HOT'E
'I'm Mary.'

At'ɫ is also frequently translated as *do*, in common with the verb *al̥*. However, they differ in their argument structure: *al̥* (2a), but not *at'ɫ*, is employed as a causativizer and can select an accusative argument:

- (2) a. *eyits'ç̥ d̥ç̥ k'aat'ìi age-le ha g̥ç̥-ghàhòɫç̥ç̥.* (author's field data)
and person be.well 3PL-ALE FUT 3PL-be.instructed
'and he gave them authority to heal sickness.'
(Lit., 'they were instructed to make people well.')
- b. **D̥ç̥ k'aat'ìi age-t'ɫ ha g̥ç̥-ghàhòɫç̥ç̥.*
person be.well 3PL-AT'ɫ FUT 3PL-be.instructed
(Intended: 'they were instructed to make people well.')
- c. *Sets'ç̥ f̥ç̥ç̥ ane-le.*
my phone 3PL-ALE
'Call me.'

The light verb *g̥ç̥h̥ɫ* 'exist/be born' has a single thematic argument, as well as a Davidsonian event argument:

- (3) a. *As̥j̥ì ne-ɫ g̥ç̥h̥ɫ?* b. *Behchok̥ k'e se-g̥ç̥h̥ɫ.* (author's field data)
QN 2SG-dog exist Behchok̥ in 1SG-be.born
'Do you have a dog?' 'I was born in Behchok̥.'

The variable English translations of all of these verbs suggest minimally specified semantics:

Light verb	<i>h̥ç̥t'e</i>	<i>g̥ç̥h̥ɫ</i>	<i>at'ɫ</i>	<i>elɫ</i>	<i>al̥</i>
English translations	be	be, exist, have	be, do, go	be, become	do, make

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The light verbs of Tłıchǝ Yatı̄ give an unusually clear picture of argument-structure distinctions in the absence of further lexical semantic content. I adduce evidence from fieldwork and textual sources to demonstrate the following argument structure for six light verbs:

	<i>hǝt'e</i>	<i>gǝhłı̄</i>	<i>at'ı̄</i>	<i>elı̄</i>	<i>ale</i>
internal thematic argument	1	0	1	1	0
external thematic argument	0	0	0	1	1
spatiotemporal argument	0	1	1	1	1
accusative argument	0	1	0	0	1
other complement	0	0	(PP)	(AP)	(CP)

I suggest that their lexical entries therefore consist minimally of selectional features, preserving the view of light verbs as both functional feature bundles and lexical items selecting arguments. I argue that the distinction between copulas and other light verbs is problematical in this language for this reason. Combined with the fact that none of these verbs co-occur, this suggests that they all instantiate a single category, which I argue is *v* (Chomsky 1995). Light verbs function as Relators (den Dikken 2006) to allow various non-verbal categories to be predicates, a role that has previously been asserted for copulas in Dene languages (Wilhelm 2014). Further, light verbs are distinguished from each other wholly by their selectional features and serve as last-resort spellouts for argument structure in the absence of a lexical verb.

This proposal has several implications. First, the lack of specific lexical semantics and the presence of thematic argument structure for these verbs suggest that the selection of thematic arguments is not a clear diagnostic of lexical categorial status. Secondly, the absence of clear semantic content in all of these verbs suggests that copulas as a category are ill-defined and perhaps can best be categorized in language-specific terms. Finally, if *v* has multiple instantiations differing in argument structure, it is evidence against multiple argument-selecting heads à la Pylkkänen (2002).

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