
A comparison of light verb constructions and auxiliary verb constructions in the Bantu language Gĩkũyũ

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In various languages, light verb constructions (LVCs) are often difficult to distinguish from auxiliary verb constructions (AVCs) at the surface level. This is particularly true for Bantu languages like Gĩkũyũ, where both types of verbal complex predicates consist of a combination of a finite verb with a nominal element (cf. 1). (1a) is an instance of an LVC, while (1b) and (1c) show AVCs: *enda* ‘want’ functions as an aspectual auxiliary and *rika* ‘start’ as a phasal verb.

- (1) a. *Mũ-tumia* *nĩ=a-ra-hũr-a* *thimo*.
1-woman FOC=1-PRS-beat-FC 9.phone
‘The woman is making a call.’
b. *Nĩ=kũ-r-end-a* *kũ-in-a*.
FOC=17-PRS-want-FV 15-rain-FV
‘It is about to rain.’
c. *Ma-kĩ-rik-a* *kũ-ur-a*.
2-NARR-start-FV 15-sing-FV
‘And they started to sing/singing.’

Although there are no generally established criteria for distinguishing between LVCs and AVCs, we can differentiate both construction types in Gĩkũyũ based on language-specific criteria. While LVCs (1a) behave grammatically like regular predicate-argument constructions, AVCs exhibit restrictions regarding (i) possible complement types (restriction to infinitives [noun class 15]), (ii) verb inflection (e.g., object marking) and (iii) voice morphology (no passive/ causative/ applicative marking). Such grammatical restrictions can be analyzed as ‘decategorization’, i.e., the loss of morphosyntactic properties of a lexical unit. Decategorization represents a central parameter in grammaticalization theory (e.g., Narrog & Heine 2021, 72–78), and the results suggest that semi-auxiliaries show signs of grammaticalization – but are not yet fully grammaticalized – while the light verb does not exhibit this. We propose that *enda* and *rika* lost their status as an independent verb in (1b/c) which has consequences for their syntactic status.

Reference. Narrog, H. & B. Heine (2021). *Grammaticalization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.