

Complex predicates

Jane Simpson 28/11/2025

Multi-predicator constructions

- Multi-predicator structures found across northern Australia
- They are typically two part, but can have more than two parts
- Closed class of finite verbs
- Typological parallels: German separable verbs, English phrasal verbs, Hindi compound verbs, Georgian preverbs, Algonquian preverbs, Hungarian locative
- In the Australian and other cases, the multi-predicator structures appear to be doing the same work as simple verbs.
- However, they behave differently from simple verbs in that
 - In some languages the order of the parts can be reversed
 - In some languages other elements can intervene between the parts.
- Sometimes the meaning of the multi-predicator structure is non-compositional.
- Do the parts form a single word? A phrase?
- What determines the case of the subject?
- How is the argument structure of the whole composite determined?

Nash, David. 1982. "Warlpiri preverbs and verb roots." In *Papers in Warlpiri grammar: in memory of Lothar Jagst*, edited by Stephen Swartz, 165-216. Berrimah, Australia: Summer Institute of Linguistics.

1980s analytic problem: The Lexical Integrity Hypothesis

- Words are the atoms of syntax. Words (lexical categories) are the terminal node of syntactic trees.
- **Weak LIH:** derivational morphology operates in the lexicon, not at the level of syntax. I.e. words are NOT assembled in constituent structure
- **Strong LIH:** syntactic rules cannot move elements into or out of lexical categories.
 - Constituent structure processes are blind to the internal structure of lexical categories.
 - Subparts of words cannot be re-ordered during syntactic composition
- Sometimes assumed: lexical entries (argument structure, selection restrictions) only undergo change before the word enters the level of syntax.

Problem: Discontinuous verbs

- *John ran.* Intransitive
- *John ran up a bill.* (could be ‘ran up’ as a complex verb with the lexical entry of a transitive verb.
Doesn’t violate LIH)
- *John ran a bill up.* (Violates LIH)

Problem: Light verbs

- *John looked (at the paper).*
- *John had a look (at the paper).*

Look has as participant the object of sight. This is expressed as an optional PP, whether it is N or V *had*.

Had acts as main verb, is identical in form (inflection) to the lexical/heavy verb *have*, and has the same transitive argument structure. It adds aspectual information converting a process to a bounded event.

- *John gave the paper a look.*
- *?John gave a look at the paper.*

gave acts as main verb, is identical in form (inflection) to the lexical/heavy verb *give*, and adds aspectual information converting a process to a bounded event.

It has the same ditransitive argument structure but then the object of perception is expressed as the Object, without the preposition *at* , and *a look* is discontinuous from *gave*. The transitive argument structure is odd, perhaps because ‘*to*’, not ‘*at*’ is the expected preposition for *give*.

In languages with Ergative case, the case of the subject is determined by the light verb, and not by the other verb.

Complex predicates (LFG)

Two or more predicational elements [...] come together to form a joint predication, with a jointly determined argument structure (Butt 2010)

Each predicational element contributes something predicational to the joint predication (contra *noun incorporation*, which, in Butt's view expresses an argument but does not add to the predication).

Argument merger draws together the arguments of each predicational element to form the single argument structure of the complex predicate. It takes place at an argument structure level.

The complex predicate is the head of its clause (monoclausal).

In contrast with controlled complements, there are no embedded arguments and no embedded predicates at the level of syntax.

- Butt, Miriam. 2010. "The Light Verb jungle: Still hacking away." In *Complex predicates in cross-linguistic perspective*, edited by Mengistu Amberber, Mark Harvey and Brett Baker, 48-78. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Alsina, Alex, Joan Bresnan, and Peter Sells, eds. 1997. *Complex predicates, CSLI Lecture notes 64*. Stanford CA: CSLI Publications

Complex predicates

- Complex predicates can be formed in the morphology (e.g. derived causative affixes), or in the syntax (e.g. light verb structures).
- Claim: *argument merger* in argument structure works in similar ways in both morphologically created complex predicates and syntactically created complex predicates.

Butt's proposal

The different parts of the complex predicate instantiate different subparts/subevents of the overall predication.

- **Light verbs**
 - contribute to an independently existing event predication at the subevental level.
 - Always **form-identical** to a main verb of the language (inflect in the same way)
 - Aspectual class of light verb cannot conflict with that of the co-predicator.
 - Case of subject is determined by that of light verb.
 - *Form complex predicates*
- **Auxiliaries** situate an event in time. They do not modify the basic event predication.
 - *Do not form complex predicates*
 - Case of subject is determined by that of heavy verb.
- **Modals** situate an event with respect to possible worlds. They do not modify the basic event predication.
 - *Do not form complex predicates*
 - Case of subject is determined by that of heavy verb.

Light verbs vs Auxiliaries (Butt)

- Light verbs and the other predators form a complex predicate.
- The case of the subject is determined by the light verb.
- Light verbs do not grammaticalise into inflections
- Free auxiliary verbs do not form a complex predicate.
- Free auxiliary verbs do grammaticalise into inflections.

Part 0	Part 1 UP - predicator that is not inflected for tense or mood	Part 2 IP predictor that is inflected for tense and mood	ORDER	Language(s)	Complex construction name	Source
	UV uninflecting verb	IV inflecting verb predicate		Comparative across northern Australia and Pama-Nyungan	compound verb constructions	McGregor (2002); Schultze-Berndt (2017)
	Verb root	Classifier (role)	U I	Nyulnyulan languages		McGregor (2002)
	Preverb	Verb	U I, IU depends on preverb type	Warlpiri	Preverb-Verb construction	Hale (1982), Nash (1982)
	Preverb	Light verb (dependent); Heavy verb (independent or dependent)	U I	Warlpiri		Laughren (2010)
	Coverb	Verb	U I	Jarragan, Wagiman, Jaminjung, Warlmanpa		Kofod (1996), Wilson (1999), Schultze-Berndt (2000), Browne (2024)
	Verbal particle	Verb/ Auxiliary	U I	Wardaman		Merlan (1994)
	Main verb	Auxiliary	U I	Ngan'gityemerri		Reid (1990)
	Finite V	Coverb	IU	Ngan'gityemerri		Reid (2003)
	Coverb	Finite verb	UI, IU	Ngan'gityemerri		Reid (2003)
	Compound verb stem	Free Auxiliary; Bound Auxiliary		Ngankikurungkurr		Hoddinott & Kofod (1988)
	Auxiliary	Main verb stem		Murrinhpathera & Ngan'gityemerri		Green (2003)
	Participle	Finite verb	U I	Wagiman		Cook (1988)
Pre-verb	Co-verbal root [category-less]	Light verb	U I	Jingulu		Pensalfini (2003)
	Preverb	Verb root	UI	Bardi		Bowern (2012)
	Coverb	Light verb	UI	Bardi		Bowern (2012), Bowern (2014)
	Preverb	Verbal base [role 'classifier'OR 'simple verb']	U I	Bardi		Nicolas (2000)
	Coverb	Verb	U I	Murrinhpathera	phrasal verb	Mansfield (2019)
	Verb stem	Coverb	UII	Murrinhpathera	complex adverb	Mansfield (2019)

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Warlpiri, Warumungu, Warlmanpa

- Neighbours
- All have multi-predicator constructions which include a verb that can be inflected for tense/aspect/mood, i.e. finite.
- Properties of these constructions depend on:
 - properties of the potentially finite verb
 - properties of the remaining parts on the other
- All accord special status to pronominal clitics representing arguments and adjuncts, constraining them to appear in ‘second position’ in the clause.
 - Warlpiri and Warlmanpa: Auxiliary complex (which also includes tense-aspect marking).
 - Warumungu: a portmanteau cluster of pronominal clitics.

Nash, David. 1982. "Warlpiri preverbs and verb roots." In *Papers in Warlpiri grammar: in memory of Lothar Jagst*, edited by Stephen Swartz, 165-216. Berrimah, Australia: SIL.¹²

References

Warlpiri: Multi-predicator construction

- multi-part verb constructions follow a template:
- X ? V where ? stands for different degrees of tightness of boundary:
 - - (affix), + (compound), # (word-boundary)
- X can be a range of parts of speech:
 - **Nominal, Nominalised Verb, Preverb**

Warlpiri preverbs (coverbs)

- A distinct class of words in terms of their phonotactics. Unlike free-standing words, they can end with a consonant and they can be monosyllabic.
- The vast majority appear in front of the verb: hence the name ‘preverb’.
- Unlike Nominals true preverbs cannot take nominal case inflections. (Some preverbs can be converted into nominals through derivational suffixes or reduplication.)
- Unlike Verbs, preverbs cannot take tense/aspect/mood inflections.
- **Numbers**
 - 109 different words which are doubly classified as Nominal or Particle or Preverb in the *Warlpiri dictionary* appear with only one verb.
 - 508 different words classified solely as Preverbs appear with only one verb.
 - 634 other preverbs that occur with more than one verb
- Nash divides Preverbs into the following types: *lexical, semi-productive, adverbial (including quantifiers), dative-adjunct*, according to the degree of tightness of boundary. To which were added Dative object preverbs

<i>X type</i>		Properties
<i>Vnom -ya-ni</i> 'go' and a few motion verbs	Associated path	Inner: tight nexus
<i>N-jarrimi</i>	become/be X	Inner: tight nexus
<i>N-mani</i>	cause to be X, transitive	
<i>N V</i>	Few examples, like object noun incorporation	Inner: tight nexus
<i>PV lexical</i>	Many examples, preverb usually unique	Inner preverb: tight nexus
<i>PV semi-productive</i>	Many examples:	Inner preverb: tight nexus
<i>PV adverbial quantifier</i>	Many examples Few quantifiers	Outer preverb: loose nexus
<i>PV Dative adjunct</i>	Modifies Dative adjunct, <i>for benefit/detriment/ reason/ threat...</i> Few	Outer preverb: loose
<i>PV Dative object</i>	Adds Dative object, against, on top of.. Few	Outer preverb: loose

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Nash's 4 tests for boundary tightness

- Can X host a directional clitic?
- Can the Auxiliary split X and the Verb?
- Is the order V X possible?
- Can the V and the X be separated by other words in the sentence?

Laughren 2010: inner (thematic core), outer (thematic periphery)

Browne 2024: loose nexus, tight nexus

Outer preverb, loose nexus, adverbial

Pina ya-nu =0-pala.

back-go-PST =PERF-3dS

'They (two) went back.'

Pina =0-pala ya-nu.

Back =PERF-3dS go-PST

'They (two) went back.'

Ya-nu =0-pala pina.

go-PST =PERF-3dS back

'They (two) went back.'

Jintilyka ka=lu muku=rra paarr-pardi-mi.

Grasshopper PRES=3pLS all=away flight-rise-NPST

The grasshoppers all fly away.

Outer preverbs

- *Adverbs*

Jurlpu ka=lu nguru-wana jaala-parnka-mi.

Bird PRES=3plS sky-across **back&forth-move.fast-PRES**

The birds are flying back and forth in the sky.

- *Quantifiers*

Jintilyka ka=lu muku=rra paarr-pardi-mi.

Grasshopper PRES=3plS all=away flight-rise-NPST

The grasshoppers all fly away.

Inner preverbs

- *Lexical* (mostly unique):

Wurru-ka-nyi =ka-pala-jana.

Pvb-bound.verb ‘stalk’-NPST =IMPF-3dS-3pNS

The (two) are stalking them (more than two).

- *Semi-productive*

Kulanganta yinga payi-ngki pirri-kiji-karla yujuku,
As if COMP wind-ERG scatter-throw-IRR _humpy

I thought that the wind would have scattered the humpies

Outer: Dative-orienting preverbs

Modifying adjunct

Wati =rla jurnta-ya-nu karnta-ku

Man =3sDAT away-go-PAST woman-DAT

jarda-nguna-nja-rlarni.

sleep-lie-INF-**OBVCOMP**

The man went away from the woman while she was sleeping

Adding object

Wati=ji kulu jangkardu=rnu ya-nu waparlku-kurra-ku

man-1sO fight against-hither go-PST unknowing-**OBJCOMP-DAT**

The man came to fight me when I didn't know about it.

Nash's 4 tests for boundary strength

- Can X host a directional clitic?
- Can the Auxiliary split X and the Verb?
- Is the order V X possible?
- Can the V and the X be separated by other words in the sentence?

<i>Xtype</i>	<i>Directional</i>	<i>XAux V</i>	<i>VX</i>	<i>X..Y.. V, V.Y..X</i>
<i>Vnom -ya-ni</i> 'go'	Yes	No	No	No
<i>N-inch</i>	Yes	Rare	No	No
<i>N-cause</i>				
<i>NV</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Irrelevant
<i>PV lexical</i>	No?	No	No	No
<i>PV semi-productive</i>	Yes	Yes	No	No
<i>PV adverbial</i> <i>quantifier</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Sometimes
<i>PV Dative adjunct</i>	No	Yes	Yes	Sometimes
<i>PV Dative object</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Ordering

Consonant-final preverbs must be augmented (mostly with *-pa*) if they are split from the verb or postposed to it

Laughren (2010:179-180)

- PV in thematic core may not be postposed to the thematic V; PV in thematic periphery may be pre- or postposed to the thematic V
- order of PVs within the thematic core is fixed ; order of PV in the thematic periphery is variable.

jurnta= [tarda - ya-] nu pina ‘sat/landed back away
(from)

muku =jurnta= [walku-jarri-] ja ‘all ran out on’

Verbs attested in dictionary with many preverbs

Form	Meaning	Number of attested combinations	Meaning	Number	Transitivity
Kiji-	throw	101	throw	101	transitive
Wanti-	fall	108	fall	108	intransitive
Paka-	hit	112	hit	112	transitive
Yirra-	put	131	put	131	transitive
Ma-	get and... (at least 6 different senses)	194	get and...	194	transitive and intransitive
Karri-	stand	210	stand	210	intransitive

Laughren's classification of verbs

Thematic Verb

Aspectual Verb

Heavy

Independent

Light – joint with
preverb

Independent

Light – joint with preverb

Dependent (bound)

Dependent (bound)

–thematic verb

determines

argument structure

Ya-ni ‘go’ (Laughren 2010)

- **Heavy**

Ngarrka ka yani

The man is going

- **Light:** joint with preverb

Kurdu waku rdilyki-ya-nu. *The child’s arm broke*

Child arm broken-go-PST

- **Aspectual (attached to nominalised verb ‘go’ PATH)**

Wati ka [ngurrju-jarri-nja]-ya-ni.

man AUX:PRS good-INCH-INF-PATH-NPST

The man is getting better/becoming good.

Wati ka [ngurrju-ma-ninja]-ya-ni nyanguwaji-rli.

man AUX:PRS good-CAUS-INF-PATH-NPST doctor-ERG

The doctor is making the man better.

Subject case distinguishes aspectual
and light verbs

Miriam Butt

- Heavy and Light verbs provide the case for the subject
 - Auxiliary verbs are transparent, and the subject's case is provided by the other predicator

- **Preverb/Nominal verb**

- (i) Warlu-ngku=juku=palangu paarr-jurru-rnu [transitive]

Fire-ERG=still=3duO flight-force-PST

The fire just forced them up into the sky.

- (ii) Jintilyka ka=lu muku=rra paarr-pardi-mi [intransitive].

Grasshopper PRES=3pIS all=away flight-rise-NPST

The grasshoppers all fly away.

- Wati ka ngurrju-ma-ni [transitive] nyanguwaji-rlí

man AUX:PRS good-CAUS-NPST doctor-ERG

The doctor makes the man better

- **Aspectual verb** [ya- as heavy verb is intransitive, ma- CAUS is transitive]

- Wati ka [ngurrju-ma-ninja]-ya-ni nyanguwaji-rli.

man AUX:PRS good-CAUS-INF-PATH-NPST

The doctor is making the man better.

Laughren's proposal for Warlpiri preverb-verb structures

- Considers contribution of both preverb and verb to the complex predicate
- Argues for two levels:
 - Lexical event structure (roughly equivalent to argument structure)
 - S-Syntax structure
- Types of preverb include among others resultant states ('broken') and states ('good')
- Types of verbs on continuum between Heavy and Light include among others
 - Lexical verbs
 - Syntactic light verbs
 - Abstract change
 - Change plus additional manner
- Thematic verbs express ATPs: may be Heavy (stand on their own) or Light (associated with a preverb) – these have selectional restrictions
- HV and LV versions of same thematic verb have same valency and argument structure
- Aspectual verbs combine with other verbs (NOT preverbs) and do not affect argument structure: productive

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Warumungu

Neighbour of Warlmanpa and Warlpiri (Yapa languages)

Long intermarriage and connection with Warlmanpa

Genetic position unclear – properties in common with Yapa languages, but also with Arandic languages.

Pronominal clitics in ‘second position’

Comparing Warumungu and Warlpiri

	Warlpiri	Warumungu
<i>Inflected predicates (simple verbs)</i>	165	64
<i>Attestations of compound verbs/phrasal verbs</i>	2464	178
<i>Uninflected predicates (preverbs) double classified (N ,Interj Adv)</i>	150	8
<i>Preverbs (other than double-classified) occurring with more than one verb</i>	565	62
<i>Compounds/phrases with unique preverbs</i>	630	118
<i>Bound verbs</i>	19 (2 with nominals)	5 (3 with nominals)

<i>Xtype</i>	<i>Directional</i>	<i>XAux V</i>	<i>VX</i>	<i>X..Y.. V, V.Y..X</i>
<i>Associated path inflect</i>	n/a	No	No	No
<i>N-inch</i>	n/a	No	No	No
<i>N-cause</i>				
<i>NV</i>	n/a	Yes	Yes	Irrelevant
<i>PV lexical</i>	n/a	No	No	No
<i>PV semi-productive</i>	n/a	Yes	No	No
<i>PV adverbial quantifier</i>	n/a	Yes	Yes	Sometimes
<i>PV Dative adjunct</i>	n/a	Yes	Yes	Sometimes
<i>PV Dative object</i>	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

Warumungu associated path: inflection

Go	<i>go-hither</i>	<i>go-away</i>	
Apan	Apirrapan	Apижirranta	Present
Api	Apижirra	Apиррkarl	Future
Apinyi	Apирrkarni	Apирrarni	Past Punctual
papulu-kku = arni	juku-nyu	<i>I took it to the house</i>	
House-Dative = I	carry-past.punctual		
papulu-kku = arni	juku-ntirrarni	<i>I took it away to the house</i>	
House-Dative = I	carry-away-past.punctual		

i.e. This combines both the concepts expressed by Warlpiri directional clitics and the Warlpiri aspectual verb Vnom-yani into inflections on verbs.

Fits with Butt's proposal about grammaticalisation of auxiliary verbs.