

# The Light Verb Construction

## “take a V” in English

### 1 Introduction

Many languages including English allow for so called light verb constructions (LVCs) (Jespersen, 1954). These constructions consist of a light verb such as *have*, *take*, or *give* and a direct object. The main characteristic of these constructions is that the main semantic content is not contributed by the verb itself but instead by its direct object.

LVCs often appear in the form *have/take/give a V* where *V* is a deverbal noun of identical form as its corresponding verb.

- (1) a. She **took a walk**.
- b. I **gave** the table **a wipe**.
- c. They **had a drink**.

There also exist many other constructions in which almost the entire meaning of the verb phrase is contributed by its complement as illustrated in the following examples.

- (2) a. He **gave a demonstration**.
- b. They **made an inspection**.

(Kearns, 2002)

In this paper, however, I only consider constructions of the form **take a V** where *take a V* is closely related to the meaning of *V*. For example, I consider constructions such as *took a walk* as in (3a) which entails that the agent *walked* but I do not consider construction such as *took a stand* which has a very different meaning from *stood*. Most of the constructions that I consider show the entailment pattern *take a V*  $\Rightarrow$  *V* but I also consider expressions

such as *take a hit* which are closely related to the corresponding verb despite the fact that no entailment is possible as exemplified in (5).

- (3) a. I **took a walk**.  
b.  $\Rightarrow$  I **walked**.
- (4) a. She made up her mind and **took a stand**.  
b.  $\nRightarrow$  She made up her mind and **stood**.
- (5) a. The economy **took a hit**.  
b.  $\nRightarrow$  \* The economy hit.

These constructions raise several interesting questions. The first one comes from the observation that, at least at a first glance, it seems highly idiosyncratic which deverbal nouns can be complements in LVCs. For example, the deverbal noun *a nap* can be a complement in a LVC but *a sleep* cannot which seems surprising considering that both of them describe very similar activities.

- (6) a. I **took a nap**.  
b. \* I **took a sleep**.

At the same time, one might also wonder why people use these constructions instead of using a bare verb and how the light verb contributes to the meaning of the entire construction.

In this paper, I therefore try to answer the following two questions.

- Which deverbal nouns can form light verb constructions headed by *take*?
- How does *take* contribute to the meaning of light verbs constructions?

Not surprisingly, I am not the first person to ask these questions. Wierzbicka (1982) carefully studied which deverbal nouns can be a complement in *have a V* expressions and she also briefly mentions how *take a V* constructions compare to *have a V* constructions. She proposes the following semantic formula to predict whether a *take a V* construction is licensed or not.

- (7) X took a V =  
 At moment  $t$ ,  $X$  moved some parts of his/her body  
 because X wanted to do something for a short time which would cause him/her to  
 feel or know something  
 X was doing it not because he/she wanted anything to happen to anything other  
 than him/herself  
 X could do it again

However, her formula seems to give incorrect predictions for several sentences.

- (8) a. [...] he crammed so many interesting ideas, I think it's well worth just **taking a listen** to. (COCA, 1996, SPOK, NPR\_Weekend)  
 b. I **took a walk** in the mountains.  
 c. Grandpa Nick **took a fall** today. (COCA, 2010, FIC, Storyworks)

(8a) should not be licensed as, according to her, *listening* does not entail any movement of the body. (8b), on the other hand, does not entail that one was walking only for a short time, and (8c) does not entail that *Grandpa Nick* wanted to fall.

To address some of the problems of her analysis, I am therefore taking a slightly different and more data-driven approach. I extract LVCs from a large corpus and group them based on the semantic class of the verb corresponding to the deverbal noun within the construction. For each of these classes, I analyze the semantic contribution of *take* within the class and try to explain the differences between verbs that can be part of *take a V* constructions and the ones that cannot (§3). Based on these individual analyses, I propose some generalizations that seem to hold across multiple semantic classes (§4).

## 2 Data collection

In order to identify semantic classes of verbs whose members can be part of LVCs of the form *take a V*, I consulted a large corpus of written text. I started by extracting all deverbal nouns that are tagged as a verb and a noun in the Penn Treebank (Marcus *et al.*, 1993). Using this list, I extracted all sentences from the English Gigaword corpus that contain a

*take a V* construction with one of the deverbal nouns. Then, I parsed all the extracted sentences to the English Universal Dependencies representation (de Marneffe *et al.*, 2014). I then extracted all direct objects from the parsed sentences and removed all sentences whose direct object was not in the list of deverbal nouns. The main purpose of parsing and filtering the list of sentences was to get rid of sentences that contain phrases such as *took a crash course* where *crash* is indeed a deverbal noun but in this case a part of the compound *crash course* and therefore not relevant for my analysis. I then ranked the list of possible direct objects by frequency and manually examined all 177 objects that appeared more than a 100 times as a complement of *take* in the Gigaword corpus. I removed all the objects that I did not consider to be complements in light verb constructions, resulting in a list of 37 deverbal nouns. I mapped all of these deverbal nouns to their corresponding Levin verb class (Levin, 1993) and identified several verb classes with multiple verbs whose corresponding deverbal noun can be part of an LVC of the form *take a V*. These classes served as the starting point for my analysis in the next section. For the discussion of the individual semantic classes, I also searched for examples in COCA and the web as many of them do not appear in formal written text and the Gigaword corpus does not contain any informal genres.

### 3 Semantic Classes

#### 3.1 Active perception verbs

The most consistent semantic class of verbs is the class of *peer* verbs (Levin, 1993, 30.3) which includes verbs such as *look*, *stare*, *listen*, and *sniff*. This seems to be the only verb class for which one can find *take a V* constructions with all its members<sup>1</sup>, some of which are exemplified in the following sentences.

- (9) She **took a look** at my shoes and winced.

(COCA, 2012, FIC, Bk:WickedCityZephyr)

- (10) [...] he crammed so many interesting ideas, I think it's well worth just **taking a listen** to.

(COCA, 1996, SPOK, NPR\_Weekend)

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<sup>1</sup>Not all of them appear in COCA but you get many results for all of them on the web.

(11) I **took a stare** at an old woman and she stared back!

(<http://www.actiontracker.org.uk/actions/view/544/>)

However, also within this class there seem to be two subclasses of verbs of which one of them is more likely to appear in LVCs than the other. The first subclass consists of verbs such as *look*, *glance*, *squint*, *peek*, *sniff* and *listen* and the second subclass consists of verbs such as *glare*, *gawk*, and *stare*. Part of the difference between these two subclasses can be explained by the frequency of the corresponding verb as a verb such as *look* and *listen* are used a lot more frequently than verbs such as *glare* and *gawk*. Frequency alone, however, cannot explain why *take a squint* occurs more frequently than *take a stare* as verbal forms of *stare* occur about a magnitude more often in COCA than verbal forms of *squint*.

I believe the main the difference between these two classes can be explained by looking at the contribution of *take* to the meaning of these verbs. Wierzbicka (1982) notes that a construction of the form *take a V* often gives rise to the implicature that the action was performed only for a short amount of time and therefore sentences such as (12) seem unnatural as they imply that someone looked at something for a long time.

(12) ? I took a look at the problem for hours but I still haven't figured it out.

However, I claim that *take a V* constructions with *peer* verbs do not only give rise to the implicature that something was done for a short amount of time but also that the amount of attention given to the object that one looks at/listens to/etc. is relatively low. This creates a contradiction in LVCs with verbs such as *glare* and *stare* which imply that one pays very close attention to something, even if it is only for a very short amount of time. Verbs such as *look* and *listen*, on the other hand, do not imply anything like that and some of them, e.g., *glance*, even imply the opposite and therefore they appear more frequently in LVCs headed by *take*.

Another interesting observation is that LVCs with all of the *peer* verbs are used most of the time as imperatives. In these constructions, the contribution of *take* seems to be mainly pragmatic. As Stein (1991) noted, sentences such as the ones in (13) have a different illocutionary force than the sentences in (14).

- (13) a. Look!  
b. Listen!

- (14) a. Take a look!  
b. Take a listen!

The examples in (13) are only acceptable as a command in an emergency situation while the examples in (14) are considered to be a more polite invitation to look at or listen to something. This also explains why some of these verbs can only be used as imperatives when they are a part of an LVCs as in (15b) but not on their own as in (15a).

- (15) a. ? Glance (at our top rated funds)!  
b. Take a glance (at our top rated funds)!

(Adapted from COCA, 1995, MAG, Fortune)

(15b) is licensed because it is meaningful to invite someone to take a brief look at something while it is hard to imagine a situation in which someone would command someone else to only *glance* at something as in (15a).

### 3.2 *Run verbs*

The second semantic class of which many of its members can be part of LVCs of the form *take a V* is the class of *run verbs* (Levin, 1993, 51.3.2) which includes verbs such as *run*, *walk*, *hike*, *stroll*, *tiptoe* but also verbs such as *swim*, *jump*, *bounce*, and *fly*. This class is a lot larger and contains in total 124 verbs, and, as indicated by the examples that I mentioned, its members are a lot more heterogeneous than the ones of the *peer* verb class. Further, there are also a lot of verbs whose derived deverbal nouns cannot be part of a LVC headed by *take*.

- (16) \* She took a speed.  
(17) \* He took a tiptoe.  
(18) \* They took a fly.

At the same time, verbs that describe a range of activities can be part of LVCs.

- (19) a. take a **walk/stroll/hike/drift/promenade/tramp/trek**

- b. take a **run/jog/dash/dart**
- c. take a **climb**
- d. take a **swim/float**
- (20) take a **jump/hop/leap/bound/somersault/bounce/carom**
- (21) take a **lurch**

We can again look at the contribution of *take* to the meaning of LVCs with nouns derived from verbs in this semantic class. However, unlike it was the case with the *peer* verbs, adding *take* does not seem to have the same effect on all verbs in this class. For most of them, including all the examples in (19), *take* seems to add unspecified temporal bounds to the activity. All of the verbs in (19) describe activities which are therefore atelic events but when they are used in a LVC headed by *take* they seem to be bounded. While it does not seem to be possible to apply one of the most common diagnostics for telicity to these LVCs as shown in (22), the fact that (23b) is not licensed indicates that *took a walk* implies that one is no longer taking a walk. Without *take*, such a description seems to be acceptable as illustrated in (23a).

- (22) ? I took a walk in an hour.
- (23) a. I already walked for an hour and I will walk some more.
- b. \* I already took a walk for an hour and I will take a walk some more.

The verbs in (20) all seem to be semelfactives. In constructions with the corresponding deverbal nouns, the main contribution to the LVC by *take* seems to be to state explicitly that the event happens or happened only once and not repeatedly.

- (24) The ball **took a bounce** [...] (Franlyn Thomas, *The Fab 5*, p. 142)

- (25) The ball **took a carom** off the wall [...] (<http://m.mlb.com/cutfour/2015/09/09/148217968>)

The phrase *take a lurch* only seems to appear with vehicles such as cars or ships as subjects, and in these cases, *take* seems to imply that there is some external causation such as an action by the driver or weather conditions that cause the vehicle to lurch.

(26) [...] when the jeep **took a lurch**. (COCA, 2002, FIC, Ploughshares)

It seems to be very hard to exactly define the differences between the verbs in this class that can be part of a LVC and the ones that cannot. In general, it seems as if all verbs that describe a certain manner of *taking a walk* or *taking a run* such as *stroll* or *jog* can be part of LVCs. Verbs that describe types or manners of locomotion which are unlikely to be the form of movement when someone takes a walk or takes a run such as *tiptoe*, *toddle*, and *zigzag*, on the other hand, are generally not part of LVCs. Further, verbs that describe similar sportive activities, such as *swim* and *climb* also can be part of LVCs. Also, all semelfactives in this class seem to be able to be part of an LVC. The fact that *lurch* can be part of a LVC seems to be idiosyncratic as there are no other verbs within this semantic class that can be part of an LVC and that behave in a similar way.

All the constructions in (19) can also be used as imperatives and the effect of adding *take* to the verb is the same as with the *peer* verbs, namely it turns a command as in (27a) into an invitation to do something as in (27b).

- (27) a. Run!  
b. Take a run!

Most of the constructions in (20) can also be used as imperatives which again has the effect of turning a command into an invitation. However, *take a bounce* and *take a carom* are primarily used with inanimate subjects and therefore it seems unnatural to use them as imperatives.

*Take a lurch* is also primarily used with inanimate subjects and also cannot be used as an imperative.

### 3.3 *take a hit*

The light verb constructions that I discussed in the previous two sections all take agentive subjects. However, there also exists a limited number of constructions in which *take* has the effect of passivizing the verb and turning a verb that typically takes an agentive subject into a phrase whose subject is the patient. The by far most frequently used construction is *take a hit* but occasionally such a construction also appears with other deverbal nouns such as *knock*.



- (28) Even though we might **take a hit** with our economy [...]  
(COCA, 2012, SPOK, Fox\_Kilmeade)
- (29) I used to get horrendous bruising when I used to **take a knock**, and a blood vessel burst, [...]  
(COCA, 2007, SPOK, ABC\_PrimeTime)

*Hit* and *knock* are both members of the class of *hit* verbs (Levin, 1993, 18.1) and at the same time also members of the class of *thud* verbs (Levin, 1993, 18.4) and therefore the following sentences with agentive subjects (a) and with instruments as subjects (b) are possible.

- (30) a. Paula hit the stick against the window.  
b. The stick hit against the window. (Levin (1993))
- (31) a. Paula knocked the stick against the fence.  
b. The stick knocked against the fence.

One possible interpretation of this observation is that these verbs are more flexible in terms of agentivity than other verbs of contact and therefore more likely to appear in an LVC that does not explicitly express the agent. However, considering that the majority of uses of this phrase expresses that the economy or some economic indicator are performing poorly, this type of expression might also be entirely idiomatic.

None of these expressions can be used as imperatives which is not surprising as the subject of these expressions is always non-agentive.

### 3.4 Sports expressions

Another interesting class of phrases are constructions that are primarily used in reporting about sports events.

- (32) An Australian fielder runs to **take a catch**.  
(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caught>)
- (33) Most often, they are told to **take a pitch** when the count is 3–0.  
([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary\\_of\\_baseball\\_\(T\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary_of_baseball_(T)))

At a first glance, these expressions also appear to be light verb constructions. However, all of them actually are specific game moves limited to a specific type of sport, e.g., to *take a pitch* can only be used in baseball and means that the batter decides not to swing a pitch<sup>2</sup>. These expressions therefore seem to be completely idiosyncratic and should probably not be considered light verb constructions. For this reason, it does not seem to make sense to consider these constructions in a more general discussion of LVCs.

### 3.5 *take a fall*

A further class of LVCs headed by *take* contain the deverbal noun *fall* or other nouns that describe a “falling” event such as *tumble* or *plunge*.

(34) Grandpa Nick **took a fall** today. (COCA, 2010, FIC, Storyworks)

(35) She **took a tumble** over a tree root and lost her pack. (COCA, 2009, FIC, Bk:DeepDown)

All of these verbs are a member of the class of *advance* verbs (Levin, 1993, 51.1) and at the same time also a member of the class of *decrease* verbs (Levin, 1993, 45.6) but almost no other verbs<sup>3</sup> from either of these classes seem to form LVCs with *take*. Apart from the fact that the other verbs do not describe a “falling” event there does not seem to be any semantic property that would separate the verbs that can be part of LVCs from the ones that cannot.

Further, in these constructions, *take* does not seem to contribute any meaning and *to take a fall* is identical in meaning to *to fall*.

Another interesting observation is that *fall* and its related verbs are unaccusative verbs. Most of the *run* verbs and all of the active perception verbs imply that the subject is volitional but in the case of *fall* and also in the case of *take a fall* the subject seems to have the patient role. But at the same time, *take a fall* is also different from *take a hit* as only in the latter case *take* changes the semantic role of the subject from agent to patient.

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<sup>2</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary\\_of\\_baseball\\_\(T\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary_of_baseball_(T))

<sup>3</sup>The only two other verbs which belong to either of these classes and appear in *take a V* constructions are *climb* which I already discussed above and *leave*. *Leave*, however, seems to be a special case on its own as *taking a leave* describes the state of being on leave rather than the event of leaving.

### 3.6 *snooze* verbs

Most of the deverbal nouns that were derived from members of the *snooze* verb class (Levin, 1993, 40.4) can also be part of light verb constructions. This verb class contains the verbs *snooze*, *nap*, *doze*, *catnap*, *slumber*, *sleep* and *drowse*, and, with the exception of the last two, all of them seem to appear in LVCs.

(36) He **took a nap**.

(37) I **took a snooze**.

(38) Chances are high they came in late Fall and **took a slumber** for awhile.  
([www.city-data.com/forum/house/1226484-all-sudden-i-have-huge-ant.html](http://www.city-data.com/forum/house/1226484-all-sudden-i-have-huge-ant.html))

(39) He then smoked a pipe with great gravity, drank sherbet, and **took a doze**, [...]  
(Joseph Wolff, *Travels and Adventures of the Rev. Joseph Wolff*, p.185)

With these verbs, the use of the *take a V* frame again seems to imply that the event lasted for an unspecified but limited amount of time which is not implied when the verb is used on its own. These constructions also seem to imply that the event was volitional. Further, they can again be used as imperatives to invite someone to take a nap/snooze/etc.

The remaining question is why *\*take a sleep* and *\*take a drowse* are not licensed. Wierzbicka (1982) claims the difference between *sleep* and *nap* is that one is not entirely unconscious when one *takes a nap* and therefore a nap is also controllable. However, I disagree with her judgement that someone who takes a nap is necessarily conscious and further her argument does not explain why *\*take a drowse* is not licensed. Nevertheless, I also believe that control plays a role in the explanation of this contrast. *Sleeping* and *drowsing* describe states of consciousness over which one has only limited control – just because one wants to sleep does not mean one can sleep and just because one does not want to sleep one cannot necessarily stay awake. *Napping*, *snoozing*, *dozing* and *slumbering*, on the other hand, all seem to imply a certain degree of volitionality<sup>4</sup> and they only seem to be used when one wants to express that he or she had control over his or her state of consciousness. As *take* in LVCs with *snooze* verbs seems to reinforce volition this does not seem to be compatible with the deverbal nouns *sleep* and *drowse*.

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<sup>4</sup>*Dozing off* is arguably not volitional but without *off*, *doze* describes a volitional event in my opinion.

### 3.7 Chew verbs

Finally, let me turn to LVCs with deverbal nouns derived from members of the *chew* verb class (Levin, 1993, 39.2). This class consists of verbs such as *chew*, *chomp*, *crunch*, *lick*, *pick*, *slurp*, and *suck*, many of which can appear in LVCs headed by *take*.

(40) She **took a bite**.

(41) [...] and Cheryl **took a chomp** of the carrot herself [...]  
(COCA, 2007, FIC, NewEnglandRev)

(42) [...] then **took a lick** of the yogurt.  
(COCA, 2005, FIC, Bk:YearPleasures)

(43) [...] something that looked like orange soda. I popped the membrane and **took a suck**.  
(COCA, 2009, FIC, Analog)

These expressions are particularly interesting because unlike all the other light verb constructions they imply that the agent actually takes (in) an actual object and therefore these expressions seem to be the only ones in which *take* retains part of its literal meaning. At the same time, however, these constructions are also different from a regular *take a NP* construction as the objects, e.g., a bite, only exist because of the event that is described by the corresponding verb of the deverbal noun. For example, *to take a bite* implies that someone is biting a piece off something edible which becomes *the bite* which is taken in by the agent. So in these cases, the meaning of the LVC is roughly the composition of a *chew* verb and *take in*.

This also carries over to imperatives. Unlike it was the case with all the other LVCs that I discussed, the contribution of *take* to the meaning of imperatives is not solely pragmatic but it combines the meaning of the phrase in a non-imperative context and the pragmatic effect of inviting someone to do something. For example, the utterance “*Take a bite!*” implicates that the speaker invites the listener to bite a piece off something and ingest this piece.

The decomposition of the meaning of these phrases also explains the difference between deverbal nouns derived from *chew* verbs that can be part of LVCs and the ones that cannot. All the *chew* verbs that can imply that the product of the activity is a certain quantity removed from the incremental theme can be part of a LVC. These verbs include among

others *bite*, *nibble*, *slurp* and *suck*. Verbs such as *crunch* or *gnaw*, on the other hand, do not imply such a thing and therefore also cannot be used as part of an LVC. There also exist some exceptions in this verb class. For example, the expression *take a chew* is licensed but it has the proverbial meaning of *chewing tobacco*. Further, *take a pick* is also licensed but in this case *pick* is not interpreted as the activity of ingestion of grains by birds but instead as a choice. The other verbs in this class seem to behave exactly as expected by my analysis.

## 4 Generalizations across classes

After having discussed the contribution to the meaning of *take* to LVCs of the form *take a V* for each verb class individually, I will now try to formulate several generalizations that hold across the individual classes. For this analysis, I exclude the sports expressions from section 3.4, the “*take a hit*” expressions from section 3.3, the “*take a fall*” expressions from section 3.5, and the phrase *take a lurch* from section 3.2 as all of these constructions seem to behave very differently from all the other LVCs and at the same time make up only a small fraction of all the possible LVCs. This leaves us with the LVCs made up of *take* and a deverbal noun derived from one of the following verb classes.

- *peer* verbs
- *run* verbs (except for *lurch*)
- *snooze* verbs
- *chew* verbs

### 4.1 Imperatives

The first generalization that we can observe across all classes is that the LVCs can be used as imperatives and that the pragmatic effect of using an LVC instead of a bare imperative is the same. In all the cases the bare imperative is either not even licensed or considered to be very impolite unless uttered in an emergency situation. The effect of *take* is that it turns the command into a more polite invitation to perform the mentioned action.

## 4.2 Optional properties

Apart from the behavior regarding imperatives, there does not seem to be any other generalization that holds true for all LVCs headed by *take*. However, there still seem to be properties that are true for many of these LVCs. I therefore pick up the idea by Butt (2010) to define a set of potential but non-essential properties of LVCs along the lines of Dowty's (1991) Proto-role entailments.

**Volition** In many cases LVCs headed by *take* have a volitional subject. This is particularly true for LVCs with deverbal nouns derived from *peer*, *snooze* and *chew* verbs, but also true for most of the deverbal nouns derived from *run* verbs. Only some of the constructions with nouns derived from verbs such as *bounce* do not seem to require volitional subjects as it is the case in (44), repeated from (24).

(44) The ball **took a bounce** [...] (Franlyn Thomas, *The Fab 5*, p. 142)

**Limited attention and brevity** As discussed in section 3.1, the LVCs with nouns derived from *peer* verbs seem to imply most of the time that the agent only directs part of his or her attention to the object or sound that is being perceived. This only seems to be true for constructions with nouns derived from *peer* verbs as for all the other classes attention does not really play an important role. The implication of performing only a brief action, however, also seems to be entailed by most constructions with nouns derived from *chew* and *snooze* verbs which imply most of the time that the agent only ingested very little or slept or dozed only for a short period of time.

**Temporal boundedness** Another common property of LVCs headed by *take* is that they describe an activity that lasts for an unspecified but limited amount of time. This is especially true for many of the constructions with nouns derived from *run* verbs such as *take a walk* or *take a stroll* but this also seems to be true for many of the constructions with nouns derived from *snooze* verbs.

**Non-repetition** As I discussed above, several of the verbs which can be derived to be a complement of *take* are semelfactives. In these cases, *take* always seems to imply that the event happens only once and not repeatedly. This seems to be true for expressions such as *take a jump* but also for expressions such as *take a bite* which imply that the agent bites only once into the incremental theme.

**Intake of comestibles or sensory information** For the constructions with nouns derived from *chew* verbs, the use of *take* also implies the intake of a small amount of comestibles which becomes only defined by performing the action. Constructions with nouns derived from *peer* verbs imply the intake of sensory information and at least from a constructivist’s point of view the information also does not exist independent of the perceiving event.

## 5 Conclusion

In this project, I compiled an exhaustive list of light verb constructions using several large corpora. Further, I discussed a wide range of classes of deverbal nouns that appear in light verb constructions of the form *take a V*. I described the contributions of *take* to the meaning of the LVC for each class and also tried to explain why some verbs within the discussed classes cannot be derived to deverbal nouns that can be part of LVCs. Finally, I also discussed properties of LVCs that seem to be shared by LVCs across classes. My preliminary analysis shows that there are constructions of the form *take a V* that seem to be primarily idiosyncratic but at the same time there also seems to be a large collection of LVCs that have many shared properties. Lastly, my analysis also shows that for most semantic classes, lexical-semantic properties of its members can be used to predict whether a derived deverbal noun can be part of an LVC or not.

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