Taking a closer look at function verbs: Lexicon, grammar, or both?

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1. Introduction

There are several ways in which a reference grammar of a language may incorporate information that is traditionally relegated to the lexicon. First, the grammar can make reference to lexical categories – parts of speech – and subcategories, e.g. formally circumscribed semantic classes. Second, for many lexical items the boundary between “content words” (which are only listed in the lexicon) and “function words” (whose meanings and functions, in traditional grammar writing, are described in the grammar) is difficult to draw. The gradient nature of the distinction between lexical and grammatical elements has long been recognised by functionally-oriented linguists, especially those with an interest in grammaticalisation (e.g. Bybee 1985; Lehmann 1995), and recently even by formally-oriented linguists (cf. e.g. the contributions in Corver and Riemsdijk 2001). For example, it appears entirely justified to treat in a reference grammar function verbs, i.e. closed (sub)classes of verbs which are used productively to form periphrastic predicates, generic nominals which can serve a classificatory function (cf. e.g. Dixon 1982a; Wilkins 2000), or so-called discourse particles, since all of these play an important role in how a particular language is actually used.

In this paper, I concentrate on function verbs (or “light verbs”) as an example of a category on the boundary between lexicon and grammar. In many languages, function verb constructions are very frequent, and – to use Sapir’s term – are an important part of the “genius” of the language, and need to be considered by anybody – whether language learner or linguist – who wants to get a realistic idea of how the language functions.

Function verbs not only occupy an intermediate position between content words and function words, but the description of their use also often has to make reference to lexical semantic (sub)classes of the elements they
combine with to form complex predicates. Both of these issues are brought out quite clearly in Dixon’s (1991: 336–362) discussion of the English verbs give, have, and take, which are employed as function verbs (or in his terms, “secondary verbs”) in complex predicates of the type have a walk, have a stroke of something, give a laugh, give something a stroke, take a walk, or take a sniff of something.

Thus, function verbs are independent verbs which can be used both as regular simple predicates and as parts of complex predicates. As such, they are clearly lexical items, not just grammatical items, but on the other hand they may fulfil functions that are often fulfilled by bona fide grammatical elements in other languages.

It is precisely because of this status and their role in complex predicate formation that function verbs have been the subject of considerable theoretical interest in recent years, as shown by a number of papers, theses and monographs that have been published on the topic (see Section 2.3 for some references). However, in most reference grammars of the languages that feature in these studies, or languages with a similar structure, the role of function verbs has not received the same amount of attention. Although one might expect that the intermediate status of function verbs would lead to an exhaustive coverage of their functions both in grammars and dictionaries of a given language, more often than not this is not the case. Rather, as Dixon (1991: 337) notes for English, function verbs often only receive marginal attention in reference grammars.

Similar remarks can be made for dictionaries – insofar as a dictionary exists for the language in question; as we know, this not the case for many languages of the world, since even linguists who advocate the documentation of small or endangered language often give very low priority to the production, let alone publication, of dictionaries. To the extent that they are accessible, dictionaries rarely provide systematic information on the complex lexicalised expressions formed with function verbs, either in the form of exhaustive listing, or in providing (in the entry of the function verb in question) the semantic generalisations that govern the formation of such expressions. Thus, the remarks of Hacker (1958), referring to the treatment of Hindi function verbs (here termed “auxiliaries”) in grammars and dictionaries, have lost nothing of their relevance:

In den Grammatiken sind die Hilfsverben sehr unzulänglich behandelt. Die Angaben sind nicht nur unvollständig, sondern oft auch ungenau, irreführend oder geradezu falsch. (…) Nur wenig Material konnte aus Wörterbüchern geschöpft werden. (…) Im allgemeinen konnten die Wörterbücher nur zur Feststellung der Bedeutungen isolierter Wörter benutzt werden. [In the
grammars, the auxiliaries are treated very insufficiently. The statements are not only incomplete, but often also unprecise, misleading or downright wrong ... Only little material could be taken from dictionaries. ... Generally, the dictionaries could only be used to determine the meaning of isolated words.] (Hacker 1958: 184–196, translation mine, ESB)

In this paper, I will argue that these elements deserve a closer look in grammar writing, and provide some suggestions of how this could be achieved. The paper is structured as follows.

In Section 2, a working definition of function verbs is provided and illustrated with examples from different languages. In Section 3, I review the treatment of function verbs in reference grammars of languages where they are known to play an important role, and put forward some suggestions as to how their role could be more adequately captured. I also argue for a broad conception of “grammar” which licences, from a theoretical perspective, the incorporation of function verbs (and other lexical items with a similar status) in grammatical descriptions. Some conclusions are offered in Section 4.

2. Function verbs: definition and illustration

2.1. A working definition

The term “light verb” was coined for English light verbs by Jespersen ([1942] 1961: 117f.) and more recently is gaining currency in application to languages of other families; it corresponds to what Dixon (1991: 88) has called “secondary verb”. The term Funktionsverb (‘function verb’) is prevalent in the German linguistic tradition, with Funktionsverbgefüge (‘function verb structure’) or Zusammengesetztes Verb (‘compound verb’) for the complex predicate. In writing on Indian languages, the terms “explicator verb” and “vector verb” are particularly common, although the terms “aspectual verb” and “auxiliary verb” are also found. The term “auxiliary” is also commonly used by Australianists to describe a similar phenomenon.

In this paper, the terms “function verb” and “light verb” will be applied interchangeably to the verbal element in complex predicates of the type give a laugh (the term “light verb” is used in particular to avoid proliferation of the word “function” in a single sentence or paragraph). Complex predicates, in turn, are defined as monoclusal constructions involving two predicative elements which jointly contribute to the valency of the complex
The term “host” will be used as a cover term for the other constituent in complex predicates of this type, in order to avoid the question of which constituent should be regarded as the head or “main predicate” in these constructions.

More specifically, for the purposes of this paper, “function verbs” will be defined as forms which:

a) are members of the class of verbs and as such may be used as simple predicates in independent clauses
b) are productively used to form complex predicates with members of an open lexical (“host”) category (e.g. verb, nominal, ideophone …)
c) in the resulting complex predicate, carry all or most of the verbal inflections that are also found on verbs as simple predicates (if any)
d) are subject to collocational restrictions in their combination with host elements
e) are semantically “light” (while the host carries the main semantic weight in the complex predicate).

This definition, obviously, assumes that a category of verbs can be defined in a language (Criterion a). Moreover, the definition excludes phonologically null elements. It thus conflicts with theoretical approaches which consider a (potentially empty) light verb slot to be part of the basic clause structure in all languages. Likewise excluded are morphemes which are known or likely to have originated from independent verbs but can no longer be used as main verbs, such as the “verbal classifiers” of Gooniyandi (McGregor 1990, 2002) and the three auxiliaries of Wambaya (Nordlinger 1998).

Criterion (b) requires that the function verb productively combines with members of an open lexical class, e.g. nominals or open classes of preverb-like or ideophone-like elements. Complex predicates formed with e.g. preverbs from a closed class, as found in many Indo-European languages, are thus excluded. This criterion is also intended to capture the distinction between productively formed complex predicates and idiomatic phrases, difficult as it may be to draw in practice. Possible syntactic correlates of productivity – depending on the language and the type of complex predicate in question – include the potential for negation and passivisation (cf. Kachru 1987: 375 for Hindi).

While criterion (c) requires the function verb to carry verbal inflections if available in the language in question, in principle, the definition does not exclude combinations of a function verb and another, lexical, verb. Thus, the term “function verb” could also refer to semantically “light” verbs in a
serial verb construction of the type described for Kalam (Pawley 1993). This holds even if they are not formally distinguished from the other verbs in the construction (either because all constituents in the construction inflect for the same categories, or because none of them inflect). For practical purposes rather than for theoretical reasons, the scope of this paper is limited to function verbs which can be formally distinguished from the elements with which they are in combination by the presence vs. absence of certain inflections that correspond either to a finiteness distinction or to a part of speech distinction in the language in question.

In many grammatical descriptions, function verbs are referred to as “auxiliaries”, or as semi-auxiliaries half-way on a grammaticalisation chain between full verbs and auxiliaries (Hopper and Traugott 1993: 108–114). Function verbs can, however, be distinguished from true auxiliaries by criterion (d) above, since the term “auxiliary”, at least in the usage of most linguists, is restricted to those items which are part of an inflectional paradigm of a given part of speech and can be used with all, or at least a clearly defined subset, of its members, more or less independently of semantic considerations (but consider Heine 1993: 70 for a less restricted definition). This criterion still does not define a watertight boundary between function verbs and auxiliaries, even though some authors (e.g. Butt and Geuder 2001) have recently argued for a strict separation of these categories. A good example is the much-discussed auxiliary selection (i.e. the choice between the equivalents of ‘have’ and ‘be’ – with undisputed auxiliary status – in some Romance and Germanic languages), which is sensitive to a single semanto-syntactic component of the verb, its agentivity (or “unaccusativity”). One could regard auxiliaries and function verbs as the periphrastic counterparts of inflectional and derivational morphology, respectively, for which the distinction is also generally possible but in many individual cases fraught with difficulties.

Another problem of definition arises where a single “dummy” verb – usually one with a general action meaning (‘do’) – is used extensively in complex predicate formation. In most authors’ usage, this type of verb also falls under the definition of “light verb” (although the term “auxiliary” is also employed). In these cases, it is more difficult to speak of collocational restrictions between the verb and the host, as required by criterion (d) above, since the function verb is not in semantic opposition to other function verbs. However, the light verb in this case is often still lexically restricted, in its occurrence, to certain subclasses of host. This is the case e.g. in Kanuri (Hutchison 1981: 90–111), where the “dummy verb” is obligatory with items of a certain lexical class (“verbs 2”), but does not form part
of the paradigm of the regular class of verbs ("verbs 1"). This type of light verb will not be considered in this paper.

Criterion (e), requiring function verbs to be semantically "light", is perhaps the most problematic, since in practice, it may prove difficult to distinguish function verbs from "ordinary", "heavy" verbs, except perhaps in the case of those languages (e.g. some Australian languages) where function verbs form a distinct part of speech category. The difficulty of defining and delimiting the class of function verbs in a language is also reflected in the practice of grammar writing: often, no clear indication of the number and type of function verbs is provided in a grammar. Rather, in one grammar after the other, one finds expressions like "verbs such as …", "the verbs … among others" or "the verbs most frequently used are …", followed by a fairly restricted list of perhaps 5-10 items. In other cases, reference grammars of one and the same language make contradictory statements about the size of the class. For example, Heidolph et al. (1972: 74–78) list 13 function verbs for German, but indicate that they do not wish to draw a strict line between function verbs and auxiliaries. Griesbach et al. (1986: 280–287), on the other hand, list around two hundred function verbs, and Engel (1996: 407), likewise, speaks of more than a hundred function verbs occurring in construction with an object noun phrase. In section 3.3 below it will be suggested that the frequency and productivity of a verb in complex predicate formation may be a more reliable indicator of its status than the semantic criterion alone. Moreover, at least for languages with nominal hosts, semantic weight also has a syntactic correlate. In true function verb expressions, unlike in ordinary noun-verb collocations, the host cannot be pronominalised (e.g. saying she took it rather than she took a walk), since the semantic weight of the light verb is not sufficient (cf. e.g. Helbig and Buscha 2001: 88).

For the purposes of the present paper, the scope of the discussion will be limited to verbs which are semantically general in the sense that they do not have a semantic predisposition to be complement-taking predicates; this excludes modal verbs such as want and phasal predicates such as begin. Some examples of those function verbs that fall under the scope of this paper are provided in the following section.

2.2. Some examples

Function verbs are an important feature in many European languages, but also in Iranian languages, Indian languages of both Indo-Aryan and Dravidian subgroups, East Asian languages such as Japanese, Korean, and Chi-
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Hence, and Northern Australian languages. Here, I can only give examples from a few of these language groups.

Most research on function verbs has been undertaken on European languages, notably English and other West Germanic languages (cf. e.g. Persson 1975; Yuan 1986; von Polenz 1987; Koo 1997: 68-79; Van Pottelberge 2001 for German; and Dixon 1982b, 1991: Ch. 11; Wierzbicka 1982, and Cattell 1984, for English). English function verbs were briefly illustrated in Section 1. In German, two types of function verb constructions can be distinguished, one with a deverbal nominal, and the other with a prepositional phrase involving a deverbal nominal. The latter type is illustrated in (1). In (1a), the function verb kommen ‘come’ is used in an inchoative interpretation. As the contrast between (1a) and (1b) shows, the verbs kommen ‘come’ and bringen ‘bring’ occur with the same host, with a concomitant change in transitivity. Moreover, the two complex expressions in (1a) and (1b) contrast with the simple verb (1c); this is true for many but by no means all function verb expressions in German (cf. Eisenberg 1994: 309).

(1) a. und da jetzt kommt (...) die ganze Action
   and there now come:PRS.3SG DEF whole action
   eigentlich erst ins Rollen
   really only into:DEF roll:ACTNOM
   ‘and there now the whole action really only gets under way’ (lit.: ‘comes to roll’) (Kölnkorpus: “Polanski” [conversation about a movie])

   b. wir haben da die Sache erstmal
   we AUX:PRS.1PL there DEF thing first
   ins Rollen bringen müssen
   into:DEF roll:ACTNOM bring:INF must:INF
   ‘we had to get things going first’ (lit.: ‘bring the thing to roll’) (Kölnkorpus: “Tasso”)

   c. der Ball rollte langsam ins Tor
   DEF ball roll:PST:3SG slowly into:DEF goal
   ‘the ball rolled slowly into the goal’ (constructed)
Iranian languages such as Persian and Kurdish rely very heavily on function verb constructions. In fact, it has been argued that (simple) verbs in these languages form a small class or even a closed class: Consequently, most light verb constructions do not have simple verb counterparts. Karimi (1997: 276) states that the number of verbs in contemporary Persian does not exceed 115, of which many are infrequent. Haig (2000) argues that verbs in Kurdish are a closed class, and presents the result of a text count according to which 60 verbs account for over 96% of all verb tokens.

Examples (2) and (3) illustrate complex predicates involving a light verb and a nominal host in Persian. (Persian, like German, in addition has function verbs constructions involving a prepositional phrase). Again, more than one light verb may appear with the same host, and the choice of light verb influences transitivity. The contrast between (2) and (3) also shows that more than one light verb can be used both in transitive and in intransitive complex predicates, depending on the lexical semantics of the host (cf. also Goldberg 1996).

(2) a. Pezešk mæriz-ro šæfa dad
   doctor patient-OBJ cure give.PAST.3SG
   ‘The doctor cured the patient’ (Megerdoomian 2002: 69)

   b. mæriz šæfa yaft
   patient cure find.PAST.3SG
   ‘The patient was cured’ (Megerdoomian 2002: 69)

(3) a. Hušæng Nader-ro gul zæd
   Hushang Nader-OBJ deceit hit.PAST.3SG
   ‘Hushang deceived Nader’ (Megerdoomian 2002: 68)

   b. Nader gul xord
   Nader deceit eat.PAST.3SG
   ‘Nader was deceived’ (Megerdoomian 2002: 68)

It is well known that function verbs are also prominent as an areal feature in South Asian languages of different genealogical affiliation (cf. e.g. Hook 1974, 1991; Abbi 1994: Ch. 3). The large Indo-Aryan languages, like Hindi
and Urdu, have been particularly well studied in this respect (cf. Mohanan 1994, 1997; Butt 1995, 1997; Butt and Geuder 2001).

Urdu has two distinct function verb constructions, one involving an object noun phrase as the host, and the other involving a bare verb stem, that is, a nonfinite form of the verb. Only the latter is illustrated in (4). In Urdu, as in German, complex predicates formed with a light verb often contrast with a simple, finite verb ((4a-c) vs. (4d)), although the number of simple verb also seems to be fairly small; Butt and Geuder (2001: 328) provide an estimate of around 200 verbs.

As in German and Persian, the choice of verb in the complex predicate may serve to express distinctions of transitivity ((4a-b) vs. (4c)). Some of the distinctions expressed by the choice of light verb are not easily captured either in terms of a grammatical feature or in an English translation. The verb de ‘give’ in (4a) simultaneously indicates completion of an action and outward directedness, while le ‘take’ in (4b) expresses completion and lack of outward direction (e.g. in the case that the action is performed for the actor’s own benefit) (Butt and Geuder 2001).

(4) a. \( N\, a\, d\, y\, a\, a\, ^{\, e\, n\, e} \quad x\, a\, t \quad l\, i\, k^{b} \quad d\, i\, i\, -y\, a \)
\( N\, a\, d\, y\, a\, =E\, R\, G \quad l\, e\, t\, e\, r\, .M.NOM \quad w\, r\, i\, t\, e\,(N\, F\, I\, N) \quad g\, i\, v\, e-P\, E\, R\, F.M.SG \)
‘Nadya wrote a letter (completely, for the benefit of someone else)’ (Butt and Geuder 2001: 327)

b. \( N\, a\, d\, y\, a\, a\, ^{\, e\, n\, e} \quad x\, a\, t \quad l\, i\, k^{b} \quad l\, i\, i\, -y\, a \)
\( N\, a\, d\, y\, a\, =E\, R\, G \quad l\, e\, t\, e\, r\, .M.NOM \quad w\, r\, i\, t\, e\,(N\, F\, I\, N) \quad t\, a\, k\, e-P\, E\, R\, F.M.SG \)
‘Nadya wrote a letter (completely)’ (Butt and Geuder 2001: 331)

c. \( v\, o \quad x\, a\, t \quad l\, i\, k^{b} \quad p\, a\, r\,-a a \)
\( 3\, S\, G.NOM \quad l\, e\, t\, e\, r\, .M.NOM \quad w\, r\, i\, t\, e\,(N\, F\, I\, N) \quad f\, a\, l\, l-P\, E\, R\, F.M.SG \)
‘He “fell to” writing a letter’ (Butt and Geuder 2001: 331)

d. \( v\, o \quad x\, a\, t \quad l\, i\, k^{b} a a \)
\( 3\, S\, G.NOM \quad l\, e\, t\, e\, r\, .M.NOM \quad w\, r\, i\, t\, e-P\, E\, R\, F.M.SG \)
‘He wrote a letter’ (Butt and Geuder 2001: 330)

A somewhat different type of light verb construction is an areal feature found in a number of Northern Australian languages, cross-cutting genea-
logical groupings. In these languages, the host element is not a nominal, but comes from an open class of underived predicative elements which will be termed “coverb” here. They constitute a part of speech distinct from both nominals and inflecting verbs (other terms found in the literature include “preverb”, “verbal particle”, and “uninflecting verbs”). Coverbs cannot take verbal inflections or occur as main predicates in independent clauses. Consequently, in these languages, most predicates are complex, and complex predicates usually do not have simple counterparts (although most of the inflecting verbs may be used either as simple verbs or as function verbs). Function verbs of this type in Australian and Papuan languages have also been analysed as event classifiers (e.g. Capell 1979; Silverstein 1986; Schultze-Berndt 2000; McGregor 2002; and Pawley 1969).

The data provided for illustration come from my own fieldwork on Jaminjung, a language belonging to the Jaminjungan or Yirram subgroup of the Mirndi family. In Jaminjung and some other (though not all) Northern Australian languages, as in Persian, inflecting verbs form a small class. In Jaminjung, the verb class (around 35 members) is even smaller than in Persian. As examples (5) and (6) show, more than one function verb can occur with the same host.

(5) a. *gugu-ni=biya wurlmaj nga-wu-ngarna*
   water-ERG/INSTR=now splash.water 1SG>3SG-POT-give
   ‘I will put it (fire) out with water’

   b. *wurlmaj gan-angu*
   splash.water 3SG>3SG-get/handle.PAST
   ‘she put water on her’ (ritual manner of introducing a stranger to a place)

(6) a. *dibird ga-yu langiny-gi*
   be.wound.around 3SG-be.PRS tree-LOC
   ‘(the snake) is wound around a tree’

   b. *dibird=biji yaniny-ma*
   be.wound.around=only IRR:3SG>2SG-hit
   ‘(the rock python won’t bite you), it will only wind itself around you’
c. *dibird nganth-angu ngarrgina*
   be.wound.around  2SG>3SG-get/handle.PAST  1SG.POSS

   *mununggu*
   rope

   ‘you tangled up my fishing line’

The choice of verb may indicate a difference in transitivity (cf. (6a) vs. (6b-c)), but usually, in addition, it reflects other aspects of the event in question. Thus, the verb *-ngarna* ‘give’ in (5a), like its counterpart in Urdu illustrated in (4a), indicates outward directedness of an action, while the verb *-angu* ‘get, handle’ in (5b) and (6c) marks an event as one of physical or metaphorical manipulation, and the verb *-ma* ‘hit’, in one of its uses, can indicate complete affectedness of an undergoer (for more information, see Schultze-Berndt 2000: Ch. 5).

2.3. Properties of function verb constructions

At first sight, the examples of function verbs provided in the preceding subsection look remarkably similar. In particular, in all the languages illustrated, many hosts can combine with more than one function verb. Consequently, the function verb, rather than simply serving as a dummy verb and carrier of the verbal inflections, makes a semantic contribution to the overall expression. For example, a change in light verb may lead to a change in transitivity of the complex predicate.

However, on closer inspection, light verbs play a rather different role in the languages under consideration. The first parameter in which languages may vary is the types of hosts that function verbs may combine with. As we have seen, the hosts may be underived nominals, deverbal nominals, adpositional phrases, or members of a part of speech distinct from both nominals and verbs. Moreover, languages – like most of the languages illustrated in Section 2.2 – may employ more than one type of host in function verb expressions.

The second parameter on which languages differ is the size of the verb class. In some of the languages with function verb constructions, the class of true verbs is quite small, and consequently most predicates are complex predicates which do not alternate with simple verbs. Other correlates of the small class or closed-class status include a scarcity of morphological means for deriving verbs from verbs or from members of other word classes such
as nominals, and the integration of loanwords not as verbs but as members of the host category employed in light verb constructions (this point will be taken up again in Section 3.3). An overview of the similarities and differences between the four languages illustrated in Section 2.2 is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1. Comparison of the functional load of function verbs (FV) structures in four languages**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>German</th>
<th>Urdu</th>
<th>Persian</th>
<th>Jaminjung</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Types of FV constructions</td>
<td>1. PP + FV</td>
<td>1. NP + FV</td>
<td>1. PP + FV</td>
<td>Coverb + FV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. NP + FV</td>
<td>2. V_{nfin} + FV</td>
<td>2. N + FV</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of (inflecting) verbs</td>
<td>open class</td>
<td>open class, but n = 200</td>
<td>closed class, n = 115</td>
<td>closed class, n = 35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple verbs corresponding to FV structures</td>
<td>most</td>
<td>all?/most for type 1, but not type 2</td>
<td>some</td>
<td>none (in independent clauses)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V-V deriving morphology</td>
<td>yes, productive</td>
<td>yes, e.g. causative</td>
<td>yes, e.g. causative</td>
<td>only reflexive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N-V deriving morphology</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>only non-productive</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FVs used to integrate loans</td>
<td>rarely</td>
<td>main strategy</td>
<td>main strategy</td>
<td>only strategy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This brief overview shows that in many languages, in particular in languages with a small class of verbs, function verb constructions are very frequent and have a high functional load. This alone would appear to be a good reason to give them sufficient attention in a reference grammar.

In addition, function verbs are of considerable theoretical interest to linguists in a number of domains. A recurring topic is that of the syntactic properties and appropriate syntactic analysis of the complex predicate formed with function verbs, given its intermediate status between a lexical and a syntactic entity (cf. e.g. Cattell 1984 for English; Butt and Geuder 2001 for English and Urdu; Goldberg 1996, Karimi 1997, Megerdoomian 2002 for Persian; and Nash 1982, McGregor 2002 for several Australian languages). Related to the problem of syntactic analysis is the analysis of the argument sharing (or “argument merger”) between function verb and host (cf. e.g. Butt 1997 for Urdu; Mohanan 1994, 1997 for Hindi; Haig
Another line of research is concerned with the semantics of function verbs (e.g. Hacker 1958 for Hindi; Yuan 1986 for German and Chinese; Wierzbicka 1982, Dixon 1982b, 1991: Ch. 11 for English), as well as their potential for taking on grammatical or semi-grammatical functions, i.e. their possible grammaticalisation chains (e.g. Hook 1991 for Indian languages; von Polenz 1987 for German).

Finally, a number of publications assess the role of function verbs in language contact and areal convergence (e.g. Romaine 1989: 120-164 and Myers-Scotton 1993: 112–116 from the point of view of bilingual interaction in general; Masica 1976: Ch. 5, Abbi 1994: Ch. 3 for Indian languages; Dixon 2001 for Australian languages).

Still, despite the apparent importance of function verbs for the description and analysis of many languages, reference grammars (and to some extent also dictionaries) often contain very little information on these verbs and the complex predicates they are used to form. The treatment of function verbs in reference grammars is the topic of the following section.

3. The treatment of function verbs in reference grammars: Theory and practice

The phrase “theory and practice” in the section heading has at least two different readings. The first concerns the contrast between ideal (“theory”) vs. actual (“practice”) grammatical descriptions: this section contains both a review of the treatment of function verbs in existing reference grammars, and suggestions (which admittedly reflect personal preferences) as to what information might be included “in theory” in an ideal reference grammar.

The second reading of “theory and practice” concerns the relationship between linguistic theory on the one hand, and the practice of grammatical description and documentation on the other hand. It will be argued here that theoretical conceptualisations of grammar and lexicon influence what is included in or omitted from language descriptions. I will also provide the sketch of a model of grammar that provides the theoretical foundation for incorporating, in a reference grammar, information that is often assumed to be “lexical”.

For the purpose of assessing the treatment of function verbs in currently available language descriptions, I surveyed some 40 reference grammars of languages where function verbs of different kinds are known to play an
important role. Both the selection of languages covered and the selection of grammars is eclectic rather than systematic, since the main aim of this paper is not a comprehensive survey of the treatment of function verbs cross-linguistically (which is far beyond its scope), but rather the illustration and discussion of some recurring issues that arise from attempting to fit function verbs into the mould of standard reference grammars. The languages for which grammars were surveyed for this paper come from the West Germanic, Indo-Aryan and Iranian subgroups of Indo-European, from the Dravidian family, and from various subgroups of Australian languages. Moreover, for practical reasons, I have limited myself to grammars written by scholars who are working mainly in the Western tradition (even though some of them are of non-Western origin), and no attempt has been made to include the treatment of function verbs in other traditions of grammar writing.

The suggestions put forward in this section do not amount to an attempt at standardisation. On the contrary, I view grammar writing as an art which resists standardisation, both because of cross-linguistic differences that demand different approaches, and because of individual differences between authors. Rather, I have attempted to specify the type of information that users of a grammar – whether they are interested in learning the language or whether they approach it with the goal of cross-linguistic comparison – will need in order to get a good grasp of the functional load of light verbs in a language, especially where this functional load is high.

The specific issues addressed in this section cover the theoretical analysis of complex verb constructions, with its practical implications for their place in the outline of a reference grammar (Section 3.1), the meaning and function of light verbs (Section 3.2), and their frequency and functional load (Section 3.3).

3.1. Analysis of function verb constructions and their place in a reference grammar

As already pointed out above, complex predicates formed with function verbs have a double nature: they are syntactically complex and (more or less) productive, but at the same time, they also form (more or less) lexicalised collocations. This double nature is, for example, reflected in the title of the section in Dixon (1976) (“Topic E: Simple and compound verbs: conjugation by auxiliaries in Australian verbal systems”) which comprises papers on function verbs and complex predicates in Australian languages, of the
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type illustrated in examples (5) and (6). The term “compound verb” stresses the lexicalised nature of the combinations, whereas the expression “conjugation by auxiliaries” reflects their syntactic and productive nature.

As a result of their dual nature, complex predicates formed with function verbs do not easily fit into the standard outline of reference grammars with their division into “Morphology” (possibly divided into separate chapters by part of speech), “Phrasal syntax” and “Clausal syntax”. Occasionally, this seems to have the result that they are not discussed at all, as in Selcan’s (1998) grammar of the Iranian language Zazaki (though the important role of function verbs in this language is acknowledged in another grammar, Paul 1998).

Most frequently, one finds that function verbs are discussed under headings equivalent to “verb morphology”, or more specifically, “word formation” or “derivational morphology”. Among grammars of Australian languages, examples include Rumsey (1982), McGregor (1994), and Merlan (1994). Other examples are the Persian grammar by Lazard (1992) and the Kurdish grammar by Bedir-Khan and Lescot (1991).

In several grammars of Indo-Aryan languages written in the Lingua Descriptive Series / Routledge Descriptive Series format (based on Comrie and Smith 1977), function verbs and the complex predicates formed with them are treated in the subsection on “Compounding” (2.2.6), embedded in the section on morphology. Examples are Asher and Kumari (1997: 401–403) for Malayalam, Bhatia (1993) for Punjabi, Sridhar (1990) for Kannada, and Mahootian (1997: 283f.) for Persian.

Grammars where complex verbs are discussed under the heading of “Clausal Syntax” are found more rarely, although the Djaru grammar by Tsunoda (1981) is one example. Paul (1998), a grammar of Zazaki, treats N-V collocations formed with light verbs both under the heading of “Verb” (p. 100f.) and under the heading of “Syntax of the clause” (pp. 131–133); the information is partly repeated verbatim. In grammars that have a special chapter or section for verb phrases, the phenomenon naturally falls under this heading, as e.g. in the Maithili grammar by Yadav (1996: 191–209), the Tamil grammar by Schiffman (1999), the Kurdish grammar by MacCurus (1958: 95), or the grammar of the Australian language Ngankikurungkurr by Hoddinott and Kofod (1988).

A few authors reserve a separate section chapter for complex verbs which includes a discussion of the function verbs. Two unpublished Australianist grammars following this approach are Reid (1990) and Green (1989). The treatment of complex verbs involving function verbs in a separate section of the grammar seems to be more common in grammars with a
pedagogical rather than purely descriptive goal, perhaps reflecting the
greater sensitivity of authors of pedagogical grammars to the high func-
tional load of these structures. Examples are the Persian grammar by Lamb-
ton ([1953] 1961), the Hindi grammar by McGregor (1995), and the Urdu
grammar by Schmidt (1999).

Some alternative possibilities are also attested. Thus, a certain tradition
seems to exist among grammarians of German of discussing function verbs
as a subclass of verbs in the “part of speech” chapter (e.g. Heidolph et al.

In a number of grammars (e.g. Rumsey 1982: 74 for Ungarinyin; Bedir-
Khan and Lescot 1991: 119 for Kurdish), the section on parts of speech
contains an introductory statement alerting the reader to the frequency of
complex verbs alongside simple verbs. Perhaps more surprisingly, such a
statement is lacking in many grammars, even if the language in question
only has a small class of verbs. For example, in Lazard’s ([1957] 1992) oft-
cited Persian grammar, it is not until the section on compound verbs, which
is one of the last sections of the book, that the reader learns that “[t]he
number of simple verbs in Persian is relatively limited” and that “[v]erbal
phrases … are extremely numerous and very much used” (Lazard 1992:
294).

In many grammars, the information on function verbs is distributed
among several sections or chapters, often but not always with cross-
references between them. Thus, in Tsunoda (1981), complex predicates in
the Australian language Djaru are mentioned briefly (with cross-
referencing) in the section on “verb complexes”, but a full discussion is
found in the section on “preverbs” (i.e. the hosts) (both under the heading
of “Syntax”; see above).

Distribution of information among several sections of the grammar is
particularly common when light verbs are regarded as fulfilling grammati-
cal functions. For example, for a number of languages, the alternation of
intransitive and transitive function verbs with the same main predicate is
described as functionally equivalent to a morphologically marked transitivity
change or a voice contrast. Accordingly, function verbs are discussed in the
section on voice/transitivity change in grammars of these languages,
e.g. Mangarayi (Merlan 1982: 132–134), Wardaman (Merlan 1994: 206–
207), Urdu (Schmidt 1999: 165–166), Persian (Mahootian 1997: 224), and
Malayalam (Asher and Kumari 1997: 270–271). The “voice-like” nature of
an alternation between two function verbs is also emphasised by many
grammarians writing on German, including Heidolph et al. (1972: 81).
Similarly, function verbs may be discussed under the headings of “Aspect” or “Mood/Modality”. In grammars of Indian languages, in particular, there exists a tradition of describing light verbs (or a subset of them) as aspectual verbs (an analysis argued against by Butt and Geuder 2001). For example, Asher and Kumari (1997: 295–296) describe a set of five light verbs in Malayalam as perfective markers (glossed PERFV₁,₂,₃).

This, admittedly brief, overview of the treatment of function verbs in a selection of reference grammars reveals huge differences between grammarians in their choices for placing the relevant information within the overall outline of a grammar. These differences can hardly be reduced entirely to language-specific differences between the structures in question. Rather, the differences are due, to some extent, to decisions made in the overall organisation of the grammar, and to some extent to theoretical differences in the treatment of structures on the borderline between lexicon and grammar.

As for the first of these factors, there are two possible basic organisational perspectives for a reference grammar (cf. e.g. Mosel 1987, this volume, Lehmann 1989, Comrie 1998). One possibility is to proceed from form to function (the semasiological or analytic perspective), that is, the organisation is exclusively by language-specific categories and constructions, which is both an advantage (in that the language-specific structures are recognised) and a disadvantage (in that comparison of different grammars is made more difficult). The second possibility is an organisation from function to form (the onomasiological or synthetic perspective). This has the advantage of (potentially) facilitating cross-linguistic comparison, but has the disadvantage that information on multifunctional constructions is distributed among several sections of the grammar. In the case of light verbs, it is particularly true that their functions often cannot be neatly assigned to specific categories (e.g. “Aktionsart marking”), because the lexical semantics of the verb is retained to a considerable extent (cf. Butt and Geuder 2001; Van Pottelberge 2001).

But, although most existing reference grammars are indeed predominantly organised from form to function, some mixing of levels can be encountered, accounting in part for the distribution of information on function verb constructions in various parts of the grammar. As pointed out above, this is true to a considerable extent for grammars written in the Lingua Descriptive Studies format (as also indicated by Comrie 1998: 13). In the following, it will be assumed that the outline of the grammar is from form to function, i.e. that function verb constructions are dealt with in a single chapter or subsection of the grammar. This is not to suggest that the
onomasiological perspective (i.e. from function to form) should be given up entirely: it could be reflected in typologically informed indexing and/or cross-referencing (which is often but not always found in current practice). Thus, cross-references could be added to the section on function verb constructions in cases where the light verbs fulfil functions fulfilled by bona fide grammatical elements in other languages, e.g. aktionsart marking, causative or detransitive marking, or verbalisation of non-verbal constituents.

The second factor that accounts for the attested differences between grammars in their treatment of function verbs has to do with the theoretical difficulties, in many grammatical frameworks, of analysing structures that are at the same time syntactic in nature (since the constituents are both independent words) and lexical in nature (since combinations of host and function verbs tend to be lexicalised), and where moreover one of the constituents (the function verb) displays properties of a both content words and grammatical morphemes.

It will be suggested here that these different aspects of function verb structures are best captured, in the practice of grammatical description, if one views grammar as a set of constructions, and recognises that grammatical constructions comprise many expressions that are commonly treated as “idiomatic” because they are centred around content words, or words on the boundary between content and function words.

The construction-based approach to grammar has been quite explicitly endorsed by many structuralist linguists such as Bloomfield ([1933] 1970) and Hockett (1958), as well as more recently by those linguists pursuing what has been labelled “Cognitive Grammar” (e.g. Langacker 1987, 1990, Lakoff 1987) and “Construction Grammar” (e.g. Fillmore 198; Fillmore et al. 1988; Kay and Fillmore 1999; Goldberg 1995; Michaelis and Lambrecht 1996; Croft 2001). A construction-based approach is also explicitly or implicitly adopted in many works with a typological-functionalist orientation.

Grammatical constructions can be characterised as conventional pairings of a complex form which is partly schematic, and a constructional meaning, i.e. as complex signs or “schematic symbolic units” (Langacker 1987: 58). Constructions comprise patterns traditionally treated under the heading “morphology” (e.g. a verb stem with a transitivity-changing suffix) as well as patterns traditionally termed “syntactic” (e.g. a verb form preceded by an object noun phrase). This approach therefore easily accommodates expressions that are not easily classified as either “complex words” or “syntactic expressions”, including the function verb constructions that are the focus of this paper.
Moreover, constructions in this sense include schemas which are partly filled by a phonologically specified form, if this filler constitutes a necessary part of the larger pattern. The filler in question could be a grammatical formative, e.g. a specific causative suffix which appears in construction with an unspecified slot for, say, an intransitive verb. Partially specified constructions, however, also include structures that are usually treated as idioms, e.g. the X let alone Y construction in English (as in Nancy will not eat cod let alone sardines), discussed by Fillmore et al. (1988). The construction-based perspective thus allows for a much broader definition of what is part of the grammar, and makes the strict division between “grammatical” and “lexical” items unnecessary. This may mean that information from the lexicon (or in practical terms, the dictionary of a language) is repeated in the grammar, allowing for redundancy for the sake of a greater adequacy of the language description with regard to language use.

It is easy to see how this broad conception of constructions could be of relevance for the treatment of function verbs. Each combination of a specific function verb with a slot for the relevant class of hosts (typically, a semantically defined subclass of hosts filling a specific syntactic slot, e.g. nominalised verbs) can be analysed as a construction in its own right, which has a specific function or “constructional meaning” (see further 3.2). Translated into grammaticographical practice, it could be treated as a construction at phrasal level, in a separate section.

Other information relevant at this level of analysis concerns the selectional restrictions between the function verb in question and the subclasses of the host category that it collocates with, and the argument structure and nature of argument sharing for this particular subconstruction. Assuming a basically semasiological outline of the grammar, all functions of multifunctional light verbs could be discussed in the same section. For example, complex predicates involving the light verb de ‘give’ in Urdu (cf. ex. (4a)) could be described as a construction type where the light verb is responsible for the transitive nature of the complex verb, and has both the functions of indicating completion of the activity denoted by the host, and the outwardly directed nature of this activity (cf. Butt and Geuder 2001).

There are, however, also properties shared by all function verb structures involving a particular host category. These include, obviously, the category of the host (e.g. deverbal nominal, bare verb stem, or a member of a distinct part of speech such as the “coverbs” of Northern Australian languages), but also the degree of syntactic independence of the host and the function verb (as revealed e.g. by modification, determination, scope of negation, and separability). As pointed out in Sections 2.2 and 2.3 above, a
language may have more than one construction at this level. Thus, function verbs in German may combine with either noun phrases or prepositional phrases. Similarly, in many Indo-Aryan languages, light verbs may combine with the bare stem of verbs, with a non-finite form of a verb, or with a non-derived nominal.

It is thus useful to conceive of constructions as forming a taxonomic network. In the case of function verbs, at the upper level of the taxonomy, we find a schematic construction consisting of a slot for a host category and a slot for a set of function verbs, respectively. At the lower level, we find a partially specified construction involving a specific function verb (which is, in this respect, treated like a grammatical formative). By way of example, a small section of such a network for function verb constructions in Urdu is provided in Figure 1.

3.2. Meaning and function

The most crucial aspect of how function verbs are treated in a reference grammar is, obviously, the discussion of their function. In most of the grammars that I have surveyed, however, the meaning and function of light verbs is only dealt with very briefly if at all. There are some grammars in which no systematic (i.e. verb-by-verb) description of their function is given at all, e.g. the Persian grammar by Mahootian (1997: 283f.) and the grammar of Kannada by Sridhar (1990: 287–289). Statements of one sentence or at most a paragraph per verb are the most frequent option (cf. e.g. Yadav 1996: 201–208 for Maithili; Schiffman 1983: 81–90 for Kannada),
and a discussion of more than half a page is quite uncommon. The twenty pages devoted to the description of the meaning of individual function verbs in one of the light verb constructions in Tamil found in Schiffman (1999: 83–104) probably constitute the richest description encountered in the survey.

In languages where different function verbs contrast with the same host (e.g. with resulting differences in aktionsart or valency; see above), some indication and illustration of the contrast is often given (as e.g. in Pandharpande 1997: 529 for Marathi; Cardona 1965: 131–133 for Gujarati; Hoddinott and Kofod 1988: 170–177 for Ngankikurungkurr), sometimes even in the form of a table. However, no information was provided in any of the grammars on the range of hosts for which the contrasts hold. As a result of these practices, it would be quite difficult to come up with a systematic cross-linguistic survey of the functions of light verbs, at least on the basis of reference grammars.

The problems that grammarians face when dealing with the meanings and functions of light verbs are manyfold. First there is the meta-theoretical problem of division of labour between grammar and lexicon already discussed in Section 3.1: most authors of grammars will be likely to assume, either explicitly (as e.g. in Schmidt 1999: 96) or implicitly, that semantic information of this kind should be provided in the dictionary, not the grammar of a language. As pointed out in Section 1, though, dictionaries often do not provide detailed information on the use of function verbs, either.

A second problem for the grammarian is that function verbs cannot be discussed in isolation. Function verbs or light verbs, as defined in Section 2.1, are by definition part of complex predicates. That is, their function can only be discussed with reference to the specific construction they appear in, by specifying the syntactic category or part of speech of their host (see Section 3.1). Very often, moreover, a discussion of the meaning of function verbs has to make reference to semantically defined subclasses of a single category of hosts. In describing the function of light verbs, it is important – but often difficult – to disentangle the contribution of the host from the contribution of the function verb to the interpretation of the complex predicate.

There are, however, several important clues to the meaning of light verbs, which, if systematically included in descriptions of languages, would provide the reader with a much better idea of their actual range of functions.
One indication – which is seemingly obvious, but by no means always invoked in reference grammars – is the meaning of a given function verb when used as a simple verb. Ideally, the description would include an indication of the true semantic range of the verb as an independent verb (beyond providing a mere gloss), and of any similarities and differences that can be discerned in the semantic entailments of the verb in the main verb use and in the function verb uses (cf. e.g. Schultze-Berndt 2000: Ch. 5; Butt and Geuder 2001).

The second clue is the privative opposition between the presence of a function verb and its absence, in languages where the verbal or finite form of the host can also be used as a simple predicate (cf. Abbi 2001: 192), and/or the equipollent opposition between different function verbs attested with the same host. The more systematic the differences in meaning between complex predicates formed with the same host but different function verbs, the more precisely the contribution of the function verb to the meaning of the whole can be delimited.

A third type of information, which however presupposes a very good command of the lexicon of the language in question, is the nature of the host classes that the function verbs combine with, since the common semantic components of the hosts can provide important clues to the meaning of the function verb itself. Especially where no clear generalisations can be drawn as to the semantic classes of host expressions (e.g. expressions of locomotion, expressions of sound emission, activities, or the like), lists of lexical items could be provided to supplement the discussion and to enable users of the grammar to draw their own generalisations. Although this may be regarded as a proliferation of lexical information in the grammar (and has obvious disadvantages in terms of space considerations), the usefulness of lists of this sort is obvious for those users of a grammar who are primarily interested in learning the language or gaining grammatical insights about their native language or a language they already know well. Moreover, linguists of various theoretical persuasions, including typologists, have become more and more aware of the central role of semantics for certain aspects of grammar. For example, the importance of semantic subclasses has been recognised in the literature on aspect and aktionsart (cf. Sasse 2002 for a review) and on valency and argument structure (e.g. in the “unaccusativity” discussion; cf. e.g. Levin 1993, Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1995). Cross-linguistic generalisations in these areas can only be drawn by comparing the semantic classes of lexical items exhibiting a certain grammatical or collocational behaviour.
3.3. Information on usage

In this section, it will be argued that a reference grammar should also attempt to capture the status of the grammatical structures that it describes in terms of their usage and their functional load, since this information is essential for any user of a grammar who wants to get a “feel” for the language in question – whether they are consulting the grammar as learners or for the purposes of cross-linguistic comparison. The example of function verbs will again be used to illustrate the point.

In current grammatical practice, information either on the frequency of function verb expressions in general or on the productivity of individual function verbs is rare, beyond statements like “very common”, “the most frequent verbs”, or “more common in written language”.

In a number of the grammars surveyed, though, reference is made to the fact that certain light verbs are used productively to integrate loanwords; cf. e.g. Bhatia (1993: 324) for Punjabi, Pandharipande (1997: 529) for Marathi, Schmidt (1999: 95) for Urdu, Sridhar (1990: 289) for Kannada, and McGregor (1996: 47) for Nyulnyul. In these, as in many other languages (cf. Moravcsik 1975; Hock 1991: 386; Myers-Scotton 1993: 112–116), “verbal” loanwords from the donor language are incorporated as nominals or non-finite or non-inflecting predicates in the recipient language, and have to be combined with a light verb to be able to function as a predicate in an independent clause. The employment of specific function verbs in the integration of loans is an important indicator of their productivity.

The functional load of specific light verbs can moreover be stated in terms of frequency. Type frequency concerns the number of different collocations that a given function verb enters into. Token frequency concerns the overall frequency of the verb in discourse (in its function verb use). In existing reference grammars, such information is almost never to be found. This can partly be related to the preoccupation with “competence” – as opposed to “performance” – in a lot of mainstream linguistics in the 20th century, including descriptive linguistics.

Ideally, moreover, grammarians would provide frequency indications relative to discourse genres – even when there is no absolute agreement on how to delimit these. Information on the frequency of certain constructions relative to discourse genre is very scarce in existing reference grammars (the grammar of English by Biber et al. 1991 being a notable exception), and the information given by different authors may sometimes be contradictory. Thus, in English, according to Quirk et al. (1997: 751) and Hopper (1991, 1996), complex predicates formed with a closed subclass of verbs
are more frequent than simple verbs in informal written or spoken discourse. Likewise, Dixon (1991: 337–338) finds that give a, take a, and have a constructions are “found far more frequently in colloquial than in formal styles of English”. On the other hand, according to Biber et al. (1991: 1028), collocations involving the verbs have, make and take are prevalent in written registers. Similar claims have been made for German function verbs, e.g. by Heidolph et al. (1972: 81).

Today, grammarians are in a more fortunate position than grammarians until recently, because with electronic data processing and the methods of corpus linguistics, frequency information can be compiled much more easily. If included in a language description, frequency information can also provide an important clue to the delimitation problem discussed in Section 2.1, since productivity may be used as one of the criteria for the distinction between function verbs and fully lexical verbs, and also for the degree of grammaticalisation of individual function verbs (cf. Hook 1991).

4. Conclusions

In this paper, I have argued that ideally, descriptions of a language (and specifically, reference grammars) should aim at capturing, as far as possible, how the language is actually used, in giving attention to structures in proportion with their importance in the language. Specifically, these structures may include some that are more “collocational” or “idiomatic” in nature in that they incorporate elements on the boundary of “lexical word” and “function word”, of which function verbs are just one example. In addition, these structures may be of limited productivity, i.e. their description involves reference to semantic properties, not just categorial properties, of the fillers of the “open” slot in a construction.

In the case of function verbs, it was argued that the complex predicates they are employed in can be regarded as constructions in their own right, and not just as mere functional equivalents or quasi-equivalents of commonly found morphological marking, such as word-class changing or transitivitv-changing derivational morphology, or aspect or aktionsart marking. On a higher taxonomic level, it is often possible to distinguish different types of function verb constructions – depending on the type of host – and to describe their respective syntactic properties, such as the tightness of nexus between the host and the function verb. On a lower taxonomic level, each specific light verb can be taken to define a subconstruction which has a specific function (or which is, potentially, multifunctional). The construc-
tional function or meaning can be delimited by taking into account, among other things, the meaning of the verb involved as a main verb, the common semantic components of the classes of hosts it combines with, the oppositions it enters into with other function verbs occurring with the same class of hosts (if applicable), and the semantic difference between a simple verb and a function verb construction based on the same host (if applicable). Moreover, it was argued that it is important to give an indication of the frequency and productivity of each function verb, if possible, relative to specific text genres.

A description of this kind obviously implies a good documentation of the language in terms of a substantial corpus of texts, which would enable one to measure frequency and provide a good indication of the range of application of a construction in spontaneous usage. It also implies a documentation that is not driven by purist concerns, but captures actual language use, since, as we have seen, code-switching phenomena and integration of recent loans can provide important insights into the functional load of light verb constructions.

It seems that theoretical obstacles often prevent the inclusion of semi-grammatical (or semi-lexical) items such as function verbs in a reference grammar. Many models of grammar maintain a strict separation of “grammar” and “lexicon”. As Mosel (this volume) also points out, this borderline is a linguistic construct, and many aspects of language use are only captured by recognising that many expressions are both conventionalised (lexicalised) and formed by productive means (cf. also Pawley 1986).

There obviously also exist a number of practical limitations to the implementation of the suggestions made above (cf. also Mosel, this volume). The time limitations and personal interests of grammar authors will determine to some extent how much attention is paid to which area of the grammar. Space limitations (which are in turn conditioned by marketability), too, may preclude an in-depth discussion of function verbs, at least under the current standard of the one-volume reference grammar. Moreover, it is unrealistic to expect this type of information in a reference grammar that is the outcome of a PhD thesis, especially in an academic climate where it is crucial to finish one’s PhD in a short time. One might argue that, especially in the case of languages that are endangered or at least not widely spoken, a description that is incomplete in some respects is better than no description at all. The danger in producing a reference grammar under severe time constraints, however, is that once a reference grammar of a language exists – especially for a small or endangered language – the chances are small that someone will later take a closer look at function
verbs and other constructions involving items on the boundary of lexicon and grammar.

Notes

1. The data come from “Kölnkorpus”, an unpublished corpus of spoken narratives recorded at the Linguistics Institute, University of Cologne.

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