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The Constructional Meaning of the Light Verb Construction:

An Analytical Study of the *have a V* Frame*

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The sentences below are different expressions that describe the same situation; one is an ordinary basic sentence and the other is a sentence using the “light verb construction.”¹

- (1) Mary walked in the garden.
- (2) Mary had a walk in the garden.

(Dixon 1991: 336)

The light verb construction is characterized as a construction that contains a “light verb” such as *have*, *take*, or *give* as its main verb, and a verb stem preceded by the indefinite article.² Wierzbicka (1982: 755) formulates this construction as (3).

- (3) NP have + AUX a V-Infinitive

Though the above sentences seem to be mutually replaceable, Bolinger (1968: 127) states that “a difference in syntactic form always spells a difference in meaning.” Therefore, it can be concluded that the specific meanings that (1) and (2) convey are different. The difference

between the expressions reflects the different ways the situation is construed by the speakers. Wierzbicka (1982: 754) remarks as follows:

The rules [that govern the periphrastic construction] are semantic in nature, and reflect different possible conceptualizations of the same situation. [...] There is a difference in meaning between *kissing someone* and *giving someone a kiss*, between *walking* and *having a walk*.

Based on examples, Wierzbicka (1982) classified meanings of the *have a V* frame into ten subtypes (details discussed later), and concludes that the *have a V* frame is polysemous. That is, the subtypes are closely related and share a common core meaning. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the core meaning of the *have a V* frame through analysis of constituents of the construction. The last part of the study is allocated to a comparative study between the *have a V* frame and other light verb constructions, and an attempt to describe the constructional meaning of the “light verb construction” is made.

1. Wierzbicka’s study of the *have a V* frame

Wierzbicka (1982) developed a detailed description of the meaning of the *have a V* frame. As already stated above, ten subtypes are given based on the overall meaning of *have a V* sentences and the nature of periphrastic *have* counterparts, such as transitive/intransitive, argument structure, and aspect.

- Aimless objectless individual activity which could cause one to feel good
- Action aiming at perception which could cause one to know

- something and which would not cause one to feel bad if it didn't
- Tentative action which could cause one to come to know something and which would not cause one to feel bad if it didn't
 - Semi-voluntary action which could cause one to feel better
 - Consumption of small parts of objects which could cause one to feel pleasure
 - Consumption of non-discrete substances which could cause one to feel pleasure
 - Activity superficially involving another entity, which could cause one to feel pleasure
 - Self-directed action which could cause one to look better
 - Joint bodily activity which could cause the people involved to feel pleasure
 - Joint speech activity which could cause the people involved to feel pleasure

Out of the ten, eight types involve the subject feeling good or better, and two are related to the acquisition of knowledge. These two natures seem to have strong connection to the core meaning of the *have a V* frame.

According to Wierzbicka (1982: 793), the semantic invariant of the *have a V* construction can be summarized as follows:

X had a V. =
 For some time, not a long time
 X was doing something (V)
 which could cause something (good) to happen in him that
 nobody else would know of
 he was doing it not because he wanted anything to happen
 to anything other than himself
 he could do it again.

The remarkable characteristics of the meaning of the construction, as identified in Wierzbicka (1982), are listed below.

- The action is repeatable.
- The action involves only one core participant.
- The action does not affect objects, or it has little influence on objects, if any.
- The action is aimless and objectless.
- The action causes the subject to feel good.
- The subject acquires unimportant, trivial knowledge from the action.

The following sections are devoted to detailed investigations of the above characteristics.

2. The meaning of *have a V* sentences

2.1. Aspect

The first characteristic, “the action is repeatable,” is related to the aspect of the construction. To be repeatable, the action has to be telic. If the action is atelic and has neither clear beginning nor end, it cannot be repeatable.

Contrary to this idea, the *have a V* frame can take both atelic verbs and telic verbs. The V-infinitive of (4), *walk*, is atelic, while *wash* of (5) is telic.

(4) Mary had a walk in the garden. (=1)

(5) John had a wash.

As Wierzbicka (1982) points out, however, the *have a V* frame has a strong tendency to take atelic verbs as its V-infinitive, and telic verbs are, for the

most part, not used. For instance, though the atelic verb *walk* can also be made telic by adding prepositional phrases of destinations as in (6), the *have a V* frame cannot be applied in such a case.

- (6) John walked to the post office.
- (7) *John had a walk to the post office.

As for telic verbs, one cannot say (8):

- (8) *Mary had a wash of the babies.

Wierzbicka (1982) explains that (8) is not acceptable because the activity of washing affects the babies drastically, and this does not match another characteristic of the *have a V* frame, “the action does not affect objects, or it has little influence on objects, if any.” It is also possible, however, to say that when the verb *wash* takes objects, the boundary of the washing is fixed and its telicity would be increased. On the other hand, since its object is not evident as in (5), the telicity of the bare verb is low.

This observation reveals that the aspect of *have a V* sentences is not determined by the aspect of V-infinitive, and it is the construction itself that has the telic aspect. The *have a V* frame takes atelic verbs as V-infinitives and has a function of making the action telic. The reason for the strong preference of atelic verbs lies in this “telicizing function.” As telic verbs are originally telic by nature, the telicizing function is incompatible with them. What is originally telic does not need to be telicized. In the following sections, the constituents that contribute to the telicizing function are investigated.

2.1.1. Verb infinitives

Wierzbicka (1982: 755) states the following:

the verbal stem in sentences like *He had a swim* or *She had a lie-down* is not a noun, despite the fact that it combines with an indefinite article; and it can be distinguished from deverbal nouns with a zero suffix, e.g. *smile*, *cough*, or *quarrel* in *She has a nice smile*; *He has a nasty cough*; *They had a quarrel*.

However, other linguists have different opinions. Dixon (1991) refers to the “*a V part*” as *the post-verbal NP*. It can be deduced from this that Dixon considers the V-infinitive to be a noun. Kageyama (1991: 171) defines the light verb construction as “a small set of ‘light verbs’ [...] such as *make*, *take*, *give* and *have* taking deverbal nouns as object.” This means that Kageyama also regards the V-infinitive as a noun. In fact, no firm conclusion has been reached as to whether the V-infinitive is a verb or a noun.

Langacker (1987: 53) says, “I do not hold that all grammatical classes are strictly definable in notional terms,” and “I maintain that all members of the noun class [...] instantiate an abstract noun schema, while all verbs elaborate an abstract verb schema” (p.54). In Langacker’s model, “prototypes” and “schemas” are presupposed, and while there are prototypical nouns and verbs that have the standard schemas of “noun” and “verb,” there also exist peripheral nouns and verbs. To adopt this model, the V-infinitive of the *have a V* frame, which has both a nominal nature and a verbal nature, can be placed somewhere between the noun and the verb. It is too verbal to be categorized as a noun and too nominal to be categorized as a verb.

This nominal nature of the V-infinitive plays a role in creating the

atelic nature of the construction. According to Langacker (1987: 58), “[a] count noun designates a bounded region in some domain.”³ That is, though it is not a complete noun, the V-infinitive obtains a nominal nature in the *have a V* frame through nominalization, and the boundedness of nouns serves to establish the atelic meaning of the construction as a whole.

2.1.2. Indefinite articles

It is a well-known fact that the indefinite article occurs only with count nouns. Considering that the V-infinitive derives from verbs, however, it seems more natural that V-infinitives be treated as uncountable nouns, though they are used with indefinite articles in the *have a V* frame. This idea leads to a view that the indefinite article, which originally co-occurs with count nouns, renders a nature of count nouns to the V-infinitive of the *have a V* construction. That is to say, the indefinite article functions as a marker of the boundedness carried by the *have a V* frame.

It is also possible that the indefinite article contributes to another feature of the *have a V* frame, namely “the action does not affect objects, or it has little influence on objects, if any,” and “the subject acquires unimportant, trivial knowledge from the action.” The common element in these two characteristics is “trivialness.” The former implies that the influence on objects is trivial, and the latter points out that the knowledge acquired by the subject is trivial. The indefinite article is used only for the single count noun. It derived historically from the unstressed form of *one*, and its numerical function is still preserved in present-day English as in (9) and (10) (Quirk et al. 1985: 273-274).

(9) The Wrights have two daughters and a son.

(10) Mungo can walk forty miles in a day.

This means that the indefinite article can be considered to impose trivialness, which comes from the concept of “one,” on the whole meaning of the *have a V* construction.

2.2. Indirectness

In this section, two characteristics of the *have a V* frame are investigated: “the action causes the subject to feel good,” and “the subject acquires unimportant, trivial knowledge from the action.” From these two, it is apparent that the focus of *have a V* sentences does not rest on the actions themselves. The focus is placed upon the secondary results caused indirectly by the actions — feeling good, and acquiring knowledge.

The cause of this indirectness lies in the form of the *have a V* frame.

(11) Mary walked in the garden. (=1)

(12) Mary had a walk in the garden. (=2)

While the main verb of (11) is *walk*, that of (12) is *have*. Considering this difference, it is quite reasonable to presume that (11) directly describes the “walking” of Mary, but the description of “walking” is less direct in (12). This indirectness diverts the focus from the actions to the secondary results, and the meaning of the sentence is similar to “he has an experience of Ving.”

The “indirectness” of the *have a V* frame also explains another characteristic: “the action is aimless and objectless.” Since the *have a V* sentence describes an action indirectly, the action cannot be an aim or an object of the subject in the frame.

2.3. Agent-oriented nature

It is one of the remarkable formal characteristics of the *have a V* frame that

the subject must be a living human. This seems to be a strict restriction of the construction, and even a dead person is not acceptable for its subject.

(13) *The book had a lie-down on the table.

(14) *Lazarus had a lie-down in his grave.

(Wierzbicka 1982: 760)

In addition, *have a V* sentences cannot be passivized. This means that the agent has saliency within the *have a V* frame and has to be symbolized as the subject; it is too salient to be demoted from the subject position.

(15) *A walk was had by Mary in the garden.

In the same way, though the *have a V* frame takes patients, they cannot be raised to the subject position through passivization as in (19).

(16) Tom rode the bike.

(17) Tom had a ride of the bike.

(18) The bike was ridden by Tom.

(19) *The bike was had a ride of by Tom.

These two points clearly show the agent-oriented nature of the *have a V* frame. This nature generates two characteristics of the frame: “the action involves only one core participant,” and “the action does not affect objects, or it has little influence on objects, if any.” Since the agent is salient in the *have a V* frame, the patient, which is expressed as the object, tends to be defocused. As a result of this, the patient is totally excluded from the reference of the *have a V* sentence, or the influence on the patient is not implied by the sentence.

Then, what is the factor of this agent-oriented nature? For this question, Wierzbicka (1982: 789) refers to the verb *have* as below, giving (20) as an example.

(20) John has a house.

Is this sentence transitive or intransitive? Superficially, it seems transitive: it has the direct object *a house*. Yet, as is often pointed out, *have* sentences cannot be passivized, even when their direct objects are definite.

That is, (20) is a description of the subject *John* rather than the situation in which “having” is exercised to a house by John. Wierzbicka asserts that the verb *have* is intransitive in its nature despite of its formal character, and the predication of *have* sentences are made about the agent (in this sense, the term *experiencer* may be more appropriate than *agent*). This feature of the verb *have* is imposed on the *have a V* frame and establishes the agent-oriented nature.

2.4. Summary of the core meaning of the *have a V* construction

The above discussion of the meaning of *have a V* frame can be summarized in the following three points.

- The *have a V* frame telicizes the action.
- The *have a V* frame describes the action indirectly.
- The *have a V* frame has an agent-oriented nature.

These are the dominant features of the construction and the ten subtypes of Wierzbicka (1982), and the six characteristics listed in Section 1. can be

explained by them. The core meaning of the *have a V* frame, however, does not consist of these three discrete points. The research conducted in the course of this paper shows that these three points are mutually and closely related.

As seen above, the boundedness implied by the definite article and the V-infinitive leads to repeatable actions expressed by *have a V* sentences. But the repeatability cannot be realized only by the boundedness. As (21) shows, since the same person cannot be killed more than once and “killing someone” is not repeatable, verbs that designate actions with definite results are incompatible with the *have a V* frame. In other words, V-infinitives cannot be occupied by verbs that affect objects crucially.

(21) *The murderer had a kill of the innocent citizen.

Thus, both the telicizing function and the indirect description that defocus the influence on the object are the factors of repeatability.

Similarly, there are more than two reasons that can be thought of as to why (21) is unacceptable. Let alone the repeatability and the indirectness discussed above, the agent-oriented nature also excludes (21). In the situation of someone killing some other person, the patient is as salient as the agent. This point is contradictory to the agent-oriented nature of the *have a V* construction.

The feeling good of the subject can also be seen to be caused by more than two factors. First, it is implied by the indirect description of the *have a V* frame, which focuses on the secondary result of the action. Second, because of the agent-oriented nature, the *have a V* sentence is inclined to describe a state of the subject through the action.

In this way, as depicted in Figure 1, the three factors are related to each other and they constitute a highly schematic abstract constructional

meaning of the *have a V* frame. The ten subtypes and the six characteristics are the realizations of this constructional meaning.

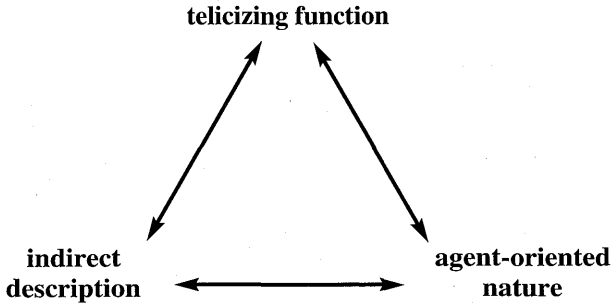


Figure 1

3. Other light verb constructions

Though the purpose of this paper is to illuminate the core meaning of the *have a V* frame, this section is devoted to a brief overview of other light verb constructions.

Dixon (1991) analyzed the meaning of light verb constructions that include *have*, *give*, and *take*, and summarized the meanings of each construction.

have a V

- something done voluntarily, by the subject;
- to indulge himself in something he enjoys doing, or which provides relief;
- the activity being done “for a bit,” at the subject’s whim (rather than to achieve any transcendental goal).

give NP a V

- something done voluntarily by the subject;
- to “transfer” something to an object, either affecting the object in some physical way, or communicating with another person;
- the activity being “done a bit,” at the subject’s whim — and often, if the verb refers to an activity that can be incremental, just one unit of the activity is performed.

give a V

- likely to refer to a single corporeal gesture;
- an act of communication may be involved.

take a V

- something done voluntarily, by the subject;
- often a definite premeditated activity;
- generally involving some physical effort on the part of the subject;
- just one unit of the activity being completed.

What is common to these light verb constructions are “the voluntary activity done by subjects,” and “the activity done a bit, or one unit of the activity.” Though the former is not fully studied in this paper, the latter corresponds to the telicizing function discussed above.

The feature of the *have a V* frame that the others do not share is “to indulge himself in something he enjoys doing, or which provides relief.” This is equivalent to “feeling good” or “acquiring knowledge” stated earlier, and as in the above discussions, this feature is held due to the nature of the verb *have*.

The unique point of the *give a V* frame is that the construction designates “transferring something to an object,” and “an act of communication.” These features can be considered to be derived from the nature of the verb *give*. The situation of “giving” includes something transferred from the agent to the patient. That is, *give* implies the movement of something. This nature is imposed to the *give a V* frame and provides the frame with the meaning of “transferring” and “communication.” Also, while the object is defocused within the *have a V* frame, the action expressed by the *give a V* frame can have the meaning of “affecting the object.” This is reasonable because “giving” cannot be achieved without objects. The nature of *give* leads to the influence on the object.

Finally, the *take a V* frame expresses actions that involve “some physical effort on the part of subject.” This subject’s effort is not meant by the other light verb constructions. In the same way as *have* and *give*, this feature seems to be due to the nature of the verb *take*. The action of “taking,” in its general sense, involves some manipulation made by the subject, while “having” is a state of the subject rather than an action. This manipulation implied by *take* gives the meaning of the subject’s effort to the *take a V* frame.

Though further investigation is indispensable for illuminating the meanings of light verb constructions, it can be concluded that the light verb construction has a schematic meaning in common, and light verbs contribute to the meaning of light verb sentences as well. Each light verb differentiates the meanings.

4. Conclusion

It is often pointed out that verbal expressions such as the light verb construction was regarded as idiosyncratic, and did not need to be taken up as subjects in grammatical studies. The discussion in this paper, however,

clearly indicates that the light verb construction is not an idiom at all. Wierzbicka (1982: 788) states that “sentences in the *have a V* frame are not a jungle of idiosyncrasies, but exhibit orderly and systematic behavior.” The meaning of the light verb construction is motivated by its constituents; light verbs, indefinite articles, and V-infinitives.

As investigated above, the light verb imposes its nature to the construction and gives it special meanings, invoking “indirectness” by being located as a main verb. The indefinite articles and V-infinitives contribute to the telicizing function of the construction. The meaning of the light verb construction is analyzable and its constituents are essential for building up the meaning of the whole construction.

There is another important fact that was shown by this paper. That is, the features motivated by the constituents are closely interrelated and constitute a core meaning of the light verb construction. None of them exists independently. The core meaning of the construction is quite complex in its nature and present as a highly schematic abstract meaning. In this sense, the meaning of the light verb construction cannot be determined only by its constituents, nor by the whole. The combination of the meaning of the constituents and the intertwined schematic meaning of the whole forms the meaning of the light verb constructions.

Though an analytical study has been made of the *have a V* frame, there still remain some questions to be answered. For example, why is the *have a V* frame used to refer to experiences that are comfortable for subjects? What is the determinant of the feeling good or acquiring knowledge of the subject? Neither “enjoyment” nor “relief” is generally meant by indefinite articles and V-infinitives. Also, the verb *have* does not seem to be a factor, because *have* is not always used for good senses as in the following sentences.

(22) I have a cold.

(23) Jim had trouble.

This paper revealed the existence and complexity of the core meaning of the light verb construction. Some part of the meaning structure of the *have a V* frame was exhibited as well. The investigation in this paper, however, does not illustrate the whole picture of the light verb construction. The further analysis of this matter will contribute not only to the illumination of the light verb construction but also to the elucidation of the nature of constructions.

Notes

- * I am grateful to Professor Norimitsu Tosu, Professor Yukio Tsuji, Mitsuko Sakaguchi for their continuing support of my studies. My deep gratitude goes to Rick Bartlett, who improved this paper considerably.
- 1 The term *light verb construction* is originally a term developed by Jespersen (1942). Several terms have been used by linguists to refer to the construction under consideration in order to distinguish it from the ordinary sentence. Wierzbicka (1982) and Dixon (1991) used the term *periphrastic* for the former and *basic* for the latter. Terms such as *have a V frame* or *have a verb construction*, and *simple-verb construction* are used as well. Among these, the term that is thought to be most appropriate for each case is used in this paper.
- 2 Other than *have*, *get*, and *take*, verbs such as *do* and *make* are also named as light verbs in some studies (Kageyama 1996 and Akimoto 2002, among others).
- 3 As discussed in 2.1.2., since the V-infinitive of the *have a V* construction invariably has a preceded indefinite article, it can be considered to have the nature of count nouns.

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