

***Do* as the Lightest Light Verb**

The paper to be presented examines *do*'s possible status as the "lightest of light verbs" (Mohanán, 2005: 408). According to Piñango, Mack, and Jackendoff (2006), light verbs are so named because the main substance of the predicate meaning is found not in the predicate itself but rather in its syntactic object. However, the precise role the light verb plays in composing meaning is the subject of some disagreement. As both Butt (2003) and Mohanán (2005) note, some linguists view light verbs as having no semantic information to contribute, while others see them as making at least some contribution to the meaning of the complex predicate that they are used to form. Among the light verbs themselves, it seems that not all are equally light. Smith (2009) considers *give*, *make*, *have*, and *take* to be the most general semantically, and therefore the ones that are most commonly used. Interestingly, Smith excludes *do* from this list, while Mohanán (2005) refers to *do* as "the ubiquitous light verb" (423) and "the lightest of light verbs" (408).

As a light verb, *do* actually received some attention through its collocation with *lunch* as in "Let's do lunch." Noting its deviation from the more common "have lunch", many people seemed to find the expression objectionable, perceiving it as an affectation. The case of *do lunch* may tell us something about language innovations, and social attitudes towards the perceived originators of the innovations. It also raises questions about the substitutability of light verbs in light verb constructions. That is, if light verbs are taken to be semantically empty or near-empty, how acceptable are constructions that involve substitutions of one light verb for another? In particular, if we take *do* as the lightest of light verbs, would that suggest that it is more generally acceptable as a substitute in constructions that typically involve one of the other common light verbs?

In a study intended to provide some answers to these questions, ten native speakers of American English were surveyed. The instrument used was a twenty-item form that featured example sentences using light verb constructions, with a blank left in the place of the light verb. Below each sentence, the light verbs *have*, *do*, *give*, *take* and *make* were listed. The respondents were asked to rate each of the light verbs as being "acceptable", "perhaps acceptable" or "not acceptable" in the given contexts. The context sentences themselves were written with objects for the light verbs that are generally collocated with *have*, *give*, *take*, or *make* rather than *do*.

The results of the survey show *do* as being judged most often as "acceptable" or "perhaps acceptable" in comparison to the other light verbs. This appears to support the assertion that light verbs may indeed be perceived as being substitutable for each other, at least in their acceptability in collocations with particular objects. Likewise, the results indicate that among the five light verbs included in the survey, *do* is more commonly judged as a possible substitute in constructions that typically involve other light verbs, thus supporting Mohanán's assessment of *do* being the "lightest" of the light verbs.

References

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