

Nativised Light Verb Constructions in Malaysian English

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This study aims to investigate the structural and functional patterns of light verb constructions (LVCs) in Malaysian English, i.e. combinations of a semantically “empty” verb (e.g. GIVE, TAKE, and MAKE) with a typically isomorphic noun derived from the corresponding verb (e.g. look); see for example (1) and (2):

(1) She has to **take a look** at her biography again.

(2) Young entrepreneurs are afraid to **make unpopular decision**.

Due to their semantically light nature, LVCs are interchangeable with their corresponding simplex forms (Hoffmann, Hundt, & Mukherjee, 2011; Mehl, 2017). To detect potential grammatical innovations, I created a general corpus consisting of threads from Lowyat.NET, a popular Internet forum in Malaysia and used the British National Corpus (BNC) as the reference corpus. Most researchers (Wierzbicka, 1982; Algeo, 1995; Dixon, 2005) exclusively focus on LVCs of the format ‘verb + indefinite article + isomorphic deverbal noun’. However, I take a more inclusive approach and also consider structures without articles and derived nouns to be relevant for my analysis – cf. example (2) above.

The structural analysis reveals that Malaysians tend to overuse non-isomorphic nouns, zero article LVCs and those taking determiners as well as descriptive adjectives (e.g. ‘unpopular’ in example 2) in the modifier slots. The functional analysis shows that most Malaysian English LVCs are atelic; this is due to a great number of LVCs being used in declarative and interrogative forms. The latter finding contradicts hypotheses of related work which suggest that the function of LVCs is mainly to convert aimless actions into achievements (Leech, Hundt, Mair, & Smith, 2009; Wittenberg & Levy, 2017; Bonial & Pollard, 2020).

In comparison with the BNC data, TAKE and MAKE LVCs are more dominant in the Malaysian English corpus. To identify nativised LVCs in Malaysian English, I use the log-likelihood test to evaluate the difference between each structural and functional LVC pattern in the two corpora. Nativised LVC structures are defined as those where the log-likelihood scores are greater than 100. This is the case for most zero article LVCs. Their high frequency could be explained by the absence of articles in the substrate languages (Malay, Chinese, and various Indian languages). As for functional patterns, nativisation can be shown for TAKE_care, MAKE_report, and MAKE_decision LVCs that indicate goalless activities and incomplete tasks; their log-likelihood scores range from 130 to 1976. In contrast to the findings of past studies, the function of most Malaysian English LVCs is atelic. This corpus study thus highlights the flexible nature of LVCs and the resulting patterns of nativisation in non-native varieties of English.

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