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Information packaging strategies serving the communicative needs of speakers

Abstract. This paper presents the findings of a study of diverse information packaging strategies employed by speakers of English to better serve their communicative needs in given contexts, based on examples from the British National Corpus (BNC). More precisely, the analysis centres around the information packaging possibilities offered by light verb constructions (LVCs) in comparison to their full verb counterparts. As is conventionally recognised in previous studies, LVCs formally stretch the predicate over a verbal and a nominal element (e.g. to order vs to give an order). It is precisely this fact that makes it possible for speakers to structure their utterances in various ways. Thus, either all participants are overtly realized in the sentence and the communicative focus could be placed on each one of them depending on the context, or some participants are reduced, which is the preferred strategy when their identity is implied, unfamiliar, irrelevant or would rather be concealed.

Keywords: information packaging, information structure, light verb constructions, full verbs, argument structure.

1. Introduction

This paper presents the findings of a study of diverse information packaging strategies employed by speakers of English to better serve their communicative needs in given contexts, based on examples from the British National Corpus (BNC). More precisely, the analysis centres around the information packaging possibilities offered by light verb constructions (LVCs) in comparison to their full verb (FV) counterparts. The study aims to identify the variations in information structuring across several subcategories of LVCs

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and to discuss the contextual and pragmatic reasons that could have potentially motivated the arrangement of sentence constituents in specific examples. The topic is important as the fairly fixed word order of English leaves little room for reordering of constituents, so addressing this issue in the context of LVCs alleviates this inflexibility to a certain degree. This paper differs from other studies in that it is entirely devoted to the exploration of information packaging possibilities vested specifically in the LVCs with give.

As is conventionally recognised in previous studies, LVCs formally stretch the predicate over a verbal and a nominal element (e.g. to order vs to give an order; to explain vs to give an explanation). The term reserved for the verbal component is a light verb (LV) (Jespersen 1942: 117; Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 290), which is suggestive of the fact that these verbs are to some extent semantically bleached. Light verbs that commonly occur in LVCs are make, do, give, have, take, etc. This study investigates only the LVCs with give, as this verb enters a ditransitive sentence pattern and could potentially offer greater versatility in terms of sentence structure compared to the monotransitive light verbs. Some linguists restrict their definition of light verb constructions to include only those instances of LVCs where the nominal component is a product of verb to noun conversion (Jespersen 1942; Wierzbicka 1982; Dixon 2005). The interpretation adopted in this paper is broader and is in agreement with the views according to which the nominal component in LVCs is a deverbal noun, irrespective of whether it is a product of conversion or derivation (Quirk et al. 1985; Brugman 2001; Allerton 2002; Algeo 2006). Semantically, it denotes an action or a process, i.e. it is nomen actionis as suggested by Topolińska (1982: 39) and Allerton (2002:115), but it could also denote a completed act, in which case it corresponds to nomina acti (Topolińska 2003: 91) or it could even have an objectified interpretation. Oftentimes, LVCs can be paraphrased with the corresponding full verbs (e.g. to make a contribution vs. to contribute), even though these two structures are by no means absolutely synonymous. Some features of the English LVCs cannot always be adequately conveyed with the corresponding full verbs, such as the adjectival premodification of the noun within the LVCs, the aspectual meaning of LVCs when the deverbal noun is preceded by an indefinite article (Brinton 2011: 568), or the distinction between a single occurrence and multiple occurrences of the action denoted by the deverbal noun.

The specific bipartite structure of the LVCs makes it possible for speakers to structure their utterances in various ways, by focusing, reducing and arranging constituents in line with the demands of a particular situation. This is where the significance is information packaging is brought to the forefront. With LVCs speakers do not simply convey the propositional content of their utterances, but they employ versatile sentence patterns to formulate and frame their thoughts in a manner that is context-dependent. In addition, by adjusting the structure of their verbal messages to a specific context,

speakers demonstrate understanding of and sensitivity to the prior knowledge of the addressee and to what had previously been mentioned in the discourse.

2. Literature review

There is a plethora of different views among linguists regarding sentence information structure. Yet, on the whole, linguists are unanimous that, to a certain degree, the linear sequence of constituents is governed by what is known/unknown to the participants in a given context. These ideas were first presented by the Prague School in the 1920s, and their practical application has been the topic of much debate ever since (Erteschik-Shir 2007).

The distinctions between topic-comment, theme-rheme, given-new, (back)ground-focus play a pivotal role in sentence information structure (Vallduvi & Engdahl 1996; Erteschik-Shir 2007). Over time these have been used with slight variations among linguists, but essentially all these ideas can be condensed into two major models: (a) ones that divide the sentence into ground and focus, and (b) others that divide the sentence into topic and comment (Vallduvi & Engdahl 1996: 462). Different as they might seem, there is still a partial overlap between these binary concepts. This is why they could be regarded as complementing each other, rather than as being isolated sets of primitives.

The term information packaging was first introduced by Chafe in 1976 and was later used to refer to "a structuring of sentences by syntactic, prosodic, or morphological means that arises from the need to meet the communicative demands of a particular context or discourse" (Vallduvi & Engdahl 1996: 460) and "the way that utterances are formulated to fit into the communicative situation as a whole, including the speech participants, the extra-linguistic context and the linguistic co-text" (Grenoble 1998: 3-4). Smit (2010) considers information packaging to be one of the three subdomains of information structure, alongside referent management and cohesion management. In principle, information packaging deals with alternative sequencing of constituents in sentences, such that does not alter the propositional content of sentences. These differently-structured sentences are not interchangeable in just any context. As a matter of fact, it is the actual context that determines which alternative would be felicitous in a given situation and which one would be considered less acceptable or unacceptable.

Finally, to relate this discussion of information packaging to light verb constructions that will be used to illustrate this concept, according to Topolińska (1982: 36-37), LVCs offer the possibility for an alternative thematization of the two components, which is closely related to the altered communicative hierarchy of arguments. Sentences with FVs and LVCs may be informationally equivalent, but their structural difference has major significance for the participants in the speech act and for the discourse in general. All this becomes even more important having in mind the fact that English has a relatively fixed word order, governed by the syntactic functions of the sentence constituents. This is why the structural difference between LVCs and the corresponding

FVs should not be equalled to a mere variation in the ordering of constituents on a sentence level, but its importance should also be acknowledged on a broader discourse plane, as will be demonstrated in Section 4.

There have been several studies thus far that have sought to explore to a greater or lesser degree, information packaging in the context of English LVCs. Quirk et al. (1985), for example, analyse some types of LVCs from the viewpoint of communicative dynamism, while the study of composite predicates by Brinton (1996) builds on their observations. In her analysis of several different types of multi-word verbs, Claridge (2000) uses the term "syntactic spreading" to refer to the phenomenon of LVCs (or verbo-nominal combinations in her terminology) shifting "(parts of the) verbal predication to more prominent sentence positions" (Claridge 2000: 41-42). By providing inner passive fronting examples she illustrates the syntactic flexibility of LVCs. There was also a contrastive study by Dušková (2012) which compares English LVCs and their Czech translation equivalents with occasional references to the similarities and differences between them in terms of their information structure.

3. Research methodology

This study is based on the British National Corpus (BNC), which is a corpus of original English texts that contains around 100 million words and is restricted in time between 1980 and 1993. One reason for this choice is that LVCs are not encountered frequently in texts, which is especially true if we focus on LVCs with a specific verb. Also, as is widely known, LVCs are typical for the spoken language, but also for the academic and administrative style. Thus, another reason to opt for the BNC was the fact that it includes material from spoken language (transcribed for easier search) and texts from different functional styles. The content of this corpus is distributed among several categories: spoken language, fiction, magazines, newspapers, academic texts and more.

My research proceeded in several stages: selection of LVCs to be analysed, search for these LVCs in the corpus, and finally, qualitative data analysis. Each of these research phases will now be briefly addressed.

The BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English, the Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English and LTP Dictionary of Selected Collocations were all used in the process of selection of English LVCs with give. The motivation behind my decision to analyse information packaging strategies through the LVCs with give lies in the fact that give, as a ditransitive verb, opens up more possibilities in terms of rearrangement of constituents than monotransitive verbs. Only such LVCs were selected that included a deverbal noun within their structure, regardless of whether this noun was a product of conversion or derivation. Then the LVCs were searched in the BNC.

A total of seventy-eight different LVCs were searched in the BNC. By comparing LVCs registered in the BNC with the parallel constructions with the corresponding FVs,

various reasons for the existence of LVCs were investigated when there are near-synony-mous FVs. In this sense, special attention was paid to the possibilities for different hier-archy of the arguments in the LVCs, which is closely related to the information structure of the sentence. Namely, the contextually familiar participants become thematized (usually in sentence initial position), and the new ones are placed towards the end of the sentence, where the information focus of the sentence is. At the same time, the possibil-ity for reduction of the superficially present arguments in the LVCs was investigated, which often proved to be grammatically unacceptable in the constructions with FVs.

4. Results and discussion

This section presents the findings of a study carried out on samples of text from the British National Corpus. For ease of reference this section has been organized into three subheadings, each of which deals with a separate group of light verb constructions with give and the opportunities they offer for information packaging. These three groups of LVCs with give were formed based on the John Newman's (1996: 136-138, 171-176, 201-205) exploration of the different metaphorical extensions in which the prototypical give has evolved over time in cultures around the globe. In a nutshell, the metaphorical extensions of prototypical give that proved to be relevant for this study are as follows:

Group 1 – causative metaphorical extension (give a scream / sigh / yawn / shrug)
Group 2 – metaphorical extension of schematic interaction (give someone a push / wash / hug)
Group 3 – metaphorical extension for interpersonal communication (give someone permission / advice / approval)

Examples from Group 3 were the most prevalent in the BNC. There were more than twice as many instances of LVCs from Group 3 than from Group 1. Examples from Group 2 were considerably fewer compared to those of Group 1. Of all the examples with LVCs with give, for the purposes of this paper only such examples were chosen that could be used to illustrate my points with regard to information packaging. Each example from the BNC is followed by a three-letter text identifier code and a sentence number within brackets.

For each of these separate groups it will be demonstrated how LVCs enhance the expressive possibilities, particularly in terms of information packaging.

4.1 LVCs from Group 1 (**give a scream** / **sigh** / **shrug**)
The established order of the basic sentence constituents in English is SVO (subject – verb – object) and consequently, other language structures tend to somehow fit into this predominant model. This could be one of the possible motivations for the appearance of LVCs in which the nominal component is derived from an intransitive verb. Namely,

sentences in which an intransitive full verb is used are not completely consistent with the SVO model. Therefore, in such cases, the predication is stretched over two constituent parts: a verbal part represented by a LV and a nominal part in the position of a direct object, reserved for the nominalization derived from the intransitive verb. In this way, the requirements of the canonical word order in English are met, i.e. the sentence contains three basic elements in the SVO order. This is illustrated with examples (1a) and (1b), where example (1a) contains the intransitive FV sigh, while example (1b) contains the LVC give a sigh, which fits the SVO word order.

1a. Elizabeth sighed. (C98 1299)
1b. Elizabeth gave a sigh. (C98 952)

Brinton (1996: 196) claims that verbal elements in English are usually not focused, nor are they carriers of sentence stress. Sentence stress usually falls on the last basic structural element in the sentence, so a simple construction of the subject-predicate type (He walked) sounds incomplete. Similarly, the verb is not expected to be the carrier of the maximum communicative dynamism in the sentence, but to form a transition between the low level of communication dynamism of the theme and the high level of communication dynamism of the rheme (Quirk et al. 1985: 1401). Thus, by stretching the predicate in LVCs simple intransitive structures are avoided (Quirk et al. 1985: 751, 1401). LVCs also allow emphasis to be placed on primarily verbal content, which in LVCs is expressed through a deverbal noun in DO position.

From the aspect of the functional sentence perspective, a function of the indefinite article is to introduce the rheme into the sentence structure, so that in LVCs it signals the nucleus of the sentence, i.e. it allows the action (profiled in the deverbal noun) to be placed in the sentence rheme position, as in (1b).

4.2 LVCs from Group 2 (**give someone a push / wash / hug**)

LVCs with give from this group enable the conceptualization of an event (for which there are two participants in the full verb construction) as a transfer of energy from the first participant to the second participant. Thereby, a third participant is introduced in the LVC, and that is physical energy, as a created participant in the position of a DO. This becomes clear if we compare sentences (2a) and (2b), which can both be used to describe the same event of punching, the difference being that in (2a) the event is conceptualized with two participants - an agent and a patient, while in (2b) the event is conceptualized as a transfer of physical energy from an agent to a recipient, i.e. three participants are involved in it.

2a. A few years ago he punched me … (CDG 1381)

2b. He gave me a punch… (KD9 849)

2c. * He gave a punch to me.

As for the information structure, these LVCs allow us to place primarily verbal content in the focus, formally expressed through a deverbal noun in DO position, while the recipient in the position of IO, as a less important element, is usually coded with a pronoun, which is demonstrated in example (2b). An alternative with an analytical dative construction is not acceptable (2c), because in that case the focus would be on the second participant, and in English there is already a construction to focus on the second participant, and that is the construction with FV in example (2a).

Newman (1996: 206) considers that generally the use of the analytical dative construction suggests that the effect of the verb action on the recipient is weaker, compared to the situations where the recipient is stated immediately after the verb. In this sense, the very preference of the word order S-V-IO-DO in the LVCs from this group, indicates a certain degree of affectedness of the argument in IO position from the action denoted by the verb, although this argument is essentially conceived as a recipient of the physical energy.

In a similar vein, following the interpretation by Quirk et al. (1985: 1396), Brinton (1996: 197) maintains that in (3a) the focus would be on the activity, and in (3b) the focus would be on the argument in IO position. But because give a kiss, unlike the simple verb kiss, is a structure explicitly created to focus the action, (3c) is preferred to (3b) when the focus should be on the recipient. Brinton (1996: 197) adds that unlike (3b), (3d) focuses on Marie while emphasizing kissing, and that unlike (3a), (3e) focuses on the kissing while emphasizing Marie. The last two examples with a marked focus mainly serve to achieve contrast.

3a. He gave Mar*ie* a k*í*ss.

3b. ? He gave a kiss to Mar*íe*.

3c. He kissed Mar*íe*.

3d. He gave Mar*íe* a kiss (not Diane).

3e. He gave a k*í*ss to Mar*ie* (not a hug).

4.3 LVCs from Group 3 (**give someone permission / advice**)

LVCs from Group 3 are conceptualized as a transfer of a verbal message from an agent to a recipient. They can undergo passivization and actually appear in the passive voice quite commonly, which is not the case with LVCs from Groups 1 and 2. The very possibility for passivization indicates that the status of the nominalization in DO position in these LVCs is different compared to the LVCs from Groups 1 and 2. It seems that in LVCs

from Group 3 passivization is possible due to the fact that the semantics of the nominalization within the LVCs has diverged from the meaning of an ongoing process/activity to a certain extent, and has acquired a more resultative or even an objectified interpretation. In other words, sometimes nomina actionis semantically evolve in the direction of nomina acti (Topolińska 2003: 91).

In some cases, the nominalization in the LVCs of this group has become so objectified that it is perceived as a participant with a (concrete or abstract) referent in the world around us. In this sense, such LVCs resemble ditransitive constructions in which the accusative argument is an indefinite noun denoting a concrete material object, as in: She gave him a book / an apple / a CD. However, what separates LVCs from these ditransitive constructions is the possibility of a close paraphrase with the corresponding FV. For example, The policeman gave him an order to slow down has a close paraphrase in The policeman ordered him to slow down. So, the NP in DO position in the former sentence resembles an argument (the possibility for passivization confirms that), but it still has a notable predicative thread. Because of this, it seems acceptable to regard this NP as a quasi-argument (Vincze & Csirik 2010: 1111).

The analysis has shown that in these LVCs the dative argument can be advanced to the subject position, as in example (4), but also the accusative quasi-argument, as in examples (5a), (6a) and (7a).

4. Charlie couldn't remember when he had last been given an order, let alone obeyed one. (K8T 445)

With regard to the passivization by advancement of the accusative quasi-argument, we notice several different situations that are related to the number of superficially present arguments, all of which are presented in items A-C below.

A) *All three participants in the transfer are overtly realized*
In example (5a) the author opted for the LVC give permission in the passive voice for several reasons. In journalistic texts, it is of vital importance that the texts are informative, precise and concise. Knowing that topicalization is used as a means of introducing a familiar element into the discourse, from the topicalization of permission we understand that the permission refers to the aforementioned conversion of a music store into a betting shop and therefore there is no need to repeat that fact. The communicative focus is on the other two NPs (denoting the recipient and the agent), which is why they are presented as new elements in the discourse within the rheme.

5a. A former music and video shop in Alton High Street is to become a modern betting office. Permission was given to Coral Estates Ltd. by planners at East Hampshire District Council... (C88 154-155)

If the FV permit was used, whether in the active or the passive voice, in order for the sentence to be grammatically correct, an infinitival clausal complement should also be added, such that would specify what the permit is given for, as in examples (5b) and (5c) respectively.

5b. East Hampshire District Council permitted Coral Estates Ltd [to do something].
5c. Coral Estates Ltd was permitted [to do something] by planners at East Hampshire District Council.

However, that would disrupt the dense expression in the text. Firstly, the text would be laden with information that could easily be retrieved from the previous sentence. Secondly, this piece of information, although known, would be in a position typical for the rheme in a sentence, contrary to the rules for a neutral word order. Thirdly, again contrary to the rules for a neutral word order, the sentence would start with new, rather than given information. From this we can conclude that, in certain contexts, the principles of sentence information structure call for the use of LVCs.

B) *Two participants in the transfer are overtly realized and the agent is reduced*
As is common practice in passive constructions, the agent can either be reconstructed from the context, or it is implied or irrelevant.

6a. ... positive encouragement was given to artists 'working in new ways'. (A4A 153)

In contrast to this passivized LVC, in principle it is possible to express the same propositional content with the FV encourage in the passive voice, as in example (6b), as such a variant would also allow the reduction of the agent. However, since the communicative focus of the sentence is precisely the NP artists 'working in new ways', it seems that in this case it is more appropriate to position this NP towards the end of the sentence. This is in line with the principle of end-focus, according to which the constituent that is communicatively most important is placed in final position (Quirk et al. 1985: 1398). This NP can be the communicative focus of the sentence even in an active construction with the FV encourage, as in example (6c), but in this case the realization of the agent in subject position is mandatory.

6b. Artists 'working in new ways' were positively encouraged.

6c. [Someone] positively encouraged artists 'working in new ways'.

So, in this situation a LVC in passive voice is preferred because the LVC makes it possible to focus the recipient while reducing the agent. Also, stylistically, example (6a) is more acceptable than example (6b) in terms of the achievement of a structural balance in the sentence. Namely, in English there is a principle according to which the longer and structurally more complex constituent should be placed in final position (known as the end-weight principle), and this same constituent would be unusual in the position of a subject (Quirk et al. 1985: 1040, 1282, 1398).

C) *Only the quasi-argument in subject position is overtly realized and both the agent and the recipient are reduced*

In a news article on the aftermath of a bomb blast in the Londonderry area, it is not as relevant to name the giver and/or recipient of the warning, as it is to mention the issuing of the warning as a fact, as in example (7a), since the emphasis in the text is placed on the devastation left by the blast.

7a. At 10.30 last night a 300 lb van bomb wrecked the heart of the Co Londonderry. A ten minute warning was given. It was not until daylight broke that the scale of the devastation could be seen. Nearly 20 shops and offices in Broad Street, just off the Diamond, were wrecked. (HJ4 7457-7460)

There is no possibility to formulate a grammatically correct sentence with the FV warn, either in the passive or the active voice, without overtly expressing the recipient of the warning and/or the agent, as can be demonstrated from examples (7b) and (7c), respectively.

7b. [Someone] was warned ten minutes before the bomb wreck.

7c. [Someone] warned [someone else] ten minutes before the bomb wreck.

Therefore, it becomes clear that the use of LVCs is preferred when the agent and the recipient are unknown, when we do not want to reveal their identity, when they are irrelevant or implied from the previous context. Because of this, LVCs are very suitable for the institutionalized administrative style or the journalistic discourse.

Generally, the FV approve requires an object in DO position and a sentence without it would be considered ungrammatical, as is evident from example (8b). LVCs, on the other hand, allow us to reduce the argument in DO position from the construction with the FV, as in example (8a).

8a. The committee reports to the faculty board, and final approval is given by the
   General Board. (J2C 396)

8b. * ... and the General Board finally approves [something].

An argument originating from the DO position of the FV, evident from example (9b), will still appear on the surface of the text in the corresponding LVC through a PP dependent on the nominalization in the LVC, as in example (9a). Due to its length, the PP for a series of seven experiments undergoes extraposition, but still remains an integral (though discontinuous) member of the NP with the nominalization as its head.

9a. ... permission was given for a series of seven experiments... (B7J 1652)

9b. [Someone] permitted a series of seven experiments.

In this section it was demonstrated that LVCs generally offer speakers greater versatility when it comes to information packaging. However, even though with LVCs speakers have various optional frameworks in which they could formulate their ideas, they are still "constrained by a combination of the linguistic packaging conventions of the speech community put together with the need to communicate effectively in a given context" (Leafgren 2002: 76).

5. Conclusion

English LVCs offer diverse information packaging possibilities that speakers can exploit depending on their communicative needs in a particular situation. The first possibility is that all participants are overtly realized in the sentence and the communicative focus can be placed on either one of them depending on the context. Another possibility is that one or two sentence participants are reduced, which is the preferred strategy when the reduced participants are implied, unfamiliar, irrelevant or would rather be concealed. It is precisely because of these information packaging options presented by LVCs that they are sometimes preferred in discourse over their full verb counterparts, and occasionally their use is even required because in certain contexts when some of the participants are reduced, the use of the full verb would yield an ungrammatical sentence.

By providing speakers with the syntactic means to organize their ideas in different ways, light verb constructions also allow them to express their more subtle communicative needs with greater accuracy. As English belongs to the languages "with fewer salient packaging options" (Leafgren 2002: 1) compared to the languages with richer inflectional morphology and a more flexible word order, the contribution of LVCs to information packaging versatility should definitely be acknowledged.

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