

Abstract for ALT VII

What do "do" verbs do? Towards a typology of generalised action verbs

All languages appear to have one or more ‘generalised action verbs’ (Van Valin & LaPolla 1997), which, like English *do* in *Who **did** this?*, are used as ‘pro-verbs’ in contexts where the nature of an event is unknown or left unspecified.

It has been claimed in the literature that the concept ‘DO’ is universal, and moreover, that it is universally linked to the notion of agency (e.g. Goddard & Wierzbicka 1994: 42-3). This assumption is also at the heart of proposals to use DO in the semantic decomposition of verbs, pioneered by Dowty (1979: 110-125). Foley & Van Valin (1984: 47-53) and Van Valin & LaPolla (1997: 102-129) even use two kinds of ‘do’ operators, one to represent activities, and one to represent agency.

Through a cross-linguistic study of generalised action verbs, it will be demonstrated that they are not necessarily agentive in nature, but may cover a wide range of functions, including the following:

- Verb of manufacturing, as e.g. in German (*machen*) and French (*faire*)
- Causative verb, as e.g. in French (*faire*) (cf. Moreno 1993)
- Grammaticalised auxiliary, as e.g. in English (*do*)
- Marker of quotations, as e.g. in many Northern Australian languages (Rumsey 1994; McGregor 1994), Papuan languages (Foley 1986: 119), and African languages (Güldemann 2001: 237-245)
- Verbaliser with non-verbal predicates or onomatopoeia, as in the German example *und auf einmal machte es “platsch”* ‘and suddenly it went (lit. ‘made’) “splash”’
- Inchoative verb, as e.g. in Wintu (Pitkin 1985: xii-xix), Yimas (Foley 1991: 293-301, 334-336), and Samoan (Mosel & Hovdhaugen 1992: 113)
- Eventive Verb, i.e. a verb translated as ‘happen’, ‘occur’, as e.g. in Hopi (*hìnti* in the Hopi Dictionary Project, 1998) and Yimas (Foley 1991: 293-301, 334-336)
- A verb used to render a feeling or emotional reaction, as e.g. in Hopi (*hìnti*, see above) and Yimas (Foley 1991: 293-301, 334-336), and Kalam (Pawley 1994: 407-8)
- A verb used to predicate a quality of an entity with a nominal or adverbial complement (e.g. Ewe *wɔ* in *é-wɔ ké* ‘it is sandy’, Ameka 1994: 71).

Note that the semantic range of these verbs includes a number of concepts for which primitives that are supposedly semantically distinct from DO have been introduced in the literature, e.g. CAUSE and BECOME in the Foley/Van Valin/LaPolla framework, and HAPPEN, SAY, and FEEL, which are claimed to be semantic primitives in Wierzbicka’s ‘Natural Semantic Metalanguage’ framework (cf. Wierzbicka 1994). The cross-linguistic data suggest, however, that the range of functions of generalised action verbs is by no means random, and that similar functions are found in numerous unrelated languages. I will propose a semantic map accounting for the most frequent functions and their formal and semantic relationships, as well as linking these to the paths of grammaticalization that are attested for generalised action verbs.

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