

Light Verbs in Punjabi

Saima Jamshaid

saima.jamshaid@uog.edu.pk

Lecturer, Department of English, University of Gujrat, Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan

Syed Tahir-ul-Amin

Assistant Lecturer, Department of English, University of Gujrat, Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan

Corresponding Author: * Saima Jamshaid saima.jamshaid@uog.edu.pk

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of light verbs in Punjabi, with a particular focus on their syntactic positioning and aspectual contribution. While the canonical position of the light verb is generally recognized as V2, evidence shows that in certain contexts it may also appear in the V1 position. The paper explores the conditions under which this positional variation occurs and its implications for the syntax–semantics interface. A range of Punjabi light verbs is introduced, demonstrating that they do not contribute independent lexical meaning but instead encode aspectual and event-structural nuances. Furthermore, the analysis reveals that certain readings and complex verbal formations are only licensed through the use of light verbs, making them indispensable for the generation of complex predicates. This aspect of Punjabi syntax represents a distinctive feature that has received little attention in the literature and adds to the broader understanding of South Asian languages.

Keywords: Punjabi language; light verbs; complex predicates; verb position; aspectual interpretation; South Asian syntax

INTRODUCTION

Indo-Aryan languages are particularly well known for their structurally complex sentences. Among the phenomena that contribute to this complexity, the formation of complex predicates is especially significant. Within these constructions, light verbs play a crucial role, as they not only introduce aspectual nuances to the main verb but also participate in agreement relations.

Complex predicates are generally understood as multi-headed structures composed of more than one grammatical element, each contributing to the overall interpretation of the predicate. Importantly, such constructions behave as a single predicate, taking a single subject, despite being composed of multiple elements. As Butt (1995, p. 162) observes, complex predicates in South Asian languages exemplify this property, providing a rich testing ground for theoretical inquiry into the syntax–semantics interface.

In Punjabi, light verbs occupy a particularly interesting position in this regard. While the canonical position of the light verb is typically recognized as V2, emerging evidence indicates that it may also appear in V1 position under certain syntactic and semantic conditions. This positional flexibility raises important questions about the interaction between syntactic structure, aspectual meaning, and event composition in the language. Moreover, Punjabi light verbs do not carry full lexical meaning on their own; instead, they contribute to the aspectual and event-structural interpretation of the clause.

Given these considerations, this study aims to explore how light verbs function within Punjabi complex predicates and how their positioning affects interpretation. Specifically, the research seeks to address the following questions:

1. What are the syntactic positions that Punjabi light verbs can occupy, and under what conditions do they appear in V1 or V2 positions?
2. How do Punjabi light verbs contribute to the aspectual and event-structural interpretation of complex predicates?
3. What are the implications of these patterns for understanding the syntax–semantics interface in Indo-Aryan languages?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of the *light verb* is relatively recent, though the phenomenon itself has long been observed in Indo-Aryan linguistics. The term *light verb* was first introduced by Jespersen (1965) and has since become central in the study of complex predicates (Grimshaw & Mester, 1988; Mohanan, 1994; Butt, 1995, 1997; Akhtar, 1998, 2000). Earlier scholarship, however, used a variety of labels to capture similar constructions. For instance, Bahl (1964), Van Olphen (1970), and Bhatia (1993) employed the term *explicator*; Baker (1967) and Bailey (1950) preferred *auxiliary*; Sharma (1982) treated such verbs as *intensifiers*; while Kachru described them as *operators*. Hook (1974) and Pray (1970) used the terms *vector* or *vector verb*. Despite the terminological variation, most of these accounts converge on the idea that light verbs are semantically weakened or “bleached” forms of their corresponding lexical verbs. In this sense, they do not contribute full lexical meaning but rather aspectual or discourse-related nuances.

In Indo-Aryan languages, light verbs are crucial for the formation of complex predicates. Such constructions typically involve either nominal/adjectival plus verb (N+V/Adj+V) structures or serial verb forms (V1+V2), where the second verb is a light verb. Akhtar (2000) identifies eight light verbs in Punjabi, while Singh (1990) lists ten, and Butt (1995) documents thirteen in Urdu. These verbs include forms that, when used as lexical verbs, have independent meanings (*dena* “give,” *chadhna* “leave,” *khana* “eat”), but as light verbs, they shift into aspectual markers or completive operators.

The productivity and distribution of light verbs are not restricted to Punjabi or Urdu. Similar constructions appear in other South Asian languages such as Hindi, Kashmiri, Pahari, Hindko, and Marathi, as well as in typologically unrelated languages such as Persian, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese (Butt, 1995; Akhtar, 2000). This suggests that the use of light verbs in complex predicate formation is a cross-linguistic phenomenon with important theoretical implications for the study of verb serialization, grammaticalization, and aspect.

Scholars such as Butt (1995) and Akhtar (2000) have emphasized that in V1V2 constructions, the second verb (*V2*) must come from a restricted set of light verbs. The *V1* position may be occupied by a lexical verb, or in some cases, by an already complex predicate (e.g., N+V or Adj+V). The role of *V2* is thus not to introduce new lexical meaning, but to contribute aspectual, aktionsart, or event-structural information. This is particularly evident in Punjabi, where the same verb can function as a lexical verb in one context and as a light verb in another.

The following Punjabi examples illustrate this distinction. In (1a) and (2a), the verbs *ditā* “gave” and *chad* “left” are used as lexical verbs with their full meaning. In contrast, in (1b) and (2b), the same verbs appear as light verbs in second position, yielding aspectual nuances such as “for use” or “tentative completion.”

1. a.
Faria ne Munnaza nu am ditā
Faria ERG Munnaza DAT mango give.PFV.M.SG
'Faria gave Munnaza a mango (temporarily).'
- b.
Faria ne Munnaza nu am de-ditā
Faria ERG Munnaza DAT mango give-PFV.M.SG
'Faria gave Munnaza a mango (for her use).'
2. a.
Naima ne sekul chad-ditā
Naima ERG school leave-PFV.M.SG
'Naima left the school (for good).'
- b.
Naima saib khā-ditā
Naima apple eat-PFV.M.SG
'Naima ate the apple (tentatively).'

These examples support the claim that Punjabi light verbs are “weaker” forms of their lexical counterparts. They do not introduce new referential content but instead modify the event structure, often indicating completion, affectedness, or temporal aspect. This aligns Punjabi with other Indo-Aryan languages, while also demonstrating distinctive patterns—such as variation in verb position (V1 vs. V2)—that warrant further investigation.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive approach grounded in theoretical linguistics and data-driven analysis. The methodology is structured to capture both the syntactic and semantic properties of light verbs in Punjabi, while also situating them within the wider typology of Indo-Aryan complex predicates.

Data Collection

The primary data for this study was collected from:

- **Native speakers of Punjabi**, including both rural and urban varieties, in order to capture dialectal variation.
- **Spontaneous speech samples**, informal conversations, and storytelling, which allowed observation of naturalistic use of light verbs.
- **Written sources** such as Punjabi short stories, novels, newspapers, and online media.

In addition, examples were also drawn from previous scholarly works (e.g., Bhatia, 1993; Butt, 1995; Akhtar, 2000) to provide continuity with established research.

Data Selection Criteria

The sentences included in the analysis were chosen according to the following criteria:

1. Presence of a main verb combined with a light verb, either in V1 or V2 position.
2. Clear illustration of aspectual contribution, such as completion, telicity, continuity, or affectedness.
3. Variation in case marking and agreement patterns, especially in transitive vs. intransitive constructions.
4. Inclusion of minimal pairs (e.g., lexical vs. light verb use) to highlight semantic distinctions.

Analytical Framework

The analysis follows Critical Syntactic Description and Aspectual Semantics, focusing on:

- **Morphosyntactic behavior:** agreement, inflection, and case marking.
- **Positional variation:** identifying when the light verb appears in V2 (canonical) vs. V1 (marked) positions.
- **Semantic contribution:** determining whether the light verb signals telicity, causation, benefaction, or emotive stance.
- **Event structure mapping:** showing how complex predicates differ from their simple verb counterparts in terms of temporal/aspectual readings.

Glossing and Notation

All examples are presented in interlinear glossed text (IGT) using Leipzig Glossing Rules, with three lines:

1. Original Punjabi sentence in Roman script.
2. Morpheme-by-morpheme gloss (ERG, DAT, PFV, etc.).
3. Free English translation.

This ensures clarity, replicability, and accessibility for both South Asian specialists and general linguists.

Limitations

The study is primarily descriptive and based on a limited set of speakers and texts. While it highlights the major patterns of Punjabi light verbs, further quantitative corpus studies would complement this work by measuring frequency and distribution across genres.

DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis of light verbs in Punjabi is guided by the methodological framework outlined earlier, focusing on their phonological, syntactic, and semantic properties. Light verbs are examined in terms of their distribution, agreement patterns, case marking behavior, semantic contribution, and positional variation. The following subsections provide a detailed account of each aspect.

Light Verbs in Punjabi

Light verbs in Indo-Aryan languages, including Punjabi, are relatively easy to identify as they differ from their corresponding main verbs in both meaning and distribution. Jespersen (1965) first introduced the term *light verb* in the context of English V+NP constructions such as *have a rest* or *give a sigh*. Such

verbs, while retaining verbal morphology, contribute little lexical content and instead add to the predication as a whole.

In Punjabi, light verbs carry tense, gender, number, and agreement morphology, and they also case-mark subjects. Butt (1995) notes that light verbs invariably contribute to the formation of complex predicates, often functioning as functional categories within minimalist theory (Hale & Keyser, 1993; Chomsky, 2000, 2001). Although scholars disagree on their exact inventory, Bhatia (1993) identifies about a dozen light verbs in Punjabi, while Akhtar (2000) lists slightly fewer, emphasizing productivity as a selection criterion.

Light verbs in Punjabi occur in both transitive and intransitive forms. Commonly used examples include *de* 'give', *le* 'take', *chad* 'leave', and *maar* 'hit' (transitive), as well as *jaa* 'go', *aa* 'come', *lag* 'attach', and *tur/chal* 'walk' (intransitive). These verbs often overlap in function, and in many contexts, *de*, *sut*, and *chad* may be used interchangeably without altering meaning (Akhtar, 2000). Importantly, Punjabi light verbs exhibit full-verb counterparts, which underscores their "weakened" but still verb-like status (Butt, 1995; Akhtar, 2000).

The distribution of negation in complex predicates also illustrates the tight bond between V1 and V2. For instance, negation may intervene between a light verb and a preceding adjective or noun but not between a main verb and its following light verb:

(1a) *Ali ne xat likh dita*

'Ali wrote a letter (completely/for someone else).'

(1b) *Ali xat likh ni dita*

'Ali did not write a letter (for someone else).'

This shows that the VV complex behaves as a single verbal unit, resisting intervention from other elements.

Agreement

Like other Indo-Aryan languages, Punjabi complex predicates exhibit agreement phenomena where the light verb (or the final verb in the sequence) inflects for gender and number. In examples such as:

(2a) *Onney sebzi kat diti*

'S/he cut the vegetable (feminine).'

(2b) *Onney phel kat dita*

'S/he cut the fruit (masculine).'

The light verb carries the agreement features corresponding to the object. Similarly, number agreement is evident:

(3a) *Ali ne gaa xarid lai*

'Ali bought a cow.'

(3b) *Ali ne gaawan xarid layyan*

'Ali bought cows.'

Thus, agreement morphology confirms the central role of light verbs in marking grammatical relations within complex predicates.

Case Marking

Case marking provides further evidence for the structural role of light verbs. Ergative case is obligatory for transitive subjects in the perfective, as in:

- (4a) *O ne xat likh lya.*
 ‘S/he wrote the letter (completely).’

In contrast, intransitive light verbs such as *bethi* ‘sit’ require nominative subjects:

- (4b) *O xat likh bethi.*
 ‘She wrote the letter (mistakenly).’

This contrast highlights the volitional and agentive distinctions encoded by light verbs. Transitive light verbs like *de* and *le* enforce ergativity, while intransitives disallow it.

Semantic Properties

Punjabi light verbs add aspectual nuances, contributing telic (bounded) or atelic (unbounded) readings. As shown in the following table, verbs such as *chad* ‘leave’ and *muk* ‘finish’ mark completion (telic), whereas verbs like *re* ‘live’ mark continuity (atelic):

Light verb (V2)	Lexical meaning	Aspectual meaning
<i>chad</i>	leave	Completion/telic
<i>sut</i>	throw	Completion/telic
<i>re</i>	live	Continuity/atelic
<i>muk</i>	finish	Completion/telic
<i>maar</i>	hit	Completion/telic
<i>le</i>	take	Completion/telic
<i>de</i>	give	Completion/telic

Dowty’s (1979) temporal adverbial test further supports this distinction: telic predicates combine naturally within *an hour*, while atelic predicates combine with *for an hour*. Punjabi speakers similarly employ *wich* ‘in’ to mark telic readings.

Position of Light Verbs

While the canonical position of the light verb is V2, Punjabi shows evidence of variation, with light verbs occasionally preceding the main verb. Compare:

- (5a) *Ali ne Kiran nu cand maar diti*
 ‘Ali slapped Kiran (volitionally).’

(5b) *Ali ne Kiran nu cand de maari*
'Ali slapped Kiran (uncontrolled act).'

Here, the semantic difference aligns with the ordering of the verbs, suggesting that positional flexibility is not merely optional but tied to discourse and aspectual interpretations. Interestingly, inflection always occurs on the second verb, whether it is the light verb or the main verb.

Role of Light Verbs in Complex Predicates

Punjabi complex predicates predominantly employ the V1V2 pattern, with V2 functioning as the light verb. These formations typically mark accomplishments or achievements. For example:

(6a) *Ali ne inaam jit lyā*
'Ali won the prize (and received it).'

(6b) *Ali ne inaam jityā*
'Ali won the prize (possibly without receiving it).'

Such contrasts show that light verbs are crucial in marking not only aspect but also speaker perspective and beneficiary roles. Change of location—either physical or abstract—is often a prerequisite for the licensing of light verbs (Akhtar, 2000). Thus, light verbs serve as both grammatical and semantic operators within Punjabi complex predicates.

DISCUSSION

The analysis presented above shows that Punjabi light verbs are not merely syntactic placeholders but play an essential role in shaping aspectual and interpretive nuances of the clause. Their presence contributes to the telicity of events, differentiates between temporary and permanent states, and marks whether an action benefits the subject, the object, or a third party. In this sense, Punjabi light verbs resemble those in other Indo-Aryan languages such as Hindi and Urdu (Butt, 1995; Akhtar, 2000), while at the same time displaying distinctive positional flexibility.

One of the most striking findings concerns the placement of the light verb. While the canonical position of V2 is generally confirmed across Indo-Aryan languages, Punjabi allows occasional inversion, where the light verb appears before the main verb. This variation is not random but corresponds to subtle differences in volitionality, control, and discourse emphasis. Such structural flexibility challenges the view that light verbs are rigidly constrained to second position and instead suggests that their placement is sensitive to semantic-pragmatic factors.

Another key finding relates to agreement and case marking. As expected, Punjabi light verbs inflect for gender and number, but they also participate in ergativity patterns depending on the transitivity and volitionality of the predicate. These patterns reinforce the idea that light verbs are integrated into the core verbal morphology rather than behaving like auxiliaries. Furthermore, the requirement that only the final verb in the sequence bears inflectional morphology underscores the tight unity of complex predicates, supporting the analysis of VV sequences as single predicates with shared argument structure (Butt, 1995).

The semantic properties of light verbs also deserve special attention. By functioning as markers of aspectual distinctions—such as telicity, completion, or continuity—Punjabi light verbs contribute to aspectogenesis in ways comparable to other Indo-Aryan and East Asian languages. At the same time, certain light verbs like *de* ‘give’ or *le* ‘take’ extend their role beyond aspectual marking to encode beneficiary relations and agentive orientation. This suggests that Punjabi, like its sister languages, has partially grammaticalized direction of benefit through the use of light verbs, a phenomenon that merits closer typological investigation.

Taken together, these findings highlight the dual status of Punjabi light verbs: they are semantically bleached in comparison to their lexical counterparts, yet they are indispensable for expressing aspect, agency, and discourse-related nuances.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the role of light verbs in Punjabi complex predicates with attention to their distribution, agreement patterns, case marking, semantic properties, and positional variation. The analysis confirms several key points:

1. **Aspectual Contribution:** Light verbs do not carry full lexical meaning but contribute essential aspectual readings such as completion, continuity, and telicity.
2. **Agreement and Case:** Light verbs exhibit agreement and case-marking properties typical of main verbs, reinforcing their integration into the verbal system.
3. **Positional Flexibility:** While the canonical position of light verbs is V2, Punjabi allows alternative V1 positions in specific semantic-pragmatic contexts, particularly those involving suddenness or reduced volitionality.
4. **Complex Predicate Formation:** Punjabi complex predicates cannot be formed without light verbs, underscoring their central role in the grammar of the language.

The findings suggest that Punjabi offers a unique perspective on the syntax and semantics of light verbs within South Asian languages. While sharing many features with Hindi and Urdu, Punjabi also demonstrates distinctive structural flexibility that enriches our understanding of complex predicate formation.

Future research could expand on this work by exploring dialectal variation in Punjabi, investigating the role of light verbs in spoken discourse, and comparing Punjabi patterns more closely with non-Indo-Aryan languages that also employ light verbs. Such comparative studies would help clarify the extent to which Punjabi-specific patterns reflect areal influences versus universal properties of complex predicates.

In conclusion, Punjabi light verbs occupy a central position in the architecture of complex predicates. Far from being semantically empty, they encode crucial grammatical and discourse-related information, making them indispensable elements of the Punjabi verbal system.

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