

TAKING A DECISION ON MAKING DECISIONS: A CORPUS BASED STUDY OF TWO ENGLISH LIGHT VERB CONSTRUCTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

A light verb is "a common and versatile lexical verb like *do, give, have, make* or *take*, which is semantically weak in many of its uses, and can be combined with nouns in constructions such as *do the cleaning, give (someone) a hug, have a drink, make a decision, take a break*. The whole construction often seems equivalent to the use of a single verb: *make a decision = decide*." (Leech, 2006). Light Verb Constructions (LVCs) pose a learning difficulty to the second language learner because there is a considerable diversity in the choice of the light verb that is used with each of the nouns in LVCs across varieties of English. This paper attempts to study the choice of such light verbs with two nouns across three varieties of English, viz, British English (BE), American English (AE) and Sri Lankan English (SLE) in order to help the second language learner in the researchers' pedagogic situations to choose the 'acceptable' verb choice(s) in the LVCs studied. Since the historical input variety for SLE is British English, it was hypothesized that the choice of the light verb in SLE for the nouns studied would resemble the usage of that in BE.

Learners of English as a Second Language, being non-native speakers of the target language, cannot resort to their intuition to check what is correct. In corpus linguistics, corpora, which are collections of computer readable natural occurring language, along with language patterning software called concordancers, provide a better way of assessing the authentic use of language. Hence, the present study uses corpus data for researching the authentic use of these light verb constructions (LVCs).

METHODOLOGY

Data: Selection of the LVC

The noun with which the light verbs are used in LVCs is a deverbal noun, i.e., a noun that is derived from a verb. This can either be only a lexical category conversion with no affixation as in *look* _(v,n), *drink* _(v,n), *walk* _(v,n) etc or that with affixation as in *decision*_(n) (from 'decide_(v)') *enquiry*_(n) (from 'enquire_(v)') etc. Although some researchers (e.g. Mukherjee, 2010) include only the former type of deverbal nouns in their studies on LVCs, the present study purposely included the latter type as well because of their pedagogic importance owing to the high frequency of occurrence. The selected deverbal nouns are 'decision' and 'look,' which are perceived to be more frequent in SLE.

Data: Selection of Corpora

Newspapers 'provide excellent sample of acrolectal English, which has been observed to be norm-providing' (Koch et al 2010). Hence, the present study used the Sri Lankan Newspapers sub corpora of the South Asian Varieties of English corpora (SAVE-SL), a pair of web-derived newspaper corpora compiled at Justus-Liebig University, Giessen (Germany) in 2008/09. These corpora consist of approximately 1.5 million words each of Daily News and Daily Mirror newspapers published during the period from 2001 to 2007. As a matching source of BE, the 'News' domain of the British National Corpus (BNC-News), which is made up of approximately 9 million words, was selected. In order to investigate AE usage, the 'journal' domain of the Open American National Corpus (OANC journals), which is composed of the journals 'Slate' and 'Verbatim', making an approximate total of 5 million words, was used.

Method of data analysis: Concordancing

Corpus data were analysed using the licensed concordancer 'Wordsmith – Version 05' by courtesy of University of Giessen. This software brings together all the occurrences of a search term along with the other terms frequently occurring with it (collocates). Wild card searches (*) were used to get all forms of a search word. E.g.: '*make**' gives all occurrences of '*make*', '*makes*', '*making*' and '*made*.' Collocates were sorted up to 3 positions right to the 'key' (search) word as well as up to 3 positions left to the key word in order to get as many occurrences of the LVCs as possible.

Forms of light verbs transformed to have an adjectival function such as '*decisions made* by wages boards' and a nominal function as in *decision makers*, *decision making* etc were also taken into the counts. However, only the

constructions both semantically and structurally functioning as LVCs were selected by manually discarding unwanted constructions. Finally, the numbers of occurrences were worked out per one million words of each of the corpora.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 summarises the average frequencies of various noun-light verb combinations of the two LVCs searched per 01 million words of each of the 03 corpora representing the 03 varieties of English.

Table 1: Searched LVCs in British English, Sri Lankan English and American English (Average frequency per million words)

Search term (LVC)	'News' domain of the British National Corpus (BNC-News)	Sri Lankan Newspapers sub corpora of the South Asian Varieties of English corpora (SAVE-SL)	2 journal corpora of the Open American National Corpus (OANC- Journals)
make*decision*	41	62	38
take* decision*	23	59	0.97 (01)
have*look*	04	03	0.8
take* look*	07	06	11
get* look*	0.1	Not found	0.2
give* look*	Not found	0.3	Not found

According to these results, several observations can be highlighted:

1. Use of more than one Light Verb with a particular deverbal noun can be seen in all 03 varieties. However, this trend is significantly seen in BE and in SLE with a higher intensity in the latter. In AE, this is negligible and a preference to a particular LVC combination is obvious.
2. In the case of *make*/take* decision**, although it is generally said that the preference in BE is to use *take* decision**, the results show that it is the opposite in this 'news' domain. In SLE, the two options occur in more or less equal frequencies. One reason for the high frequency of occurrence of *take* decision** in SLE compared to that of BE can be the fact that the literal translation of this light verb in Sinhala resembles *take* rather than *make*. In AE, the preference is quite obviously for *make* decision**. However, it should also be noted that the present study found 05 occurrences of the

option *take* decision** in the two American journals of OANC (totalling approximately 5 million words) adding to the observation that a trend in diversifying the choice of Light Verbs across varieties of English can be seen. This has even infiltrated into fixed adjective noun combinations such as *decision-making* and *decision-makers* to occur as *decision-taking* and *decision-takers* in BNC-News albeit insignificantly.

3. As for the Light verbs occurring with *look**, four options were found altogether. Preference in all three varieties is for *take* look**. In BE and SLE, *have* look** also occurs significantly, whereas, with AE, its occurrence is comparatively less significant. BE and AE also show a sign of the occurrence of *get** as a Light Verb with *look**. SLE saw the occurrence of *give** as a Light Verb with *look**, which has been recorded as a feature of Indian English as well (Cases of Nativised Semantico-Structural Analogy – Mukherjee, 2010)

CONCLUSIONS

Neither the corpora used for the present study, esp., those representing SLE, nor the scope of the study is sufficient to draw substantial conclusions either on LVCs in general or on their occurrence in the individual varieties of English studied in particular. It is necessary at least to compile large scale web-derived corpora of SLE to validate the findings of the present study further. However, the present study, conducted primarily with a pedagogic objective, obviously shows the diversity in the choice of Light Verbs in the LVCs studied across the three standard varieties researched, providing valuable insights into the second language teaching-learning process.

To a great extent, the results of the study support the initial hypothesis that, in SLE, the choice of the light verb for the deverbal nouns studied would resemble the usage of that in BE. However, more data are needed to validate this in comparison with AE because the data show a changing norm with regard to LVCs within BE itself.

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