

The Confused Nature of Delexical Verbs in English: An Error Analytic Study

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Abstract

The present study deals with the verbs that are delexicalised, outside the realm of the delexicalisation of other classes, because it is thought that the study of delexical verbs has been paid little attention. Add to this, it is a fact that L2 learners have no idea of what a delexical verb is, and even if they know it, could they differentiate between each of those verbs? Actually, this is what most concerns this study. It is hypothesized that students: 1. Use a delexical verb instead of another, 2. Do not differentiate between lexical verbs and delexical verbs. Therefore, a diagnostic test has been conducted to see whether the results agree with those hypotheses or not.

Nevertheless, this study seeks to provide a clear image about delexical verbs, and tries to collect as much information as possible about the subject. Hoping to be useful for our non-native Iraqi learners.

1. Delexicalisation in English

Kurtboke (2000: 397) mentions that the term "delexicalisation" appeared in the early nineties to refer to the fact that words, of different classes, can act together to produce different meanings, those meanings are thought to be collocational. He adds that *nouns*, *prepositions*, *intensifiers*, *verbs* and *adjectives* can all enter into delexicalisation. Kurtboke admits that only frequent

words are delexicalised, where their real meaning is reduced and hence it becomes difficult to analyze them grammatically.

Verarbeitung (2004: 72-3) poses that the term 'delexicalisation' refers to the process where words form combinations, usually of two lexical items, the first items may "lose all or part of their independent meaning", while the second items "retain their full lexical meaning". Those words which lose their meanings are delexicalised, and this process is called "delexicalisation".

Actually, delexicalisation may be seen as a feature of everyday language use, as stated by Philip (2003: 3), when he stresses that "everyday language of the native speaker is delexicalised to a considerable extent". Philip asserts that the vast majority of everyday language is phraseological and it involves "a greater or lesser degree of delexicalisation". He supports the following example:

1. New ways of *doing business* are born.

(ibid.: 5)

For Philip, the sentence in (1) is the result of everyday language use, including the delexical verb structure (*doing business*), and the metaphorical use of the verb (*born*). However, the following sections will make clear what is really meant by delexicalisation.

2. Delexical Verbs

Delexical verbs are the products of the process of delexicalisation. They have their own meanings and structures. It is important to have a look at their terminology and treatment in English. They have been studied under the phraseology of

collocation and have been defined and termed differently in their literature.

2.1 Definition

Juknevičienė (2008: 120) emphasizes that delexical verbs are those verbs that are followed by nouns as objects to form a 'collocation' of the type: **(delexical) verb + noun (object)**. Such combination requires verbs which have the highest frequency in the English language, such as '*have, do, make, take*' and '*give*'. When such verbs combine with nouns they build phrases; the meaning of those phrases depends largely on the compound noun rather than on the verb used; and in this case, those verbs perform a function of a certain use rather than conveying an action. He continues to state that those combinations in English grammar, such as: *to make a decision, to give an example*; are called "delexical structures"; and this delexical structure differs absolutely (in meaning) from other structures where a verb is followed by a noun but the verb itself carries an independent meaning, i.e., we have a delexical verb and a lexical verb. Hence, the matter becomes somehow complicated in regard to the combination of delexical verbs, because:

*"Semantically such combinations fall under the phraseological definition of collocations because their meaning is transparent; yet substitutability of the components is semantically restricted, e.g., to take notice, but not *to take observation, to make a statement, but not *to do a statement"*

(ibid.)

Lock (1996: 82) defines delexical verbs as verbs that have different ranges of meanings and he also admits the fact that they combine nouns which "represent most or all of the meaning of the process". Try to compare the following examples:

2. a: She laughed with amusement.

b: She *gave an amused laugh*.

3. a: He commented on something.

b: He *made a comment* on something

4. a: He squeezed his hand.

b: He *gave his hand a squeeze*.

The italicized words in (2.b, 3.b, 4.b) represent combinations of delexical verbs plus nouns. It is clear that the nouns following the delexical verbs carry the central meaning, and that the verbs in that structure shift their lexical function, and they are different from the verbs that appear in (2.a, 3.a, 4.a) which carry the real meaning performed in those sentences, i.e., the delexical structure in (2.b, 3.b, 4.b) is used to give the meaning of the lexical verbs in (2.a, 3.a, 4.a), like this:

Table (1)

The Meaning of the Delexical verbs and the Nouns

Delexical Structure	Lexical Meaning
<i>gave an amused laugh</i>	laughed
<i>made a comment</i>	commented
<i>gave his hand a squeeze</i>	squeezed

Hugon (2006: 18) defines such a structure as "delexical uses of lexical verbs", and he claims that those verbs have attracted the attention of linguists. He quotes the following:

"delexical combinations can be broadly defined as verb-object constructions in which a semantically general – or 'delexicalised' - verb is followed by a noun phrase headed by an eventive noun which carries the main part of the meaning"

(Hugon , 2006: 18)

Vrbinc (2002: 62) admits that delexical verbs are very common verbs, they are followed by nouns which function as objects to indicate "that someone performs an action, not that someone affects or creates something". The nouns *an amused laugh*, *comment* and *squeeze* in the above examples are nothing than objects, they indicate a sort of action performed by the speaker. This truth is facilitated when the two utterances of the three examples above; *he commented*, for example, is different from *he made a comment*. For him, delexical verbs lose their meanings when used in such a combination.

Taeko (2005: 189) stresses that delexical verbs are components of multi-word expressions which have no meanings out of the context of their use. For him, delexical verbs must be considered as part of the grammar of English, "rather than just as words in the lexicon".

2.2 Terminology

When studying the subject under discussion, one can find that many terminologies appear in this respect. For example, Nunberg (2005: 9) admits that they (delexical verbs) have the role of "supporting" the meaning of the collocated noun, therefore he calls them "support verb". Similarly, Nesselhauf (1996: 109) calls them "support verb constructions", because they are used in constructions with a "delexical sense".

Buckingham (2008: 152-53) also agrees with Nunberg and Nesselhauf above on the terminology of delexical verbs, but claims that the linguistic history of those verbs offers some other terminologies, such as: *stretched verbs constructions*; *light verbs*; *complex verb structures* and *verb-nominal predicates*. Guinda and

Plaza (2008: 796) add that they are even sometimes called "empty verbs" and "thin verbs".

"Light verbs" and "delexical verbs" might be the most suitable names for the subject as stated by Geld (2009: 15) and many other writers.

2.3 The Structure of Delexical Verbs

Arndt *et al* (2006: 124) stress that the structure which consists of a delexical verb followed by a noun group is called a delexical structure, for them, this structure:

1. Is very common in current English.
2. Includes some of the very commonest words in the language; and
3. Contributes to the impression of fluency in English.

Arndt *et al* admit that this structure represents a meaning of a certain verb, for example, the verb 'look' can be represented by the whole delexicalised structure as in "have a look", i.e., the verb 'look' becomes a noun in the delexical structure which carries the main part of meaning. They make sure that those kinds of verbs can be intransitive (*as in 5 and 6 below*), and sometimes transitive (*as in 7 and 8 below*), they present the following examples:

5. a: She *made a signal*.
b: She *signaled* for a taxi.
6. a: He *gave a vague reply*.
b: He *replied* to his sister.
7. a: I *had a glimpse of the speedometer*.
b: I *glimpsed* a bright flash of gold on the left.
8. a: He *gave a little sniff*.
b: I *sniffed* the room.

(ibid.)

Attarde (2007: 162-63) also has the same view about the structure of delexical verbs while he prefers intransitive verbs to enter into the structure.

Willis (2005: 183-84) has another point for the structure of delexical verbs. He asserts that delexical verbs are followed by the indefinite article before the noun which accompanies them, and he claims that using a delexical verb enables us to add information by using an adjective in front of the noun. For Willis, the delexical structure helps us "to comment on an action by describing it in some way", especially when we make a noun out of a verb in the delexical structure; it becomes more elegant. Notice the sentences in the following table:

Table (2)
The Difference Between Lexical and Delexical Structure
(Following Willis, 2005: 184)

Less likely forms	More likely forms
He <i>lectured</i> interestingly	He <i>gave an interesting lecture</i>
I <i>showered</i> quickly	I <i>had a quick shower</i>

Verarbeitung (2004: 123) also admits that nouns in the delexical structure are premodified by two sets of adjectives: "obligatory premodified adjectives in the form of past participle and obligatory premodified desubstantival adjectives". The two sets of adjectives are selected in the delexical structure depending on different strategies, the first set being semantically and functionally selected, and the second set is structurally selected.

2.4 The Characteristics of Delexical Verbs

Actually, the simple structure of delexical verbs leads us to think that there are few or no characteristics dominating them, while in fact these verbs have many characteristics to be mentioned.

2.4.1 Semantic Weakness

One of the most important characteristic of delexical verbs is that they are semantically weakened when used in a delexical structure. As stated by Taeko (2005: 226) below:

"delexical verbs, are closely related to semantic opacity. If verbs in verb-noun collocations have little or no meaning outside the context of their particular use, they will be difficult to understand and produce in collocations"

Furthermore, he (ibid., p.250) claims that semantic weakness of delexical verbs makes it difficult to select the right verb in the delexical structure. Hugon (2006: 15) admits this fact saying that semantic weakness of delexical verbs has its effect on the choice of the verb, he supports the following examples where the verb 'make' is used instead of another verb:

9. **Make a research.*

10. **Make a poll.*

11. **Make a balance.*

(ibid.)

He stresses that the above selection of the verb is mistaken because of the semantic weakness of the position of that verb, i.e., the position of the verb is filled with 'make' because semantically there is no big difference in meaning between 'make' and the verbs (which are right) in (12, 13, 14) below, and hence the matter becomes difficult:

12. *Do a research.*

13. *Carry out a poll.*

14. *Strike a balance.*

(ibid.)

Philip (2003: 10) agrees on the same point and asserts that:

"delexical forms abound in the language, and when they are used wrongly, the flow of meaning is interrupted, resulting in incomprehension, misunderstanding and, at times, embarrassment or unintended humour"

Vrbinc (2002: 62) admits that delexical verbs are "difficult to treat" because of their semantic weakness. He claims that when we are talking about delexical verbs we are talking about "uses rather than meanings". He describes the semantic weakness of delexical verbs as a "reduction of the distinctive contribution made by that word to the meaning".

Buckingham (2008: 164) comments that the semantic meaning is shifted towards the noun in the delexical structure; the meaning of the noun becomes the foremost one, while the meaning of the delexical verb is neglected. This is what he calls "emphasis on the semantic contribution of the noun".

2.4.2 Frequency

Frequency as a characteristic appears to abide delexical verbs. This fact is admitted by Vrbinc (2002: 63) when he stresses that frequency is the direct reason behind considering a verb as being delexical. He also claims that frequency is what gives delexical verbs the characteristic of semantic weakness, therefore the most frequent meaning of delexical verbs should be chosen;

because frequency has shifted "the foremost meaning" of those verbs.

Cameron (2003: 34) stresses that delexical verbs are frequently used in the English language to the degree that "the link between the verb and its meaning becomes quite weak". Nunberg (2005: 90) also describes the frequency of delexical verbs admitting that "less frequent" verbs cannot be delexicalised, and that they have their independent meanings, while frequent verbs are delexicalised and their meanings are dependent on the nouns they accompany. He gives an example about the frequent use of the verb 'break', where it can be delexicalised as in: *break somebody's heart; breaks a sport's record*, etc. (ibid. 159).

O'Keeffe and Carter (2003: 37-38) describe delexical verbs as a category that "embraces high-frequency verbs such as *do, make, take* and *get*". They admit that the frequency of delexical verbs raises a problem:

"One problem with the massive frequency of the delexical verbs is the fact that their low lexical content has to be complemented by the lexical content of the words they combine with, and those collocating words may often be of relatively low frequency"

(ibid.:38)

It is clear that delexical verbs are of a high frequency, and at the same time they combine nouns which can be considered as having a low frequency. What is important here is that the two characteristics of the delexical verbs, i.e., *semantic weakness* and *frequency* are interrelated. Whenever a delexical verb is frequent, it loses its semantic content.

Geld (2009: 15) admits that the high frequency of delexical verbs gives them several characteristics, such as:

- A. They express basic meanings and tend to dominate different semantic fields.
- B. They are characterized by a high degree of polysemy, caused by two kinds of meaning extensions.
- C. They tend to be problematic.

In this regard, Man-Lai *et al* (2001: 158) write that frequency leads those verbs to gradually lose their significance and that their meanings in the delexical structure is dropped. Consider the following example:

15. *Have a shower.*

For Man-Lai *et al*, the lexical meanings of the verb 'have' such as *to posses*, *to receive*, *to hold*, *to experience* or *to gain control* are neglected because of the high frequency of "have" to be used in such a structure as in (15) above; the meaning of the phrase in (15) can only be extracted from the noun 'shower'.

2.5 Delexical verbs and Collocations

All studies about delexical verbs view them as one essential type (among many other different types) of collocation. Leonard (2009: 4) defines collocation as "words that occur together in set phrases"; delexical verbs and nouns together represent a combination that falls under the umbrella of collocation. Gledhill (2000: 7) stresses that collocation is a familiar frequent expression which is related to a range of commonly recognized multi-word phrases, including delexical verb structures.

Taeko (2005: 189) stresses this fact (*see 2.1 above*) when he manipulates collocation. He also points that delexical verbs are items related to grammar (grammatical forms) because of the wide range of patterns into which they enter, therefore, they belong to collocation. Taeko also adds that "delexical verbs are influential for

the development of receptive knowledge of collocations" (ibid., p: 212).

Man-Lai *et al* (2001: 157) clarify what is meant by collocation, they assert that collocation includes items which have a high frequency, such as delexical verbs which co-occur with nouns.

Actually, it is noticed throughout this study that experts regard collocations as they are delexical structures. For example, Verarbeitung (2004: 76-7) asserts that collocation is subjected to a certain criteria which gives collocation when he speaks about the constituents of collocation, they are:

- A. The constituents of collocation must be in a direct syntactic relation with each other.
- B. The constituents display either lexically or pragmatically constrained lexical selection.
- C. The constituents have an element of semantic opacity such that the meaning of the collocation cannot be said to be deductible as a function of the meanings of the constituents.

It seems, then, that delexical structure is no more than (the best) a type of collocation, as it has all the above criteria.

2.6 Delexicalized Verbs

It seems that no linguist gives a clear concise list of delexical verbs, some of the writers prefer certain verbs to be regarded as delexical out of others. Whatever delexical verbs are, they are few. Kurtboke (2000: 398) asserts that *have, take, give, do* and *make* can be listed among the most delexicalised verbs in English. Walsh (2005: 10) and Vrbinc (2002: 61) agree on the same list, but they add *put, hold, keep, look* and *set*.

Nunberg (2005: 86) gives an important note that the verb in a *(delexical) verb + noun (object) collocation* is so sensitive to the degree that it is characterized as having either:

- A. A weakened, grammaticalized meaning, as in *do business*.
- B. A figurative meaning, as in *run a company*.
- C. A specialized or a technical meaning, as in *conclude a contract*.

He stresses that (A) above comprises only the (delexical) verbs *have, take, give, do* and *make*, because their meaning is dependent on the noun they accompany, as it is approved in the example *do business*, and that they can be followed by many nouns in English. While verbs in a figurative meaning as in *run a company*, and with a specialized or technical meaning as in *conclude a contract* will be less dependent on the noun than on the verbs with a delexical meaning. That is because they combine few nouns, which will be semantically related. He stresses that the verbs in (B and C above) should not be classified as collocations. While Hugon (2006: 5) asserts that figurative and specialized meanings of those verbs also give them the right to enter into delexicalisation, but they are less frequent in English than the verbs *have, take, give, do* and *make*.

Korte (2008: 17-18) notices that *have, take, give, do* and *make* are among the many verbs that are delexicalised in English due to their high frequency of occurrence. He points out that they are used in verb + noun constructions, where it is clear that the noun carries the "bulk of the meaning".

3. The Test

This section is devoted to clarify the procedures of the present study in regard to the hypotheses presented earlier. It gives some clarifications regarding the design of the test, information about the testees, the scoring scheme and the test administration.

The test is designed to measure the students ability in realizing delexical verbs in English and, and also to find out whether the have the ability to differentiate between the many delexical verbs (i.e., using delexical verb instead of another.

3.1 Test Design

The test of the present study is made up of two questions, each question includes ten items. Both questions are of a multiple choice type. Three choices are provided for each item in the first question and two choices are provided for each item in the second question, each item in the two questions is built up to accept only one possible choice.

Question No. (1) is mainly designed to measure the students' ability in differentiating between each delexical verb, and to select only the right one out of other delexical verbs that may seem suitable without understanding the subject.

Question No. (2) presents an estimation of the students whether they have the ability to realize delexical verbs out of other lexical verbs. Items in this question are constructed to show whether the students have any background about delexical verbs, if so, they will be able to differentiate between lexical and delexical verbs.

3.2 The Sample of the Study

The sample of this study is represented by the fourth-year students of the Translation Department, College of Arts, University

of Tikrit for the academic year 2012-2013. They are thirty, and have been chosen randomly, they are both males and females.

Actually, the purpose behind choosing the forth-year students as a sample of the present study is that they are in the final stage of their learning and it is expected that they have a background about the subject under discussion.

3.3 Reliability of the Test

Oller (1980: 491) gives a clear note that a test should give stable scores at any time and on different occasions. Heaton (1975: 156) and Lyman (1973: 27) admit that there are many factors that affect the reliability of a test positively or negatively, they are:

1. The instructions given to the students regarding the test, students should know what they are required to do.
2. Items of the test should be standard and consistent.
3. The test scores should be stable at the two occasions of the test administration.

However, this study adopts Kuder-Richardson formula. The reliability of the present test has been checked out to be 0.81 which indicates that the test is reliable.

3.4 Test administration

According to Harris (1969: 25) the test material should be presented to students of the same level of learning. For that reason the test of this study was administered to (30) students in their final stage at the College of Arts, University of Tikrit on 19th of November 2012.

However, the researchers have given the students some instructions how to fill the items. The students were told to take part seriously in the test because it is considered as an assessment for

their linguistic levels. The students finished answering the test papers in (22) Minutes.

3.5 The Scoring Scheme of the Test

The present test is scored out of forty marks, twenty marks for each of the two questions of the test. Zero mark was given for those neglected items (which are left without answer) and one mark was given for each correct item in the test as in the table below:

Table (3)
The Scoring Scheme of the Test

No. of Question	No. of Items	Scores	Percentage
1	10	10	50
2	10	10	50

4. Data Analysis

This section shows the results of the test with some clarifying tables, as well as discussing them to show whether they agree with the hypothesis of the present study. At the end of this section, some conclusions are given.

4.1 Delexical Verb Selection

The first question of the test requires that the students grasp the many delexical verbs in English so as to be able to know when and where a certain delexical verb is used. It is supposed that students fill the items of this question with only one suitable delexical verb out of other wrong delexical verbs. The following table shows the results of the first question:

Table (4)
Students' Responses in the First Question

No. of Item	No. of Correct Responses	No. of Incorrect Responses
1	17	13
2	12	18
3	10	20
4	8	22
5	9	21
6	15	15
7	14	16
8	11	19
9	12	18
10	13	17
Percentage	40%	60%

As shown in table (4) above, **179 (60%)** mistake was committed by the students, it shows that they failed to apply the required intention behind this question. This indicates that the students do not have the ability to recognize and use the right delexical verb suitable for each item, in turn it seems that delexical verbs are so confused with each other to the extent that it becomes hard for the students to determine the real meaning each delexical verb occupies, and this is true without looking at the meaning of the noun in each sentence; something the students missed to do, maybe because of the few information they have about the subject.

4.2 Lexical, Delexical Verb Distinction

The distinction between lexical and delexical verb is represented in the second question of the test. Actually this question makes the cutting point if the students know what is meant by delexical verbs in English. Each item in this question contains an underlined verb, the students have to determine what verbs in those items are lexical and what verbs are delexical. The following table illustrates their responses:

Table (5)
Students' Responses in the Second Question

No. of Item	No. of Correct Responses	No. of Incorrect Responses
1	3	27
2	7	23
3	2	28
4	12	18
5	13	17
6	11	19
7	8	22
8	10	20
9	1	29
10	5	25
Percentage	24%	76%

As it is clear from the table above, **228** mistakes were recorded for the students out of the **300** answer for this question (multiplied by the number of the (30) students) , i.e., **76%** of the students failed to realize delexical verbs. It is clear that the students have no idea about what is meant by delexical verbs in English.

4.3 Students' Scores in Both Questions

It is important to arrive at a final result for the whole test and to determine to what degree the students failed to recognize the subject under discussion. The following table represents the students' scores on both questions of the test with the percentage:

Table (6)
Students Scores on Both Questions

No. of Question	Mistakes Made	Percentage
1	179	60%
2	228	76%
Total	407	67%

Actually, table (6) proves that **67%** of the students faced a true difficulty regarding delexical verbs. In one hand it is proved that students show their weak responses towards differentiating between delexical verbs themselves, and on the other hand their responses proved that they even do not know what is meant by delexical verbs in English. Actually, these results agree with the hypothesis of the study presented earlier.

5. Conclusions

The researchers have reached some conclusions regarding delexical verbs in English and whether the students grasp such an important subject or not. The following are the main conclusions:

1. Delexical verbs are the emergence of everyday language use. Their high frequency of use caused them to depart their lexical meaning in a sentence to convey a certain purpose of use other than to perform a certain action.

2. Delexical verbs together with nouns represent 'collocation' where they collocate with each other to form a structure which carries only the meaning of the noun. Delexical verbs here are dependent on the nouns which follow them.
3. This study has proved that delexical verbs are really problematic for our students. This problem can be attributed to many reasons, their misuse (67%) may be because of the fact that delexical verbs have a very weak meaning (as concluded in 2 above). Therefore, teachers should take such a subject into account and try to eliminate the problems by giving some clarifications as for the structure, the meaning, and when and where a certain delexical verb is used.

Appendix

The Test

A:

Select the correct form of the verb in the following sentences:

1. It is a fact that Iraq _____ real decisions last year.
A. made B. gave C. did
2. It's time for you to _____ a shower.
A. take B. do C. make
3. She _____ a generous donation to the charity.
A. made B. have C. did
4. His wife complained that he never _____ the washing up.
A. had B. gave C. did
5. We often _____ a laugh when we're together.
A. have B. take C. do

6. Jacky _____ him a punch in the face.
A. took B. gave C. did
7. Let's go out back and _____ a smoke.
A. do B. take C. have
8. _____ a look at this!
A. Take B. Have C. Give
9. She's always _____ an interest in current affairs.
A. having B. making C. doing
10. Let's _____ a walk over the fields.
A. do B. make C. take

B:

Identify whether the following underlined verbs are: 1. Lexical or 2. delexical:

1. It's time for you to make a step forward.
2. Whose turn is it to make the dinner tonight?
3. The women got angry and hit him.
4. They've got lots of money.
5. He gave instructions on how to drive.
6. Mrs. Rams gave us three sport magazines today.
7. They usually take a tour around the building.
8. Would you take the package to the post office?
9. Can you do a favour for me?
10. Students usually do their homework at night.

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