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Complex verb constructions in Hill Mari: Semantics and event structure

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This paper deals with complex verb constructions in Hill Mari. These are combinations of two verbs in which the first verb contributes its lexical meaning and takes the form of converb, and the second one functions as a finite light verb. The data come from fieldwork in the village of Kuznetsovo and some neighbouring villages (Mari El, Russia) in 2016-2018.

These constructions were discussed in the previous research (Serebrennikov 1960: 190–199, Pengitov et al. (eds.) 1961: 202–216, Driussi 1992-1993), but without a detailed analysis of collocational restrictions and without any formal account. We will contribute to this area with a case study of three light verbs (*šənzäš* ‘to sit down’, *keäš* ‘to go, to leave’, *koltaš* ‘to send’) which describe entry to a new state.

The verb *keäš* prototypically describes the result state of a telic process (1), some semantic restrictions will be discussed in the talk.

- (1) *paj maklaka šəl-en ke-n*
meat piece thaw-CVB go-PRET
‘A piece of meat thawed’.

The verb *šənzäš* introduces a result state often with accumulation of some resource or quality:

- (2) *vəd potolok gəc vedrä-škə pat’k-en šənz-ən*
water ceiling from bucket-ILL drip-CVB sit.down-PRET
‘Water dripped into a bucket from the ceiling’.

The verb *koltaš* denotes an instant or unexpected event (3), semelfactive (4) or completive (‘do V till the end’) (5):

- (3) *tädä tol-ən kolt-en*

- he come-CVB send-PRET
 ‘He has come (unexpectedly)’.
- (4) *vas’a pičäl gäc lü-en* **kolt-əš**
 V. gun from shoot-CVB send-AOR
 ‘Vasya shot a gun once’.
- (5) *män’ šäšer-äm jü-n* **kolt-en-äm**
 V. milk-ACC drink-CVB send-PRET-1SG
 I drank all / *some milk.

The semantic development of a light verb can be described using the notion of “erasing” metaphor (Grashchenkov 2013, 2015), proposed for the analysis of verb complexes in the Turkic languages. According to this approach, a light verb loses its lexical meaning, at the same time preserving its structural position. We will develop this approach and try to account for the semantic difference between light verbs in Hill Mari adopting the event structure framework (Ramchand 2008) and suggesting that a light verb “loses” its lexical meaning but preserves its event structure.

We suppose that the meaning of a light verb is based on the semantic structure of its lexical counterpart and, particularly, on its aktionsart, aspectual composition and subevent structure. Thus, the element ‘do V quickly, in an instant’ in the semantics of constructions with *koltaš* results from the fact that *koltaš* is basically an achievement but not an accomplishment and therefore encodes an instant transition to the resulting state. On the contrary, the verb *šänzäš* is not an achievement and therefore cannot encode an instant transition. The verb *keäš* is similar to the verb *koltaš* in that both of them can introduce an argument in their *resP* with the role of Path (and this fact distinguishes these two verbs from *šänzäš* which introduces an argument with the role of Location, cf. (Ramchand 2008)). These facts account for the similar completive meanings of *koltaš* and *keäš*, but *keäš* does not express instant transition (at least in its primary meaning), and therefore neither does the corresponding light verb.

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Abbreviations

1 – 1st person; AOR – aorist; CVB – converb; ILL – illative; PRET – preterite; SG – singular.

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