1. Semantic weakness and light verbs

Hale & Keyser (1993; 1997; 1998) argue that unergative verbs (dance, cry, sing, and the like) involve a transitive structure where an empty light verb selects for a noun (or a √Root; cf. Harley 2005 and Marantz 1997). Accordingly, the l-syntax of a verb like dance would be as depicted in (1):

\[
(1) \quad V
\]

\[
\quad V \quad N
\]

\[
dance
\]

Hale & Keyser (1998:115) provide evidence from different languages where the alleged hidden transitive structure is actually spelled-out. One of them is Basque, a SOV language:

(2) Negar / eztul / barre / jolas / etc. egin. (Basque)

cry cough laugh play do
According to Hale & Keyser (1997:210; 1998:80-81; 2002:63), the empty head in (1), having a defective p(hono logical)-signature, is uninterpretable at PF, and therefore triggers a process of conflation, whose definition is given in (3) (cf. Harley 2004 for further discussion)\(^1\):

\[ (3) \text{Conflation} \]

Conflation consists in the process of copying the p-signature of the complement into the p-signature of the head, where the latter is “defective.” [from Hale & Keyser 2002:63]

In this note I want to discuss Hale & Keyser’s (2002) account of (4)’s unacceptability, which crucially depends on an analysis of unergatives that dispenses with conflation (as understood in Hale & Keyser 1993; 1997; 1998) entirely:

\[ (3) \text{a. “He made.} \]

(cf. He made trouble/fishtraps/mistakes)

\[ \text{b. “She did.} \]

(cf. She did a jig/pirouettes/the MCATs)

[from Hale & Keyser 2002:91]

Hale & Keyser (2002) give a twist to their previous accounts of unergatives, taking verbs of the dance sort to be directly inserted into the V position, leaving -Hale & Keyser reason- the N position empty. Departing from the
analysis in (1), where N is licensed through N-to-V movement (conflation), Hale & Keyser (2002) argue that N is licensed by the semantic features encoded in V, which establish a binding dependency with those of N. This is shown in (4):

(4) \[ V \]
\[ V_{[\text{dance}]} \quad N_{[\text{dance}]} \]
\[ \text{dance} \]

[from Hale & Keyser 2002:93]

Assuming this analysis, Hale & Keyser (2002) conclude that the examples in (3) are ruled out due to the semantically defective status of the verbs *make* and *do*: “we propose that their inability to take noovert objects follows from the fact that they are “light verbs” —in other words, verbs without any semantic component that could enter into a classificatory binding relation capable of licensing an empty complement” (Hale & Keyser 2002:93).

Here I would like to propose a different explanation of the facts in (3). To be precise, I would like to argue that the problem has nothing to do with semantic nuances of the kind Hale & Keyser (2002) presuppose, but rather with the purely formal need for \( v^* \)'s \( \phi \)-features to be valued, in the sense of Chomsky (2000; 2001; 2008).
2. On light nouns

Before addressing the status of (3), I would like to turn my attention to some data that, at first glance, may be taken to support Hale & Keyser’s (2002) analysis of (3) in terms of semantic weakness of light heads.

In particular, I want to consider evidence provided by Bosque (2001) that, yet again, bear on the weak status of light categories. Bosque (2001) argues that the Spanish data in (5) are unacceptable if the adjective is dropped, a fact he takes to indicate that nouns like circunstancia (Eng. circumstance), momento (Eng. moment), or situación (Eng. situation) are light\(^2\), and therefore need the semantic support of the adjective to yield an LF legitimate NP:

(5) a. La nación pasa por circunstancias *(críticas). (Spanish)

the nation go-3SG through circumstances critical

‘The nation is going through critical circumstances’

b. Estamos atravesando un momento *(difícil). (Spanish)

be-1PL go-thorugh-1PL a moment tough

‘We are going through a difficult moment’

b. Se hallaban al borde de una situación *(peligrosa). (Spanish)

CL find-3PL to-the edge of a situation dangerous

‘They were on the brink of a dangerous situation’

[from Bosque 2001:32-33]
Bosque (2001) claims that in these examples, the relevant verb is not subcategorizing (s-selecting) for the noun, but actually for the adjective, much like -he suggests-, promise subcategorizes for walk (not take) in (6):

(6) I promised him to take a walk to the beach.

[from Bosque 2001:32]

Bosque (2001) realizes that the verbs in (5) c-select a nominal object: that is why the adjective cannot stand on its own. Interestingly, Bosque (2001) shows that replacing the adjective with a nominal counterpart yields a correct outcome, in terms of both c-selection and s-selection.

(7) a. La nación pasa por una crisis. (Spanish)
    the nation go-3SG through a crisis
    ‘The nation is going through a crisis’

b. Estamos atravesando una dificultad. (Spanish)
    be-1PL go-thorugh-1PL a difficulty
    ‘We are going through some difficulty’

b. Se hallaban al borde de un peligro. (Spanish)
    CL find-3PL to-the edge of a danger
    ‘They were on the brink of some danger’

[from Bosque 2001:32-33]
Although intuitively appealing, I think Bosque’s (2001) analysis is not entirely satisfactory. For one thing, his account could not be extended to cases like, say, (8), where, to my ear, (8b) is pragmatically anomalous.

(8) a. He pasado por una situación similar. (Spanish)
    have-1SG gone through a situation similar
    ‘I went through a similar situation’

    b. #He pasado por una similitud. (Spanish)
    have-1SG gone through a similarity
    ‘I went through a similarity’

Examples along the lines of (8) are easy to construct, and in all of them, the alleged light noun can stand of its own, without any modifier.

Quite easily, the oddity of examples like (5) resembles that of data like (9), where nouns appear to require some complement or modifier:

(9) a. Hoy hace un día *(soleado). (Spanish)
    today do-3SG a day sunny
    ‘Today it’s a sunny day’

    b. Habla de una manera *(extraña). (Spanish)
    talk-3SG of a way odd
    ‘She talks in an odd way’

    c. El hermano *(de Juan) ha llegado. (Spanish)
The examples in (9) contain a rather heterogeneous list of nouns, and in all of them it seems as if the noun alone is not enough to license the structure (cf. Borer 2005 for recent discussion about the alleged necessity for nouns to take complements, relational and others). I believe, though, that just like in the cases offered by Bosque (2001), it is hasty to talk about unacceptability, as these sentences become acceptable if the relevant context is found. I take this to argue in favor of pragmatic accommodation.

Importantly, no analogous contextual strategy appears to be available for the data in (3), which remain puzzling. In the next section I explore an analysis of (3) that will make crucial use of Chomsky’s hypothesis that light verbs are endowed with a \( \varphi \)-feature bundle that acts as a Probe looking for a Goal.

3. Phases and \( \varphi \)-feature inheritance

In order to provide an alternative account for (3), let me briefly introduce the basics of Chomsky’s (2000; 2001; 2008) Probe-Goal framework. Trying to recast the traditional intuition that “verbs agree with nouns, not

Chomsky (2008) strengthens the role of C and v∗ as φ-Probes in order to claim that they provide a minimal search space for Transfer of derivational chunks to the interfaces (the phases). According to Chomsky (2008), φ-features are passed down from phase heads to non-phase heads, from which they continue probing, until they find a Goal (a DP endowed with a valued matching φ-bundle). This is depicted in (10), where I use the symbols √ and × to indicate ‘valued’ and ‘unvalued’ respectively:

(10) a. \[ C_{[\phi]} \cdots T \cdots \text{DP}_{[\phi]} \cdots \rightarrow C \cdots T_{[\phi]} \cdots \text{DP}_{[\phi]} \cdots \]

\[ v^*_{[\phi]} \cdots V \cdots \text{DP}_{[\phi]} \cdots \rightarrow v^* \cdots V_{[\phi]} \cdots \text{DP}_{[\phi]} \cdots \]

Chomsky’s (2008) hypothesis is rounded up by Richards (2007), who convincingly argues that the process of inheritance (10) illustrates is a conceptual imperative due to two background assumptions: (i) deletion of features is part of Transfer, and (ii) the Phase Impenetrability Condition, which states that only the complement of a phase head can be transferred.
It is important to notice that Chomsky’s (2000; 2001; 2008) proposal amounts to having v∗’s φ-features valued by the end of the v∗P phase, for convergence (Full Interpretation) at the SEM component to succeed.

With this in mind, let us consider (3) again, repeated below for ease of exposition:

(11) a. *He made.
   (cf. He made trouble/fishtraps/mistakes)

   b. *She did.
   (cf. She did a jig/pirouettes/the MCATs)

   [from Hale & Keyser 2002:91]

I would like to relate the unacceptable status of (11) not to the semantically weak status of make and do, but to the fact that the φ-Probe launched by these verbs (which I take to be in v∗) fails to find a matching Goal, and therefore cannot be valued:

(12) [ v∗[φ . . . ]

Plausibly, the analysis carries over to cases like (13), taken from Hale & Keyser (2002:91). Given the analysis just outlined, the problem with (13) is simple: v∗ cannot value its φ-features, because there is no Goal DP available (the only available Goal is, in Hale & Keyser’s analysis, those of
the adjective *clear, but they could not be matched by v*, due to minimality)\(^4\)\(^5\).

(12) *He cleared.

This analysis is not obviously compatible, tough, with Hale & Keyser’s (2002) claim that (13)’s status is due to the same reasons that rule (3) out.

(13) a. *John puts the books.
   (cf. John put the books on the top shelf.)
   b. *Leecil fit the horse.
   (cf. Leeceil fit the horse with a new Schowalter.)
   [from Hale & Keyser 2002:94]

As Hale & Keyser (2002) put it:

The verbs […] are too “light” to license a nonovert argument. The sole semantics associated with *put and *fit, in these uses, are those of the construction itself, the meaning corresponding approximately to the idea of effecting a relation between two entities: one (the internal specifier) functioning as a “figure,” the other (the complement of *P) as a “place or end point.”

[from Hale & Keyser 2002:94]

As Hale & Keyser (2002) observe, the relevant reading of the examples in (13) is a location/locatum one, which crucially requires a VP-internal small
clause. Nevertheless, by the logic of the Probe-Goal account of (3), (13) should be better than (3).

This prediction is borne out in Spanish, where *poner* (Eng. put) can be used in the absence of a locative PP (putting absolute uses of *poner* aside)\(^6\).

(14) a. Juan ya ha puesto los libros #(encima de la mesa). (Spanish)
   ‘Juan already put the books (on the table)’

b. *Juan ya ha puesto. (Spanish)
   ‘Juan already put’

The point the data in (14) try to make is that all that *put* obligatorily needs is an object for \(\varphi\)-feature valuation purposes, not a VP-internal locative predicate. Sentences like (14a) are thus better than (14b), since the formal needs of \(v^*\) are satisfied; however, unless some locative meaning can be contextually retrieved, the speaker will not be able to provide *poner* with a pragmatically felicitous interpretation. As in the examples in (9), it is possible to accommodate (14a), but not (14b).

4. Conclusions
The goal of this short paper was to argue for an analysis of the data in (3) that departs from Hale & Keyser’s (2002) assumption that light verbs lack the semantic features necessary to license a nonovert complement position.

Though sympathetic to the idea that verbs like put, do, become and the like are conceptually emptier than kill, sing, or saddle, I believe the unacceptable status of the data in (3) follows from a formal reason that can be implemented in terms of Chomsky’s (2000; 2001; 2008) Probe-Goal system.

Let me add that the approach I have just sketched is not incompatible with the possibility that some structures be ruled out due to purely semantic factors. Arguably, (15), where the formal needs of functional categories are properly satisfied, is one such case:

(15) *John is.

If part of LF interpretive business comes from the interpretation that DPs receive (their theta role), then (15) can be excluded because John lacks such an interpretation. Note, though, that the same idea cannot be pushed to Hale & Keyser’s (2002) analysis of (3): an object position has been created, so there is ‘a configuration’ that will interpretively feed LF. Crucially, that position is empty (and English cannot license a null
formative), which means the $\phi$-Probe in $v^*$ will not receive a value and subsequently delete, causing a formal crash.

If the gist of the analysis is on the right track, it is tempting to extend it to account for the traditional observation that core functional categories, $C$, $v^*$, $D$, and $P$, must always have a DP Goal in its c-command domain. Such a claim has already been made in the context of Chomsky’s Phase Theory for $C$ and $v^*$, but seems to be nonetheless correct in the case of $D$ (even in the case of clitics, which, under Torrego’s 1995 account, take a pro in complement position), and $P$ (cf. Svenonius 2004)\(^7\), and seems to point to a more general theory of local feature-valuation.

References


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1 Hale & Keyser (2002:12) acknowledge the similarities between their *conflation* and Baker’s (1988) *incorporation*, which “are closely related and may ultimately prove to be the same thing.” As far as I can see, the main distinction between *conflation* and *incorporation* concerns the level of representation where it occurs: l(exical)-syntax or s(entential)-syntax.

In Hale & Keyser’s (1993; 1997; 1998; 2002) framework nouns do not take complements because they instantiate a monadic template: that is, by stipulation. Once X-bar theory is dispensed with, the monadic nature of nouns cannot be maintained in a principled fashion. One could try to recast this property by taking nouns to lack what Chomsky (2008) calls *edge feature*, but I see no non-stipulative way of doing that.

I am putting aside the fact that, much like in verbs, φ-features are unininterpretable (non-valued) in adjectives. An alternative possibility is to adopt Mateu’s (2002) analysis of adjectives as elements that result from the merger of a relational element with a non-relational one -typically, a preposition and a noun. If tenable, the relevant φ-features would be those of the underlying noun.

The same minimality effect is at stake in (i), where the preposition *of* blocks Agree (*v*, *the rain*):

(i) John fears (*of*) the rain.

Spanish is not an object pro-drop language, so the possibility of having null objects is, like in English, controlled for.

The analysis extends to particles, if these always involve incorporation of a covert complement. Cf. Svenonius (2004:18 and ff.)