

English Light Nouns and the syntax-semantics interface

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The notion of Lightness has been largely discussed in literature since Jespersen's (1927, 117-118) definition of "an insignificant verb, to which the marks of person and tense are attached, before the really important idea". The idea of Lightness has, therefore, been longly associated to verbal structures formed by a semantically-bleached predicate (Szabolcsi 1986) and a *nomen actionis* (Nickel 1968), or, in keeping with a more recent definition, an event noun (Kiefer and Gross 1995). Instances of such patterns in English are to take a walk, to make a call, to give a suggestion, to have an argument. Studies on Light Verb Constructions (henceforth, LVCs) have profusely developed over the past four decades, in many languages, and following different approaches, ranging from morphology (Helbig 1979; 1984) to syntax (Cattell 1984; Grimshaw and Mester 1988), and semantics (Wierzbicka 1982; 1988; Stein 1991). More specifically, some contributions on the topic have included other constructions than the prototypical ones identified by Jespersen (1927), thus suggesting the existence of a gradient of Lightness, which shifts from 'Truly Light Verbs' (e.g., to make a call) to 'Vague Action Verbs' (e.g., to make an inspection, to give a demonstration – see Kearns 2002), and 'Complex Predicate' constructions (e.g., to fall in love, to take into account – see Butt 2010). Moreover, recent studies have highlighted the aspectual role played by the predicate in LVCs; in other words, although deprived of their semantic value, verbs entering a LVC may participate in licensing the aspectual configuration of the pattern, as in to breed resentment, to entertain a relationship (Mastrofini 2021). Since the beginning of the 21st century, the idea of Lightness has also been applied to nominal patterns (of the type 'N1 of N2'), thus assuming that this phenomenon involves a range of constructions placed along a scale between 'Nouniness' and 'Verbiness' (Sasse 2001; Simone 2006).

The notion of Light Nouns (henceforth, LNs) has been investigated so far only in few contributions, mainly focusing on languages other than English (especially, Italian and Basque). Simone and Masini (2008; 2014) carried out a research on Italian LNs (in comparison with other languages, such as French and English) based on morphosyntactic and aspectual-semantic features. According to the authors, Nouns can be distributed along a scale of 'Nouniness' (Lyons 1977; Sasse 2001; Simone 2006) where a [+Noun] extreme, which is mainly characterized by Referential Force, is opposed to other [-Noun] classes that exhibit a lower degree of Referentiality. The [-

Noun] subcategories include Classifiers (e.g., a spoonful of, a fistful of), Quantifiers (e.g., plenty of, a mountain of), Qualifiers (e.g., a type of, a quality of), Approximators (e.g., a kind of, a sort of), and Support Nouns (e.g., an attack of, a flow of). Simone and Masini's (2008; 2014) LN gradient has also been the starting point of two more studies on the topic, carried out by Masini (2016) on Italian nouns, and by Zabala (2017) on Basque nominal constructions. The most interesting subcategory, and also the one that is more reminiscent of (or parallel to) the notion of verbal Lightness is that of Support Nouns (henceforth, SNs). Duly, unlike Classifiers, Quantifiers, Qualifiers, and Approximators, SNs show a higher degree of Referentiality, represent the syntactic and semantic Head of the pattern 'N1 of N2', and, moreover, play the role of Aspectualizers. In other words, I claim that a LN (in parallelism with a LV) has to play an aspectual function within the pattern 'N1 of N2' of which it occupies the N1 position. Therefore, unlike the other classes of Light Nouns, Support Nouns exhibit specific verbal features, and their status may be accounted for in a continuum between 'Nouniness' and 'Verbiness'.

My study aims at investigating English SN patterns from an aspectual-semantic perspective, also comparing their syntactic behaviour with other LN patterns, such as Classifiers, Quantifiers, Qualifiers, and Approximators. I therefore conducted a corpus-based analysis in the Sketchengine corpus enTenTen2020, in order to verify: 1) the level of cohesion between the two nominals within the construction; 2) the existence of a typological gradient of LN patterns based on the syntax-semantics interface.

Keywords: Lightness, light nouns, English, syntax-semantics interface, corpus analysis

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