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Aboh, E.O.

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Functional verbs in Gungbe: the case of inherent complement verbs*

Enoch O. Aboh
e.o.aboh@uva.nl

University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT. Traditional linguistics assumes that verbs are lexical categories that typically merge in the predicate domain of a sentence: VP. This study shows that, in Gungbe (Kwa), a significantly large class of items functioning as verbs heading a VP in a sentence may also serve as functional elements that merge within the functional skeleton of the clause. The discussion builds on the analysis of Inherent Complement Verbs (ICVs). In the Kwa literature, ICVs are defined as verbs which require a complement in their citation form (e.g., *dó wèzùn* lit. plant race; ‘to run’). This paper argues that these verbs can first merge in two syntactic positions: little *v* and *V*. When merged in *v*, such verbs select for a VP-complement involving an abstract empty *V* which necessarily takes a bare NP as complement (Hale & Keyser 1993). When merged in *V*, however, these verbs pattern like other Gungbe lexical verbs in selecting a DP argument. The paper concludes that Gungbe, (and possibly Kwa languages in general) involve a class of verbal roots that can merge in the predicate head or in the functional domain. This finding supports Kayne’s (2009) recent antisymmetric approach to the lexicon.

KEY-WORDS. Gungbe, functional verb, inherent complement, incorporation, bare noun phrase

1. Introduction

Linguistic studies generally suggest that languages involve parts of speech such as noun, adjectives, and verbs (N, A, V) that can be distinguished from functional items such as Tense, Mood, and Aspect (TMA) markers. It is customary in generative syntax to assume that major categories merge in the predicate domain while TMA markers merge in the functional sequence. This categorical classification is believed to correlate with the observation

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that major categories form an open class while functional categories belong to a closed class.

Given this description, the Gungbe facts discussed below present us with a paradox: in this language a significant class of elements that would fall in the category of verbs can also merge within the functional sequence (e.g., in *v*, *Asp*).¹ This is illustrated by the following examples in which the items *wá* and *nɔ̀* are used as predicates or aspect markers in (1a) and (1b), respectively. Example (1c) shows that the functional elements and their lexical cognates can co-occur in the same clause (see also Aboh 2009: 30 for similar examples).

- (1) a. *Félé ná wá nɔ̀ x̀gbónù.* [Gungbe]
 Fele FUT EVENT stay Porto-Novo
 'Fele will eventually stay in Porto-Novo.'
- b. *Félé ná nɔ̀ wá x̀gbónù.*
 Fele FUT HAB come Porto-Novo
 'Fele will habitually come to Porto-Novo.'
- c. *Félé ná wá nɔ̀ nɔ̀ x̀gbónù.*
 Fele FUT EVENT HAB stay Porto-Novo
 'Fele will eventually come to stay in Porto-Novo habitually.'

Aboh (2009) discusses similar functional vs. lexical behaviour of verbs in the context of serial verb constructions and the general debate of the formal distinctions between light verbs and lexical verbs. In this paper, I turn to another construction in which one finds the same pattern: Inherent Complement Verbs (ICVs). There have been several studies on ICVs in Kwa (e.g., Nwachukwu 1987, Manfredi 1991, Ihionu 1992, Avolonto 1995, Essegbey 1999, 2003, 2010, Anyanwu 2012). ICVs can be described as verbs which require a complement in their citation form, as illustrated by the verbs under (2a-b) in Gungbe. In this paper, I gloss the verbal part of ICVs as 'Vx' in which x encodes an approximate meaning.

¹ Gungbe belongs to the Gbe languages, a subfamily of the Kwa branch of the Niger Congo languages spoken in West Africa. The variety of Gungbe discussed in this paper is the author's native tongue spoken in Porto-Novo, in the republic of Benin.

- (4) a. Yé tún kàn. [Gungbe]
 3PL V_{UNTIE} rope
 'They untied a rope/*they untied.'
- b. Yé nyìn àgán.
 3PL V_{THROW} stone
 'They threw a stone/*they threw.'
- c. Yé nyìn àgán bíś xò mè.
 3PL V_{THROW} stone enter room in
 'They threw a stone into the room.'

These examples also indicate that Gungbe (and Kwa languages in general) allow bare nouns (i.e., noun phrases lacking overt determiners) in argument positions. Though the bare internal arguments in (4a-b) are interpreted as indefinite DPs, Aboh (2004) and Aboh and DeGraff (2014) show that such bare nouns in argument positions can also correspond to definite, plural, or generic readings depending on context. This would mean that the complements in (4) are full DPs, as opposed to those of the ICVs in (2) and (3), which are structurally bare (and therefore non-referential) NPs. I return to this discussion in section 3. Aside their specific semantics, therefore, no surface difference immediately sets the ICVs in (2) apart from the lexical usages in (4a-b). In both situations, the verbs combine with a noun phrase complement, though the subtle interpretive differences in (2), (3) and (4) suggest that these noun phrases may involve distinct structural make-up.

I take these facts to suggest that many verbs in Gungbe have ambivalent properties: they can be used lexically in which case they take various complements including a referential DP internal argument (4) or they can be used in ICVs in which the V and N form a complex unit with a non-transparent meaning. In the latter situation, the inherent complement represents a structurally bare NP (i.e., it lacks a D layer). I further argue that this ambivalent behaviour of Gungbe verbs results from the fact that a significant class of verbs are roots that can first merge in *v* (thus generating ICVs) or in *V* (thus yielding lexical VPs). Likewise, the non-transparent semantics of ICV constructions derives from the fact that the

- (6) **Kùn** (%**wè**) **Félé** **kùn** **mótò** **cè**. [Gungbe]
drive FOC Fele drive car 1SG.POSS
'Fele DROVE my car.'

A **Vicv** cannot front or double in verb focus construction (7).

- (7) .***Tún** (%**wè**) **Félé** **tún** **tán**.
release FOC Fele release saliva
'Fele RELEASED saliva.'

Instead, the complement of **Vicv** must front to a position left-adjacent to the focus marker and there is no doubling, as exemplified in (8a). This derivation has the meaning of verb focus similarly to example (6) even though its syntax is comparable to that of the argument focus construction in (8b), in which the internal argument is fronted left-adjacent to the focus marker and is interpreted as (contrastive) focus.

- (8) a. **Tán** **wè** **Félé** **tún**. [Gungbe]
saliva FOC Fele VRELEASE
'Félé SPAT'
#Fele released SALIVA'
- b. **Mótò** **cè** **wè** **Félé** **kùn**.
drive 1SG.POSS FOC Fele drive
'Fele drove MY CAR (e.g., not yours).'

Note also that while the focus marker **wè** is required when focus movement targets the complement of a **Vicv** or an internal argument (8a-b), this is not necessarily the case when focus movement involves a **VLEX**, and we observe speaker variation, as I remarked with regard to example (6).

A similar asymmetry between **Vicv** and **VLEX** is found in the context of event relativization which also involves **VLEX**-doubling. In Gungbe, the verb can be relativized, yielding the so-called factive constructions (cf. Aboh 2005, 2010). Factive constructions involving the verb require doubling of the lexical verb (9a). **Vicv**'s cannot form factive constructions. Instead, the

complement must front and no doubling arises (9b):

- (9) a. **Kùn** *qě* *Félé* **kùn** *mótò* *cè* *vé* *ná* *mì*. [Gungbe]
drive REL Fele drive car 1SG.POSS hurt PREP 1SG
'The fact that Fele drove my car annoyed me.'
- b. **Tán** *qě* *Félé* *tún* *vé* *ná* *mì*.
saliva REL Fele VRELEASE hurt PREP 1SG
'The fact that Fele spat annoyed me.'

Summarizing, *V_{ICV}*'s display similar distribution as *V_{LEX}*'s except in the context of verb focus and event relativization. The generalization is that *V_{ICV}*'s cannot enter doubling structures (unlike *V_{LEX}*'s). As already argued by Aboh and Dyakonova (2009), this suggests that *V_{ICV}* is not available for certain syntactic operations (e.g., it cannot be probed by the focus head). Likewise, that the complement of a *V_{ICV}* must front in verb focus constructions, where it attaches to a focus marker as in argument focus constructions, suggests that the displaced constituent has both verbal and nominal properties.² I return to this discussion in section 4, but let us first consider the restrictions that apply to the complement of a *V_{ICV}* unlike the complement of a *V_{LEX}*.

3. The complement of an *ICV*: an NP or a DP?

In addition to showing the differences between a *V_{ICV}* and a *V_{LEX}*, the data from (6) to (9) inform us on some differences between the categories of their complements as well. For instance, complements of *V_{ICV}*'s cannot receive an individual focus reading, since the fronting operation yields the semantics of verb focus rather than argument focus as indicated by the contrast in (7) and (8). The same holds true of event relativization in (9). These facts suggest that what undergoes movement in these constructions is not just the bare NP but rather the VP whose head has been lexicalized by N. I conclude from this that the bare NP complement of a *V_{ICV}* cannot stand alone: it cannot be targeted by syntactic or semantic operations individually. Any syntactic operation that applies to V or N applies to the VP as a whole.

This intricate relation between a *V_{ICV}* and its inherent complement is

² I think Vadim Kimmelman for drawing my attention to this.

further shown in contexts of pronominalization. In Gungbe, the internal argument of a V_{LEX} can be pronominalized, as shown by (10a-b).

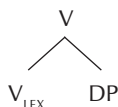
- (10) a. Àsé lǝ má ðù hwèví. [Gungbe]
 cat DET NEG eat fish
 'The cat did not eat the fish.'
- b. Àsé lǝ má ðù i.
 cat DET NEG eat 3SG
 'The cat did not eat it.'

Returning to the ICV *nyin-cin* 'to sneeze' in (2b), repeated here as example (11a), we observe that the complement of a V_{ICV} cannot be pronominalized. While the resulting sentence is not ungrammatical, the ICV meaning 'to sneeze' in (2b) is lost. Instead, the pronoun is understood as being bound by an antecedent (assumed to be present in text or in discourse).

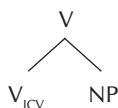
- (11) a. Félé nyin *(cin). [Gungbe]
 V_{THROW} atishoo
 'Fele sneezed.'
- b. Félé nyin i.
 Fele throw 3SG
 '*Fele sneezed/*Fele sneezed it.'
 'Fele threw it.'

These examples show that the inherent complement of a V_{ICV} is not referential. Accordingly, when this complement undergoes a syntactic operation, either the ICV meaning is retained and the operation appears to affect the VP as a whole, or the ICV meaning is blocked and the complement is interpreted referentially, that is, independently of the verb which takes on its lexical meaning. I conclude that situations in which the ICV meaning is lost involve a V_{LEX} which takes a referential DP as complement. On the other hand, ICV constructions correspond to contexts in which a V_{ICV} takes a structurally bare NP as complement. The two configurations are represented in (12a) and (12b), respectively.

(12) a. V_{LEX}



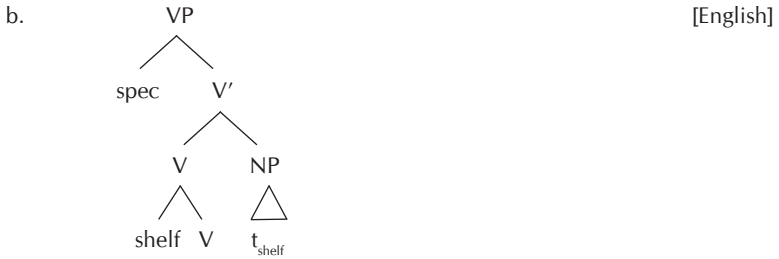
b. V_{ICV}



The structures in (12) suggest that a major distinction between a V_{ICV} and a V_{LEX} is the type of complement they take: NP versus DP. As I argue below, this suggests that a V_{ICV} does not assign any internal theta-role, while a V_{LEX} does. This latter difference, I claim, correlates with another difference between V_{ICV} 's and V_{LEX} 's: their respective merge sites.

4. The merge site of V_{ICV} and V_{LEX}

The structure in (12b) represents a classical context of incorporation in which the head of the NP complement incorporates into V (Baker 1988). This is the view adopted by Ihionu (1992: 168), who proposes that ICVs are comparable to denominal verbs (Hale & Keyser 1993). According to this author, the only difference between a V_{ICV} and a V_{LEX} resides in their selectional properties. Though a V_{ICV} takes an NP as complement this complement is not a thematic argument: it does not receive any theta-role from the lexical head V. Ihionu (1992) further argues that the so-called inherent complement is aspectually licensed because it delimits the event expressed by the lexical verb (Tenny 1992). Ihionu (1992) concludes that Igbo V_{ICV} 's and English denominals involve comparable structures even though the two languages differ because English exhibits morphological incorporation (i.e., N-to-V movement in surface syntax), whereas Igbo displays abstract incorporation (i.e., N-to-V movement at LF). This contrast is illustrated by the representation of the Igbo verb 'to kick' in (13a) and the structure of the English verb *to shelve* in (13b) (but see Hale & Keyser 1993 for a detailed analysis of English denominal verbs).



Ihionu’s (1992) analysis of Igbo in terms of abstract incorporation is compatible with the double object ICV construction in (14), which I adapted from Manfredi (1991: 153). In this example, an additional object, *Úgwu*, occurs between the *Vicv* and its inherent complement.

(14)	<i>Ádḥà</i>	<i>tù-ru</i>	<i>Úgwu</i>	<i>(nnukwu)</i>	<i>ùjò</i>	[Igbo, Kwa]
	Adha	V-ASP	Ugwu	great	fear	
	‘Adha feared Ugwu (greatly)’					

This led Ihionu (1992) to propose that the surface order observed in Igbo ICV’s such as *gbá úkwú* ‘to kick’ does not reflect structural adjacency. Accordingly, N-to-V movement at LF (or abstract incorporation in his terms) accounts for example (14) while capturing the semantic dependency between a *Vicv* and its inherent complement in Igbo. The following data from Gungbe show that the view that *Vicv* merges in V as in (12b) and (13a) must be revised.

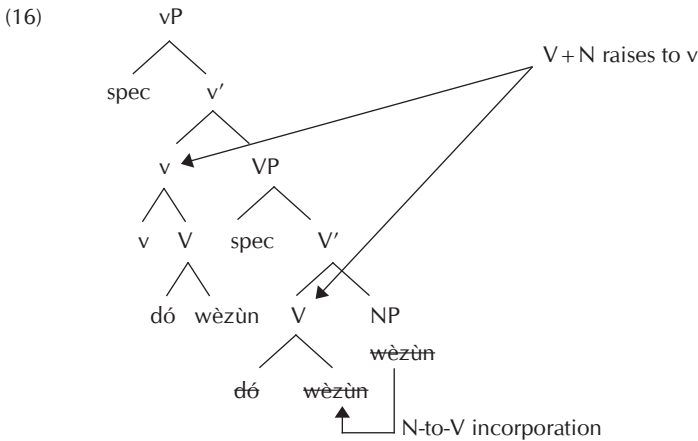
4.1 *Vicv* merges in v as a functional verb

In Gungbe, unlike in Igbo, the inherent complement must be structurally adjacent to *Vicv*. This explains the ungrammaticality of (15a), the Gungbe translation of the Igbo sentence in (14). The Gungbe grammatical example (15b) shows that the additional complement must be introduced by a

preposition in this case. Note, however, from the apparent double object ICV example (15c), that it displays the order theme > goal/recipient, as in (15b).

- (15) a. **Súrù* *ɖi* *Séná* *bú.* [Gungbe]
 Suru V_{RESEMBLE} Sena fear
- b. *Súrù* *ɖi* *bú* *ná* *Séná.*
 Suru V_{RESEMBLE} fear PREP Sena
 'Suru feared Sena.'
- c. *Súrù* *dó* *nú* *Séná.*
 Suru V_{PLANT} thing Sena
 'Suru hit Sena.'

Linear adjacency between the verb and the inherent complement in Gungbe (and more generally in Gbe, Essegbey 2010) favours an analysis in which V takes a structurally bare NP as complement. This configuration would allow N-to-V incorporation (i.e., N-to-V movement in surface syntax, Baker 1988). The complex V_{ICV}-N would further raise to little v as in (16), a representation of the Gungbe verb *dó wèzùn* 'to run'.



Unless we assume excorporation, this analysis incorrectly rules out cases of extraction in which the complement is displaced, as in verb focus

constructions or event relativization (cf. 8a, 9b). Likewise, representation (16) excludes the following facts from Gengbe in which the verb moves away from the inherent complement for the purpose of aspect licensing. In example (17a) the ICV construction is interpreted as perfective. In (17b) however, a habitual aspect marker attaches to the verb. Aboh (2004a, 2009) and Aboh and Dyakonova (2009) analyse this as an instance of V-to-Asp movement for aspect licensing. Further recall from example (8a) and (9b) again that in cases of verb focus, the complement fronts to the clausal left periphery. Therefore, the verb and the noun phrase complement appear to be individually mobile.

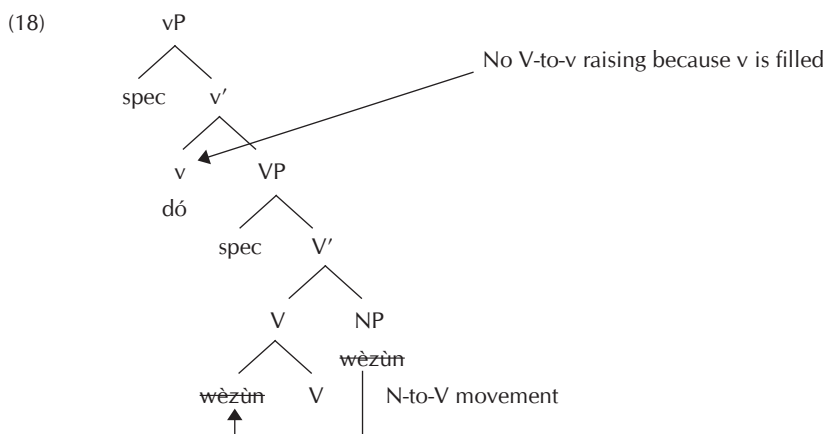
- (17) a. *Kwèsí pu du.* [Gengbe]
 Kwesi V_{HIT} race
 'Kwesi ran.'
- b. *Kwèsí pu-na du.*
 Kwesi V_{HIT-HAB} race
 'Kofi habitually runs/ran.'

This type of data is unexpected if the inherent complement had incorporated into *Vicv* forming a morphologically complex *Vicv-N* unit that moved to *v* (16). We therefore need an analysis that accounts for the linear adjacency between the verb and the inherent NP complement, while preserving the possibility of extraction of both elements, when necessary. The *Vicv* and its inherent complement are syntactically independent though semantically fused.

In order to account for this paradox, I propose that the Gbe-type *Vicv*'s belong to the class of *functional* verbs that first merge in relevant functional heads.³ In ICV constructions, *Vicv* first merges in little *v* and selects for a VP whose head is an empty or abstract transitive V. This abstract verb has certain semantic properties, but it has no morphophonological shape and no *s*-selectional requirement on the complement (cf. Hale & Keyser 1993).

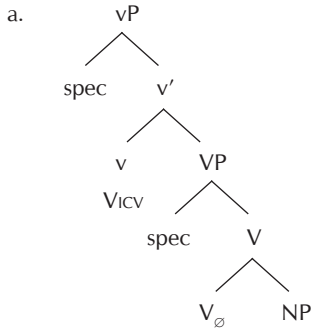
³ The term functional verb is meant to indicate that these verbs can merge in a functional position where they mostly play the same role as typical functional items such as aspect, tense, causative markers, etc. See Cinque (2004), Aboh (2009) and references therein.

The abstract verb has a categorial selectional requirement (i.e., c-selection) only: it must take a structurally bare NP complement. As a consequence, the V+NP complex does not denote an event in which a referential DP object is affected. This explains why such combinations are often translated by intransitive verbs in Romance or Germanic languages. Indeed, the noun heading the NP inherent complement must merge into the abstract V which it lexicalizes, as suggested by the representation in (18) for the verb *dó wèzùn* 'to run'.

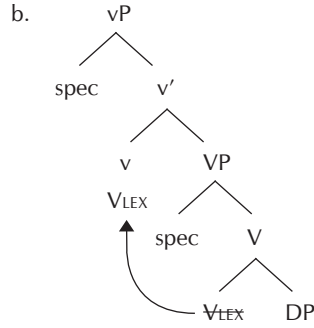


The proposed analysis suggests that elements that express *V_{cv}*'s are categorially ambiguous: they are bare roots. These roots can first merge in *v*, which takes a *VP* headed by an abstract *V* as complement, or they can function as predicate and merge in *V* (which subsequently moves to *v*). In the latter case, *V* imposes both semantic and categorial restrictions on its internal argument and therefore exhibits all properties of simple transitive verbs. The two situations are represented in (19).

(19) Functional verb in v



Lexical verb in V



These representations indicate that the lexicon of Gungbe includes a significant part of bare roots that can be used in different structural contexts, and whose meanings only emerge from structure, that is, depending on their merge site and the type of complement they combine with.

The Gungbe facts remind us of the discussion in the context of serial verb constructions and restructuring structures in Romance and Germanic, where it has been proposed that certain lexical elements have the property of merging directly in a functional position (e.g., Wurmbrand 2001, Cinque 2004, Cardinaletti & Shlonsky 2004, Aboh 2009). Put together, these facts may ultimately relate to Kayne's (2009: 9) claim that "all verbs are light verbs". Under the present discussion, this would mean that English (and other Germanic or Romance languages) have ICVs of the Gbe type even though these languages may differ as to how they spell out the functional and lexical nodes. Indeed, if nothing else is said, the representations under (19) are neutral as to how the category V is lexicalized cross-linguistically (whether via N-to-V-to-v movement in the lines of Hale & Keyser (1993) or by merging a functional verb in v and subsequent N-to-V incorporation as in Gbe).

4.2 Implications of the analysis

Let us now take this analysis to task with regard to some of the properties of ICVs that were poorly understood until now. With regard to the absence of s-selectional requirements on the noun complement, the structure in

(19a) indicates that there is no strict adjacency between *v* realized by *Vicv* and the head of the NP complement that merges into *V*.

4.2.1 The ICV verb has no internal theta-role

Being an expression of *v*, *Vicv* is understood as introducing the external argument (Hale & Keyser 1993, Chomsky 1995). Keeping to this logic, we expect the following facts in which there does not seem to be any *s*-selection between the verbal part of an ICV (i.e., the functional verb) and its putative complement. Let us consider the verb *ɖù* in various usages in Gungbe.

- (20) a. *Kòfí ɖù nú.* [Gungbe]
 Kofi eat thing
 'Kofi ate'
- b. *Kòfí ɖù làn.*
 Kofi eat meat
 'Kofi ate meat'
- c. **Kòfí ɖù ...*
 Kofi eat

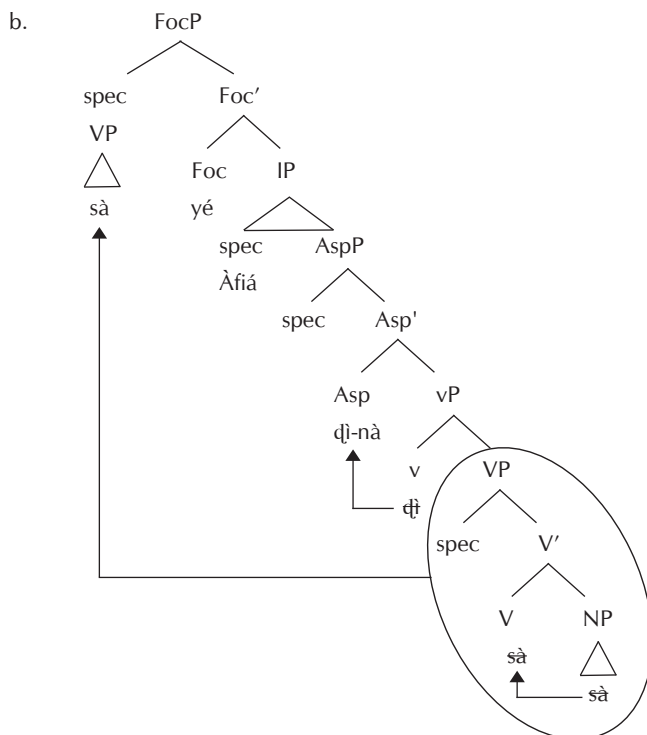
These examples suggest that *ɖù* is transitive in Gungbe and has the basic meaning of 'ingest/consume *X*' somehow subsumed by the English verb 'to eat'. Accordingly, it selects for eatable entities. This reasoning is hard to maintain, though, for the cases in (21), where *ɖù* is combined with different noun phrase objects, none of which is literally eatable or consumable and the resulting meaning is that of an ICV construction.

- (21) Verb + Noun-complement = ICV meaning
- | | | |
|-----------|----------------|---------------------------------|
| ɖù | àxó 'debt' | to have debts or to go bankrupt |
| | gbè 'life' | to enjoy |
| | xwè 'year' | to celebrate |
| | àɖì 'poison' | to get/angry |
| | winyán 'shame' | to be ashamed |
| | gán 'chief' | to be appointed or become chief |
| | yà 'pain' | to suffer |

These examples indicate that the functional verb in *v* has no *s*-selectional requirements on the complement, even though there is a sense in all these sequences that the external argument experiences something. In a way, the element *qù* tells us more about the external argument than the NP complement (apparently functioning as its internal argument). This observation would follow if *qù* first merges in little *v*, where it introduces the external argument, and selects a VP whose abstract head *V* takes an NP complement. This indicates that the intransitive flavour of ICVs derives from the fact that the functional verb in little *v* introduces the external argument only and the abstract *V* does not have any theta-role to assign, though it *c*-selects for a structurally bare NP as complement.

With regard to verb movement and verb focusing, this analysis suggests that Gungbe ICVs differ from lexical verbs in *vP* because they do not involve *V*-to-*v* movement, since *v* is already filled by *Vicv* and further movement of [*V*-*N*]-to-*v* is precluded. This in turn would mean that any probe on *V* would either target *Vicv* in *v* or the VP lexicalized by *N*. Both *v* and its VP-complement are therefore independent syntactic entities that are subject to different syntactic operations. I claim that this is what happens in the Gengbe example (22a). In this example, *Vicv* merged in little *v* is probed over by the HABITUAL aspect head to which it adjoins, while the VP lexicalized by the incorporated noun is attracted to the focus position under the probe of the focus head, as illustrated in (22b), ignoring irrelevant projections (see Aboh & Dyakonova 2009 for discussion).

- (22) a. Sà yé Àfiá ɖi-nà
 promenade FOC Afia V- HAB
 'Afia usually WANDERS around'



In addition to deriving the right order, this analysis accounts for the impossibility to front Vicv's for the purpose of focus, though they can be moved to relevant heads within the TMA sequence. Being the expression of little v, such verbs belong to the class of functional items (e.g., TMA markers) that are licensed within the IP domain. Unlike lexical verbs, however, these elements do not encode an event by themselves and cannot feed discourse-related movement operations involving TOPIC or FOCUS (Aboh 2004, Aboh & Dyakonova 2009).

4.2.2 ICVs with double objects

Example (15c), as well as sentence (3), repeated here as (24a), suggest that certain ICV constructions involve an additional complement in a way comparable to the double object construction in (24b).

- (24) a. *Súrù dó wínyán Félé.* [Gungbe]
 Suru V_{PLANT} shame Fele
 Lit. Suru planted shame in Fele
 ‘Suru made Fele feel ashamed.’
- b. *Súrù ná kwè Félé.*
 Suru give money Fele
 ‘Suru gave Fele some money.’

Essegbey (2010) provides an extensive comparison of ICVs with two objects (24a) and double object constructions (24b), showing that the two behave alike in many contexts. These constructions, however, differ in a major aspect. Double object constructions in most Gbe languages freely allow the orders theme > goal/recipient in (24b) as well as the alternative order goal/recipient > theme in (25). There is to my knowledge no discernible change of meaning between these alternatives (e.g., there is no contrast between new vs. old information or specific vs. non-specific referents).

- (25) *Súrù ná Félé kwè.* [Gungbe]
 Suru give Fele money
 ‘Suru gave Fele some money.’

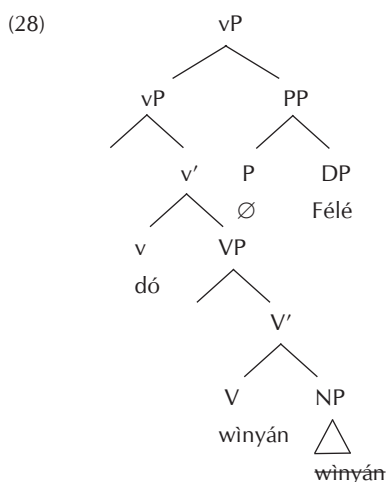
ICVs with apparent double objects, however, exclude the goal/recipient > theme order, hence the ungrammatical example (26).

- (26) **Súrù dó Félé wínyán.* [Gungbe]
 Suru V_{PLANT} Fele shame

As already shown by the contrast in (15b-c) further illustrated here by example (27), ICVs with double objects display the same order as preposition datives: compare (24a) to (27).

- (27) *Félé nyin àgán dó Súru.*
 Fele throw stone PREP Suru
 'Fele threw a stone at Suru.'

I take this similarity between ICV constructions with two apparent objects and preposition datives as indication that they involve the same underlying structure in (28): In apparent ICV double object constructions, the goal is introduced by a silent preposition (cf. Kayne 2005 and much related work). The bare noun functioning as the inherent complement merges into the empty lexical verb.



I conclude that double object constructions (24b-25) and ICV constructions with two objects (24a) involve two different structures, hence their different behaviour with regard to argument alternation.

5. Conclusion

This paper shows that ICV constructions must be treated as normal verbal phrases with the only difference that they involve a functional verb that first merges in little *v*. The latter takes a VP complement whose abstract head *V* can combine with a structurally bare NP complement only. This allows N-to-V movement, but there is no further movement of this lexicalized *V* into

v, since the latter is already filled by the functional verb. While accounting for various syntactic properties of a Vicv, this analysis shows that ICVs with double objects are better understood as constructions in which the goal is introduced by a silent preposition.

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