

# SEMANTIC TYPOLOGY OF EXPLICATOR COMPOUND VERBS IN SOUTH ASIAN LANGUAGES

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Explicator compound verbs (henceforth ECVs), also known as 'modified verbal expressions' (cf. Porizka 1967-69), 'serial verbs' (cf. Kachru 1978.) and simply 'compound verbs' (cf. Hook 1974) have long since been identified as a major areal feature of South Asian languages. The phenomenon has attracted most attention in languages of the Indo-Aryan and Dravidian families while extant work in the Austroasiatic languages is, in proportion, negligible. As for the situation in Tibeto-Burman languages, there has been no serious attempt made to study the construction to the best of our knowledge. Pioneering work on the ECV as an areal phenomenon of South Asian languages is found in Masica (1976) and this is followed by others like Kachru, Pandharipande (1980) and Hook (1988). Currently in progress is a more detailed study of the ECV as an areal phenomenon prevalent among languages of the four language families in India.<sup>1</sup>

By explicator compound verb we mean a sequence of at least two verbs V1 and V2 where the first member is the main or predicating verb and the second member, although homophonous with an independent verb in the language, does not appear with its primary lexical meaning; V2 only occurs in the sequence to mark the main verb V1 for certain 'grammatical' features. Two illustrations, from Hindi and Malayalam, are given below.

Hindi                    1. vo aa gayaa  
                              he come GO-pst.  
                              'He came'

Malayalam            2. kuppi poṭṭi pooyi  
                              bottle break-cp GO-pst  
                              '(The) bottle broke'

In sentences 1. and 2. aa 'come' and poṭṭi 'break' are the main verbs in stem and participial forms respec-

tively, while *gayaa* 'go and *pooyi* also 'go', both marked for tense, are explicators that function as grammaticalized markers for features such as 'perfectivity' and 'undesirability'.

In functional terms, both the verbs in the ECV construction do not have independent lexical status. Instead, it is the lexical meaning of just one of the verbs (usually the first) that forms the semantic core or nucleus of the ECV, while the other verbal member loses its primary lexical meaning. In other words, the morphologically non-finite verb is the functionally finite verb form. The first verbal member of the ECV has variously been called 'main verb', 'polar verb' and 'principal verb'. The second, delexicalized verb form is known as 'operator', 'vector', 'explicator', 'auxiliary', 'intensive auxiliary', and also 'light verb', in more recent GB theory based writings on the subject. It is indeed the above noted "non-lexical occurrence" (Hook) or "lexical emptying" (Masica) of the second verb form that is specifically seen as a distinguishing trait of ECVs. Further, it is also important to note that, although delexicalized, the explicator is not without function for it systematically contributes specific shades of meaning to the main verb that it would not indicate outside these constructions. These characteristics when taken together with other related facts such as those of explicators belonging to a closed set of limited members on the one hand and on the other, their combining in most cases with more than one lexical verb in languages where they occur, has led to their being identified as 'grammatical' elements.

It is a special characteristic of the explicator compound verb that it alternates with the corresponding simple verb with no apparent change in the cognitive meaning of the predicate. We do not mean by this statement that there is no meaning loss or gain in the use of the simple word in place of the ECV or vice versa, rather we simply assert that the use of one or the other does not alter the truth value of the predication made in either case. In other words, the explicator in an ECV specifies or explicates the predicate without changing it in any basic sense. This, therefore, is the reason why it is said that the semantics of explicators has a significant role to play at the level of discourse. Compare sentence 1. and 2. with sentences 1a, and 2a, given below for clarification of this point.

Hindi

- 1a. *vo aayaa*  
 he come - pst.  
 'He came'

- Malayalam            2a. kuppi poṭṭi  
                          bottle break - pst.  
                          '(The) bottle broke'.

Significantly, this second definitional constraint automatically excludes all tensual, aspectual and modal auxiliaries from the class of explicators.

What we propose to do in this paper is to make a comparative areal study of explicator compound verbs not in terms of the lexical items used or their actual semantic usages in the various Indian languages, but in terms of what most writers agree, either explicitly or otherwise, are similar types of meanings indicated by explicators in these languages. Analysis, however, demands cross linguistic comparison of the actual lexical items used in the construction under consideration. This is supplied in Tables 1-3 later in the paper. For purposes of the present study we have taken representative data from languages belonging to all the four language families in India: Dravidian, Indo-Aryan, Austro-Asiatic and Tibeto-Burman.

#### EXPLICATORS-SEMANTIC TYPES

First, a brief note on the 'types' of meanings indicated by explicators in South Asian languages. At the highest level, these meanings may be grouped into ASPECTUAL, ADVERBIAL and ATTITUDINAL types. Each of these types can further be seen in terms of several discrete or, sometimes, partially overlapping sub-types. Let us take a quick look at these sub-types that represent (and this can be said with near certainty) all the meanings indicated by explicators in the South Asian languages where they have been studied so far.

The ASPECTUAL sub-type is the least differentiated one. Under it come the overlapping meanings of perfectivity or action being seen as a whole, completion etc.

For instance:

- Meitei            3. ay cat-thok-luy  
                          I go - EXIT - pst  
                          'I went away' (Perfective)
- Kannada        4. naanu ella ha:lla nnu kuḍIdu biḍutteene  
                          I all milk drink LEAVE-fut-per.  
                          'I'll drink up all the milk'  
                          (completion)



The ADVERBIAL sub-type is of three kinds:

- (i) **manner**, indicating an action/event to be abrupt, non-volitional, deliberate, done with difficulty, done easily, done casually, decisively/drastrically done, intensively or exhaustively done.

For instance:

Punjabi 5. toshii ne kamm kar suṭṭiaa  
Toshi erg work do THROW-pst., mas. sg.  
'Toshi did the work (violently)

- (ii) **benefactive** indicating whether an action is for oneself or for another.

For instance:

Kurukh 6. nin enage onte sveṭar tas?oi ci?oi  
you for me one sweater knit-inter-  
ro. GIVE- interro-  
'Will you knit a sweater for me?  
(other-benefactive)

Bangla 7. basu bari kore niyeche  
Basu house make TAKE pst., 3 p.  
'Basu built a house  
(self-benefactive)

and (iii) **others** such as irreversible action, an action done in anticipation or in advance, done to get over with, marking emphasis, definiteness etc.

For instance:

Kashmiri 8. von kyaa karI, bI goos yI kE:m  
kErith  
now-what-do I-WENT-this-work-  
having done  
'Now what shall I do, I have done  
this work' (irreversible, without  
remedy)

The ATTITUDINAL sub-type marks attitudes of the speaker or narrator towards the action or actor such as those of humility, respect, contempt, surprise, censurability or undesirability and anger, disgust or exasperation. See examples 9 and 10 given below.

Tamil 9. lakshmi paatṭa - paadI kiliccaa  
Lakshmi song sing - pst. prt.  
TEAR-pst. fem.sg  
'Lakshmi sang a song' (contempt)



Marathi            10. mi he kaay karuun basle  
                         I this what do SIT - pst.  
                         'Oh ! what have I done' (undesira-  
                         bility)

Table 1, 2, 3a and 3b. provide information regarding the actual items used in South Asian languages as explicators expressing various semantic sub-types detailed above.

## FUNCTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Two important points emerge on examination of explicator systems in individual languages. Firstly, it is clear that explicators can be multi-functional. In other words, an explicator in a language can have more than one function and this is true of most if not all explicators in different languages. Illustration of this is provided by Hindi-Urdu explicators *le* 'take' and *de* 'give' that show the meanings of 'self-benefaction' and 'other-benefaction' respectively in some cases and that of 'perfectivity' in others.

- 11 a. ek kamiz *silvaa lo*  
one shirt get tailored TAKE-imp.  
'Get a shirt made' (for self)
- 11 b. shyaam ne saaraa duudh *piiliyaa*  
shyam-erg. all milk drink TAKE-pst.  
'Shyam drank up all the milk' (completive)
- 12 a. ek kamiz *silvaa do*  
one shirt get tailored GIVE-imp  
'Get a shirt made' (for another)
- 12 b. raadhaa ne baat *kah dii*  
Radha (obl.) matter say GIVE pst.  
'Radha revealed all' (completive)

Another illustration of this is seen in the Austro-Asiatic language Kharia where the explicator *godna* 'pluck' shows the meanings of 'perfectivity' as well as 'intensity' Cf:

- 13 a. raavan raja goej-god-ki  
Ravan king die PLUCK-pst. intr.  
'Ravan the king died' (perfective)

- 13 b.           da?-te ho-te *ḍul-gore-m*  
                   water-acc that-in pour-PLUCK-imp., tr., 2 sg.  
                   'You throw away the water there' (intensive  
                   / exhortative)

The second point noted is that explicators just as much as other grammatical elements or lexical items can be homonymous. What this means is that a language may use more than one explicator to mark the same meaning. To illustrate, Kannada explicators hoogu 'go' and bidu 'release' both mark lack of volition.

14.           maguvige paadadalli hunnu aaki *hoogide*  
                   child (gen.) foot-in wound happen GO  
                   'Wounds developed in the child's foot'
15.           maguvige paadadalli hunnu aaki *biṭṭide*  
                   child (gen.) foot-in wound happen LEAVE  
                   'Wounds developed in the child's foot'.

#### AREAL COMPARISON OF EXPLICATORS

Let us now move on from the situation in individual South-Asian languages to our main concern in this paper which is a comparative overview of the phenomenon in different languages of the area with special focus on the commonalities that underlie the identification of the ECV as a major areal feature in the languages of the region. Such a comparative study yields the following conclusions by way of results.

One, invariably, with no more than a few exceptions (North Dravidian Kurukh *bi?* 'cook', Dardic Kashmiri *tshunun* 'wear', Tibeto-Burman Meithei *haw* 'grow' and Austro-Asiatic Santhali *got?* 'pluck', the core of the explicator class in different languages of the four languages families is constituted of elements drawn from near identical or at least closely similar lexical sets. Thus, survey of data from some fifteen Indian languages belonging to Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic and Tibeto-Burman families indicates that explicators are mostly drawn from a common set consisting of GO, COME, GIVE, TAKE, KEEP, PUT, SIT and FALL. What this means is not that all Indian languages have all the above-listed eight explicators, or even that their explicators are exclusively drawn from this single set, but only that at least the majority of explicators is in each case drawn from this set. Of course, it is also true that certain explicators may be said to be typically Indo-Aryan (and Tibeto-Burman as well) and others Dravidian: examples of the former are

explicators COME and SIT, while those of the latter are HOLD/CONTAIN and possibly THROW.

Two, not all the languages show all sub-types of explicator meaning; what is more significant however, is that they all have some explicator marking main verbs for at least one of the subtypes of each of the three main types of meanings that have been noted earlier. In Kurukh, for instance, where the range of meanings indicated by explicators is nowhere as elaborate as in Indo-Aryan or even other Dravidian languages, one of each type is represented. Thus, under the aspectual heading 'perfectivity' is marked by explicators *ci?* 'give' *kaal* 'go', *xacc* 'break' and *bi?* 'cook' and under the adverbial heading *ci?* 'give' and *xacc* 'break' mark 'suddenness' and 'nonvolitionality' respectively with *ci?* 'give' also indicating 'other-benefaction' and *xacc* 'break' an 'anticipatory action'. The attitudinal sub-type is represented by *ci?* 'give' that marks 'contempt' and *bi?* 'cook' and *kaal* 'go' indicating 'surprise at unexpectedness'.

There is a related point that would be of interest here. Just as there are, as has already been noted, explicators exclusive to members of a particular language family alone, it is possible to identify certain sub-types of explicators meanings that are similarly characteristic of one language family or the other. This is illustrated by one of the uses of explicators TAKE and GIVE in Hindi and Punjabi, which is to mark an action as being introverted or overtly done respectively. It is observed that this semantic opposition is not manifested in any of the Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic or Tibeto-Burman languages (See Table 3 a.). Another instance of a semantic sub-type whose marking is family specific, is the representation of attitudes such as humility, contempt and respect in Dravidian languages alone (See Table 2.) However, it is also true that while serving as identity markers of a genetic type, semantic parameters of the kind discussed above are not found to be widespread, either in terms of their frequency of occurrence in languages they are associated with, or in terms of the number of languages they occur in within that particular language family.

Three, it is seen that very often the same explicator (being cognates lexically) may indicate different meanings in two different languages. A case in point are the explicators KEEP in Malayalam (*vai*) and Telugu (*petṭ*) that serve to mark an 'anticipatory action' in the first languages and an 'other-benefactive action' in the second.



- Malayalam 16. mohan vivaaham kalikyaan oRu  
 kuṭṭiye kandā vaiccu  
 Mohan marriage do-for  
 girl-acc. see-pst. prt. KEEP-pst.  
 'Mohan saw a girl whom he would marry'  
 (later)
- Telugu 17. miru na kosaw pustakaw tecci pettandi  
 you for me book bring-KEEP  
 'Bring the book for me ! (benefactive)

Conversely, it is also possible to have the same meaning marked by two different explicators in two languages. An illustration to substantiate this observation is provided by the fact that Indo-Aryan languages in general employ TAKE to indicate reflexive actions that are done for oneself while Dravidian languages use explicator HOLD/CONTAIN in cases where this meaning is represented at all. See Table 1-3 for details.

Five, predictably enough there are clear cases of mutual influence and borrowing to be seen amongst languages of different language families that are spoken in bordering areas. At one level this is reflected by the actual lexical items used as explicators. Thus, for instance, while none of the Dravidian languages use SIT, which is typically Indo-Aryan, as an explicator, it appears in one of the northern varieties of Telugu as *kuurcon* 'sit' (see Table 2.) Similarly Konkani shows Dravidian influence both in the presence of explicator udai 'throw' (not seen in other related Indo-Aryan languages like Marathi) as well as in the absence of the typically IA explicator COME.

Six, most important and noteworthy of all these points is the inescapable observation, made on the basis of a wide sweeping areal survey of the semantics of the ECV construction in Indian languages, that typologically there is a sameness in the features marked by explicators in South-Asian languages.

Not only are the semantic functions of explicators of the same types and sub-types but as the tables show, their distribution viz a viz languages of different genetic families and typological groups is even and thoroughly mixed. This means that almost all the languages of the area have an explicator with a function corresponding to each of the major types and to at least one of the smaller sub-types. This semantic typology becomes all the more marked when we compare analogous structures in languages of bordering East and South East Asian areas. A clear illustration of this is provided by Chinese where use of explicator-like verbal

elements includes indication of 'resultativity' such as in *byàn-cháng* 'change so as to be good' and 'directionality' as in *pá-syàchyu* 'climb down and away from speaker' (*pá* climb using both hands and feet and *syà* 'descend'. See Masica 1976). It is seen that some Tibeto-Burman languages like Meithei have 'directionality' as one of the major explicator function' possibly due to geographic and cultural proximity with Burmese languages. Meithei *khat* 'to tap' and *tha-* 'to fall' can occur with main verbs indicating directionality of the events being talked of. Consider:

10. 18.    *ayna non thak- ta yen-khat -li*  
           I- erg. sky look TAP-prs  
           'I look up towards the sky'

19.    *isin adu khik-tha-i*  
           water that splash-FALL-cont.  
           The water is splashing (down)

To conclude, we may say the observations show that explicators in South Asian languages are drawn from similar lexical sets consisting of similar types of verbs (nonstative) and are used with main verbs in the respective languages, in privative contrast with simple verbs, to indicate similar types/range of meanings. It is true that at the level of actual manifestation such as the number of explicators, their individual meanings etc., the languages show differences, but they are strikingly similar from the point of view of the semantic parameters involved.

What ought to be of paramount interest is the fact that all the four languages, geographically distant and belonging to different genetic stock but one linguistic area, use a similar linguistic device to mark the main verb for a similar type of meaning.

It is this semantic sameness or unity that is the underlying principle behind the 'Indian-ness' of South-Asian languages.

Further, this semantic similarity among South Asian languages is what lends credibility to the notion of a 'semantic area'

## Notes

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Table 1  
Aspectual

Language	Perfective/Action drawn to last point/Action seen as a complete whole
<b>INDO-ARYAN</b>	
Hindi	<i>jaa</i> 'go', <i>aa</i> 'come', <i>le</i> 'take', <i>de</i> 'give'
Punjabi	<i>jaa</i> 'go', <i>aa</i> 'come', <i>lai</i> 'take', <i>de</i> 'give'
Kashmiri	<i>hyun</i> 'take' <i>yun</i> 'come' <i>tshunun</i> 'wear'
Bengali	<i>jaa</i> 'go', <i>aaś</i> 'come' <i>ne</i> 'take' <i>de</i> 'give'
Marathi	<i>za</i> 'go', <i>ye</i> 'come', <i>kaḍ</i> 'draw'
<b>DRAVIDIAN</b>	
Tamil	<i>viṭu</i> 'leave', <i>poo</i> 'go', <i>iṭu</i> 'put'
Malayalam	<i>iṭa</i> 'put', <i>poo</i> 'go', <i>kaala</i> 'throw'
Telugu	<i>poo</i> 'go', <i>pett</i> 'keep', <i>wees</i> 'put'
Kannada	<i>hoogu</i> 'go', <i>biṭu</i> 'release'
Kurukh	<i>kaal</i> 'go', <i>ci?</i> 'give'
<b>AUSTRO-ASIATIC</b>	
Santhali	NA
Kharia	<i>godna</i> 'pluck', <i>cena</i> 'ge'
Gta?	<i>we</i> 'go', <i>bi?</i> 'give'
<b>TIBETO-BURMAN</b>	
Meithei	<i>thak</i> 'exit'
Kabui	<i>tang</i> 'do, finish' <i>lau</i> 'put'



Table 2  
Attitudinal

Language	Humility	Contempt	Respect	Surprise at unexpectedness	Regret or Censurability or Undesirability	Anger or Disgust or Exasperation
le 'take'						
INDO-ARYAN						
Hindi					baith 'sit'	
Punjabi					<i>bai</i> 'sit'	
Kashmiri					<i>gatshun</i> 'go'	
Bengali					<i>bosh</i> 'sit'	
Marathi					<i>bas</i> 'sit'	
DRAVIDIAN						
Tamil	<i>koḷ</i> 'contain'	<i>kili</i> 'tear'	<i>aruḷ</i> 'grace'		<i>pooṭu</i> 'put' <i>poo</i> 'go'	<i>tolai</i> 'get lost' <i>oli</i> 'perish'
Malayalam	<i>koḷ</i> 'contain'	<i>ta:ḷḷa</i> -push	<i>aruḷ</i> 'grace'	<i>kaala</i> 'throw'	<i>kaala</i> 'throw' <i>poo</i> 'go'	<i>tulakya</i> 'destroy'
Telugu					<i>kuurcon</i> 'sit'	<i>caaw</i> 'die'
Kannada					<i>hoogu</i> 'go'	
Kurukh		<i>ci?</i> 'give'	<i>bi?</i> 'cook' <i>kaal</i> 'go'		<i>haaku</i> 'put'	
TIBETO-BURMAN						
Meithei	<i>bi</i> 'give'			<i>sin</i> 'arrange' or 'copy'	<i>thok</i> 'exit' <i>bi</i> 'give' <i>kai</i> 'come'	
Kabui						

Table 3(a)  
Adverbial (Non-manner)

Language	Benefaction		Irreversible/ without remedy	Done and got over with	Emphatic/ Definite	Anticipatory action done in advance	Introvert action	Overt action
	Self	Other						
INDO-ARYAN								
Hindi	le 'take'	de 'give'		daal 'put'		raakh 'keep'	le 'take'	de 'give'
Punjabi	lai 'take'	de 'give'		suti 'throw'			lai 'take'	de 'give'
Kashmiri	hyun 'take'	tshunun 'wear'	gatshun 'go'	tshunun 'wear'	tshunun 'wear'			
Bengali	ne 'take'	de 'give'				rakh 'keep'		
Marathi	ghe 'take'	de 'give'		tak 'put'		thev 'keep'		
DRAVIDIAN								
Tamil	koḷ 'contain'	koḍu 'give'	poo 'go'	itu 'put'	koḷ 'contain'	vai 'keep'		
Malayalam		koḍu 'give'	poo 'go'	kaala 'throw'		vai 'keep'		
Telugu	koṇ 'take' or 'contain'	peṭi 'keep'				unc 'keep'		
Kannada	koḷ contain	koḍu 'give'				itu 'be'		
Kurukh		ci? 'give'				xacc 'break'		
AUSTRO-ASIATIC								
Kharia					godna 'pluck'			
TIBETO-BURMAN								
Meithei		bi 'give'			sln/sll 'to copy' or 'to be in'	tham 'keep'		

Table 3(b)  
Adverbial (Manner)

Language	Sudden/ abrupt	Without volition	Deliberate	Done with difficulty	Done easily	Done casually/ carelessly	Violent/ decisive/ drastic	Intesively/ exhaustively done
<b>INDO-ARYAN</b>								
Hindi	<i>uth</i> 'rise' <i>par</i> 'fall'	<i>par</i> 'fall'			<i>daal</i> 'put' de 'give'	<i>chor</i> 'leave'	<i>daal</i> 'put'	<i>daal</i> 'put'
Punjabi						<i>cadd</i> 'leave'	<i>suti</i> 'throw'	
Kashmiri	<i>pyon</i> 'fall'	<i>gatshun</i> 'go'		<i>hyun</i> 'take'		<i>tshunun</i> 'wear'	<i>tshunun</i> 'wear'	
Bengali	<i>oth</i> 'rise'				<i>phel</i> 'throw'		<i>por</i> 'fall'	<i>phel</i> 'throw'
Marathi		<i>bas</i> 'sit'						
<b>DRAVIDIAN</b>								
Tamil		<i>poo</i> 'go'		<i>etu</i> 'take'	<i>talitu</i> 'push'	<i>pootu</i> 'toss'		<i>ta:liia</i> 'push'
Malayalam	<i>kaala</i> 'throw'	<i>poo</i> 'go'	<i>kaala</i> 'throw'	<i>undaaka</i> 'make'				
Telugu	<i>koṭṭi</i> 'hit strike'				<i>wees</i> 'put'	<i>paares</i> 'throw away'		
Kannada		<i>hoogu</i> 'go' <i>biḍu</i> 'leave'	<i>biḍu</i> 'leave'	<i>biḍu</i> 'leave'		<i>haaku</i> 'put'		<i>haaku</i> 'put'
Kurukh	<i>ci?</i> 'give'	<i>ci?</i> 'give'					<i>ci?</i> 'give'	
<b>AUSTRO ASIATIC</b>								
Santhali	<i>got?</i> 'pluck' <i>hod</i> 'strip'						<i>hod</i> 'strip'	
<b>TIBETO-BURMAN</b>								
Meithei	<i>sin/sil</i> 'to copy'	<i>phaaw</i>					<i>that</i> 'break' or 'disjoin'	
Kabui	<i>bom</i> 'stay'							



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