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More unbearably light elements? Silent verbs demanding overt complementizers in Afrikaans

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Van Riemsdijk (2002) observes structures in certain West Germanic/WGmc varieties, including Afrikaans, which permit temporal and modal auxiliaries without an accompanying lexical verb:

(1) Hy is/moet biblioteek toe
    he is/must library to

    ‘He has gone/has to go to the library’

As the translation indicates, the “missing” verb is related to motion-verb go. Van Riemsdijk accordingly postulates a “super-light” verb e[GO] for (1)-type structures. Crucially, e[GO] is not identical to the overt motion-verb, exhibiting several distinctive properties (cf. Kayne 2005 on the more general non-identity of overt and “silent” elements). One difference is e[GO]’s unavailability in finite form:

(2) *Hy e[GAAN] biblioteek toe
    he GO library to

For Afrikaans specifically, we note that hypothetical e[GAAN] appears to select for the be-auxiliary, despite Afrikaans, unlike its WGmc counterparts, systematically employing have in perfect-tense structures featuring overt lexical verbs:

(3) Hy *is/ het biblioteek toe gegaan
    he is/ has library to gone

    ‘He has gone to the library’

Also not previously registered and, to the best of our knowledge, unique to Afrikaans is a further “silent verb”-containing structure:

(4) Ek sal/moet/wil/gaan/het,etc. dat Wanda die boeke bestel
    I shall/must/want/go/have,etc. that Wanda the books order

    ‘I will/must/have organize(d)/ensure(d)/propose(d)/ask(ed) that Wanda orders the books’

As before, we observe a lexical verb omissible in the presence of modals and a temporal auxiliary – here, have and not be as in (1)-type structures. Identifying a single silent verb is less straightforward than in the latter case, however: as (4)’s (non-
exhaustive) translation shows, a range of lexical verbs may be “implied”. Nevertheless, there are clear restrictions, verbs like hope, wish and think not being possible, with feasible verbs having broadly “organizational” meanings (cf. Levin 1993). The possibility of identifying a “super-light” verb, potentially something like $e_{\text{MAAK}}$ (Afrikaans $e_{\text{MAAK}}$), therefore remains.

Importantly, $e_{\text{MAAK}}$, like $e_{\text{GO}}$, would differ from overt counterparts in a range of ways, most strikingly in obligatorily requiring an overt complementizer:

(5) *Ek $h$et Wanda bestel die boeke
    I have Wanda order(ed) the books

(6) Ek het gereël...
    I have organised
    
    dat Wanda die boeke bestel
    that Wanda the books order

    Wanda bestel die boeke
    Wanda order the books

‘I organised that Wanda orders the books’

As (6) shows, complementizer omission is possible where het selects an overt “organisation”-verb, but not where this verb is “silent” ((5)). Further, hypothetical $e_{\text{MAAK}}$ requires finite declarative dat, being incompatible with finite interrogative of even where an ask-type meaning is implied. This follows directly if specifically “organisational” ask-that, rather than interrogative ask-if, is at stake, and can also be understood in relation to $e_{\text{MAAK}}$: “organisational” $e_{\text{MAAK}}$ corresponds in relevant respects to overt maak dat (“make that”) and not maak of (“make (as) if”). Like $e_{\text{GO}}$, $e_{\text{MAAK}}$’s presence is dependent on a main-clause auxiliary, finite forms being unavailable (*Ek $e_{\text{MAAK}}$ dat Wanda die boeke bestel). Embedded auxiliaries are, however, severely restricted, present-tense verbs being the norm in $e_{\text{MAAK}}$-complements.

These newly-observed overt-“silent” asymmetries seem to us to merit more detailed investigation, both for their own sake and in developing our understanding of “silent syntax” more generally.

References