

6-2010

## Review of: Auxiliary Verb Constructions

Edward J. Vajda

Western Washington University, [edward.vajda@wwu.edu](mailto:edward.vajda@wwu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://cedar.wwu.edu/mcl\\_facpubs](http://cedar.wwu.edu/mcl_facpubs)



Part of the [Modern Languages Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Vajda, Edward J., "Review of: Auxiliary Verb Constructions" (2010). *Modern & Classical Languages*. 27.  
[http://cedar.wwu.edu/mcl\\_facpubs/27](http://cedar.wwu.edu/mcl_facpubs/27)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Humanities at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modern & Classical Languages by an authorized administrator of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact [westerncedar@wwu.edu](mailto:westerncedar@wwu.edu).

## REVIEWS

**Auxiliary verb constructions.** By GREGORY D. S. ANDERSON. (Oxford studies in typology and linguistic theory.) Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. Pp. xviii, 473. ISBN 9780189563296. \$55.

Reviewed by EDWARD J. VAJDA, *Western Washington University*

This new monograph on auxiliary verb constructions (AVCs) is noteworthy for two reasons. First, unlike previous interpretations, Anderson does not limit his focus only to constructions in which the auxiliary verb serves as inflectional head. He includes complex predicates in which the main verb (the verb phrase's semantic head) carries the inflections and also types where inflections appear on the main verb as well as the auxiliary. This broad sweep permits examination of a much larger sample of complex predicate types crosslinguistically, yielding new insights into the nature of canonical types of AVCs. Second, the focus of the book is diachronic as well as synchronic—A uses the term 'panchronic'—a vantage that leads to interesting observations about the diverse origins of V + V constructions across languages.

Also impressive is the sheer number and geographic variety of the languages examined. Examples derive from over 800 distinct languages from dozens of families on every continent. Although A admits that his choice represents a sample of convenience, it seems hardly possible to have utilized any significantly less 'convenient' sample, given the severely incomplete documentation of the world's languages. Data are gleaned from families and isolates across the world, including hundreds of languages rarely, if ever, included in crosslinguistic analyses. Noteworthy are the many examples from South Siberian Turkic, Burushaski (northern Pakistan), and the Munda family of South Asia. All of these languages represent areas where A has performed original documentation or analysis (see in particular A's (2004) monograph on auxiliary verb constructions in Altai-Sayan Turkic). Although Khakas, Altai, and Tuvan (Turkic languages of south-central Siberia) contain a rich array of auxiliary verb constructions, they have hitherto been little remarked upon in broader crosslinguistic studies of complex predicates.

The book's seven chapters begin with an introduction framing the scope of the study. A's definition of 'auxiliary verb construction' is admittedly vague (4–5), since he wishes to examine phenomena beyond the bounds of canonical AVCs, as well as instances where the genesis of complex predicate constructions is an ongoing process. This view of auxiliiation as a continuum between lexical verb and functional affix is consonant with the approach of Kuteva (2001). It also allows examination of instances in which the same combination of AVC elements exists simultaneously at two different points on the grammaticalization continuum, as is the case with modern Khakas, a South Siberian Turkic language. The perennial difficulty of clearly defining the notion of serial verb construction further plays to the advantage of the approach taken. A more restricted definition would have hampered the examination of complex predicates from a diachronic perspective. Heine (1993) already noted the ambiguous grammatical status of elements in transition between full verb and auxiliary. A's approach is tailored toward this reality, and it is significant that he refrains from compiling the sort of misleadingly precise percentages that often form conclusions in typological studies. AVCs, however defined, represent a structural category that is too fuzzy to lend itself to this type of an analysis.

The next few chapters subcategorize AVCs according to the locus of inflectional material. The position of inflections within the complex predicate is the primary criterion used to classify AVCs in A's analysis. Ch. 2 examines what could be called 'canonical AVCs', that is, constructions in which all of the predicate's inflections are attached to the auxiliary element. A labels this morphosyntactic configuration as 'AUX-headed' patterns of inflection. This is the type generally typical of AVCs that happen to be found in better-known languages. Previous studies, notably Harris & Ramat 1987, regarded them as the only true AVC.

Ch. 3 turns to complex predicates in which the inflections are located on the lexical verb rather than the auxiliary. A calls this type of AVC 'LEX-headed'. The examples come from a wide vari-

ety of languages, demonstrating the extent of the distribution of this type. A regards as 'LEX-headed AVCs' only those constructions in which the uninflected component can be shown to have originated from a lexical verb and thus, in fact, represents an auxiliary, at least diachronically. In terms of synchronic structure, however, there appears to be no distinction between constructions consisting of uninflected auxiliary plus inflected lexical verb and predicates containing uninflected tense-mood-aspect particles plus inflected lexical verb. For example, a language such as Ket possesses a number of tense-mood-aspect particles that are preposed to conjugated verbs, yet form their own phonological word. These include *qan* 'imperative', *as* 'future habitual', *ba'ɪ* 'past habitual', and others. It is not clear whether these uninflected particles originated from adverbs or from lexical verbs. Therefore, such constructions, while morphologically similar to lexically headed AVCs in every way, cannot be included in that category solely on the basis of their uncertain etymology. In A's treatment, the notion of AVC thus loses some of its descriptive value as a discrete synchronic category. Still, extending the analysis of auxiliary verbs to instances where an uninflected word in the verb phrase obviously derives from an auxiliary verb is useful for gaining an understanding of the full range of auxiliary + main verb combinations that may develop and evolve across languages. It would seem that some sort of investigation is required to determine whether there is any functional difference between genuine uninflected auxiliary verbs and uninflected tense-mood-aspect particles of nonauxiliary origin.

Ch. 4 moves on to discussing AVCs where inflections appear on both the auxiliary and the main verb. These clearly need to be included in a complete study of AVCs, and A's treatment of them here under the rubric of 'doubled inflection' is excellent. It would be interesting to extend this typological analysis to ascertain what types of interdependences prevail crosslinguistically in the inflectional categories on the two verbal stems in such constructions.

Ch. 5 examines instances where some grammatical forms of the verb mark their inflections on the auxiliary, while in others the inflections attach to the lexical verb. Instances where doubled inflection is found in some but not all grammatical forms of the verb are also examined here. Examples of split and split/doubled inflection in AVCs are surprisingly numerous and diverse, yet have never before been treated systematically since they too fall outside the canonical definition of AVCs. As more languages come to be described, it will be interesting to see if additional typological patterns emerge in regard to the type of splits that occur in languages with AVCs. A's analysis offers a solid conceptual matrix for such future studies.

Ch. 6 makes the point that morphologically complex verb forms in many languages can be shown to have developed from the fusion into a single word of what was originally a multiword AVC. Among the language families examined are Athabaskan, Yeniseian, Turkic, and Bantu. This chapter likewise has the potential of being expanded into an entire monograph. Though the material presented here is too random a sample to make any firm conclusion, it is tempting to speculate that polysynthetic verbs based on a rigid series of position classes (templatic morphology) might have generally, if not exclusively, derived from fused auxiliary constructions and whether much of their typological diversity accrues from differences between auxiliary-headed AVCs, lexical-headed AVCs, and various doubled and split patterns of inflection in the original AVC that generated the complex verb form.

Ch. 7 examines and attempts to classify various morphological origins for the different types of inflection patterns found in AVCs. A investigates the etymological role of serial verb constructions and clause combining, among other possible origins. A more narrow definition of AVCs could not have lent itself to this sort of diachronic investigation.

This monograph offers much to typologists and historical-comparative linguists alike. Although some readers may balk at including under the single rubric of auxiliary verb construction the entire range of structurally diverse types of complex predicates examined here, the results of this study thoroughly vindicate bringing them together in a single analysis.

## REFERENCES

- ANDERSON, GREGORY D. S. 2004. *Auxiliary verb constructions in Altai-Sayan Turkic*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

- HARRIS, MARTIN, and PAOLO RAMAT (eds.) 1987. *Historical development of auxiliaries*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- HEINE, BERND. 1993. *Auxiliaries: Cognitive forces and grammaticalization*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- KUTEVA, TANIA. 2001. *Auxiliation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Western Washington University  
 Modern Languages-9057  
 Bellingham, WA 98225  
 [edward.vajda@wwu.edu]

**Adam's tongue:** How humans made language, how language made humans. By DEREK BICKERTON. New York: Hill & Wang, 2009. Pp. 286. ISBN 9780809022816. \$27.50.

Reviewed by MICHAEL A. ARBIB, *University of Southern California*

In his new theory of language evolution, Derek Bickerton shifts the focus from comparison with the great apes to niche construction theory (Odling-Smee et al. 2003)—the environment ‘constructed’ by its inhabitants in turn selects for new traits. B offers a particular protohuman niche, territory scavenging, as the unique key to the emergence of language. For B, culture is ‘the way we adapt our environment to suit ourselves, in the same way that ... ant nests ... are the way ants ... adapt the environment to suit them. We do it by learning, they do it by instinct; big deal’ (11). Somehow this ironic dismissal, ‘big deal’, of the difference between learning and instinct sets a style that is at times engaging in its raciness, but rides roughshod over distinctions that really do need analysis.

B clearly presents what he means by animal communication systems (ACSs) in Ch. 1. Bickerton 1990 famously developed ‘protolanguage’ as something intermediate between an ACS and true language. Whereas ACS signals are all anchored to particular situations, (proto)language units are not. ACSs lack COMBINABILITY, whereas ‘languages combine lawfully and protolanguages combine lawlessly’ (41). For B, then, the two basic problems are explaining how words evolved and THEN explaining how grammatical structure evolved. To characterize language in sensu strictu, B appears to accept without reservation the characterization given by Noam Chomsky’s minimalism. Thus, where a protolanguage can only ‘put words together like beads on a string, Merge provides the pairwise operation that builds up [English [language teacher]] as a distinct structure from [[English language] teacher]’ (187).

B offers several tests for an adequate theory of language origins, including ‘uniqueness’ and ‘selfishness’ (28–32). Describing uniqueness B states that ‘if the proposed trigger for language is anything that affects other species, it’s not likely to be the right one’ (29). On the basis of this, B dismisses hunting, tool making, social relations, rituals, gossip, scheming for power, attracting mates, and controlling children as relevant to language origins. For selfishness, B explains: ‘A gives information to B. Before that act, that information belonged to A exclusively. A could have exploited it for A’s own benefit. Now B can exploit it too. What does A get out of this?’ (32). We know that vervet monkeys evolved alarm calls that are specific to eagle versus snake versus leopard (Seyfarth et al. 1980), so we know that this problem was already overcome at the ACS level and did not require changes specific to language origins.

B offers territory scavenging as THE cause for the emergence of language, but the human genome and the chimpanzee genome differ by about 1 percent. Since that translates to changes in perhaps 300 genes, why should ‘language-readiness’ involve a single trigger rather than the cumulative effects of changes in many of those genes?

The holophrastic view of protolanguage counters B’s idea of protolanguage as comprising haphazard strings of word-like units. ACS units are holistic, corresponding IN MEANING to whole