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A COMPUTATIONAL APPROACH TO TEACHING LIGHT VERB CONSTRUCTIONS: FROM ITALIAN TO ENGLISH, FRENCH, AND ROMANIAN

Abstract. This paper presents a computational approach to the teaching of Light Verb Constructions (LVCs) from a contrastive perspective, within the framework of a multilingual digital project directed by Sabine E. Koesters Gensini. The project targets university-level learners and involves eight third languages (L3) – Albanian, Dutch, French, German, Romanian, Russian, Spanish, and Swedish – with Italian (L1) and English (L2) serving as starting points for the exploration of LVCs in the L3. Focusing on Italian, English, French, and Romanian, the article outlines the project's theoretical and practical framework, with an emphasis on the semantic and morphosyntactic properties of LVCs, investigated within a contrastive analytical perspective. After outlining the criteria used to design a digital software tool for language teaching, illustrating how LVCs can be effectively taught through a computational, data-driven approach, the study offers a detailed analysis focused on the properties of verbo-nominal constructions with the Italian light verb *fare* (to do/make). Finally, drawing on authentic learner data in Romanian, this article highlights recurring

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error patterns in LVCs acquisition and argues for the systematic integration of these structures into foreign language curricula in the university context.

Keywords: light verb constructions, L2/L3 acquisition, e-learning, applied linguistics, language teaching

1. Introduction

The present study originates from a research project conceived and directed by Sabine E. Koesters Gensini[4], which aims to develop a digital program for university-level teaching of Light Verb Constructions (LVCs) from a contrastive perspective. The languages involved – Albanian, Dutch, French, German, Romanian, Russian, Spanish, and Swedish[5] – are treated as third languages (L3) on which students are invited to reflect, taking Italian (L1) and English (L2) as a starting point (the latter presumed to have been acquired through prior formal education). In the first part of the article, following a brief presentation of the project's objectives and structure (§2), we provide an overview of LVCs (§3 and §4) with particular reference to the relevant literature in Italian, English, French, and Romanian – to which the authors contributed during the development and implementation phases of the project. We then turn to the theoretical framework adopted, focusing on the semantic and morphosyntactic dimensions that underpin the contrastive analysis (§5). The analysis centres on selected LVCs involving the verb *fare* (*to do/make*) as a light verb (§6). The section that follows aims to illustrate the analytical parameters selected for the construction of a digital platform for teaching light verb

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4   The project *L'insegnamento universitario delle lingue straniere come "lingue terze": il caso delle Costruzioni con verbo a supporto* [The University Teaching of Foreign Languages as "Third Languages": The Case of Light Verb Constructions] was funded by Sapienza University of Rome (prot. RM11916B7F2E223D).

5   Light verb constructions across different linguistic traditions are thoroughly examined in the article "Dalle costruzioni a verbo supporto italiane alle lingue terze: un percorso di studio universitario", published in *Alle radici della fraseologia europea* in 2023. This article is the outcome of a collaborative effort among various specialists in the third languages involved in the project: Andrea Berardini for Swedish, Brunilda Dashi for Albanian, Marie-Pierre Escoubas-Benveniste for French, Danilo De Salazar for Romanian, Sabine E. Koesters for German, Julija Nikolaeva for Russian, Debora Vaccari for Spanish, and Suze Anja Verkade for Dutch (Koesters Gensini *et al.* 2023).

constructions (§7), including some case-studies taken from the e-learning environment to highlight differences arising from cross-linguistic variation between L1 and L2/L3 (§8). In the final section of this study (§9), drawing on authentic examples extracted from learner corpora of Romanian, we illustrate the specific challenges students encounter in producing LVCs. These difficulties, we argue, justify the systematic inclusion of such constructions in foreign language teaching curricula.

2. Objectives and Structure of the Project

The teaching course, designed to personalize and enhance the learning process, is supported by a user-friendly digital environment that is easy to explore and oriented around several educational objectives, including: the development of cross-disciplinary metalinguistic skills typically acquired in university settings; the reinforcement of students' linguistic and metalinguistic competences, with regard to learning strategies and foreign language use; the promotion of contrastive reflection on linguistic phenomena, whether similar, identical, or divergent, across L1, L2, and L3; and, more broadly, the strengthening of grammatical and analytical abilities.

The theoretical assumption underpinning the proposed approach to language teaching is that foreign language acquisition – whether L2 or L3 – should not be conceived as an isolated activity, but rather as a continuation and expansion of an existing semiotic capacity.[6] This capacity enables human beings not only to acquire their mother tongue (L1), but also to learn additional ones. From this perspective, the acquisition of a new language represents an enrichment of the individual's overall linguistic repertoire.

In the specific context of university students who, in addition to studying foreign languages, engage with disciplines such as general linguistics or computational linguistics, it is reasonable to hypothesize the effectiveness of a cross-disciplinary educational approach. This approach would be grounded not solely in the development of phraseological competence, but more importantly in the cultivation of metalinguistic competence – namely, the ability to use language as a means to reflect on

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[6]   See De Mauro, Ferreri 2005: 27.

language itself (the reflective metalinguistic function) and on the target languages being learned (the target-oriented metalinguistic function).

From an operational standpoint, we propose that learners should first be encouraged to reflect on the structural and semantic features of LVCs, their constituent elements, congruence relations, and potential contrasts in usage between constructions in the L2/L3 and in their L1 (Italian), before engaging in practical exercises. A solid theoretical understanding of the target construction is expected to facilitate acquisition and foster autonomous learning, which is of particular importance in the university context. Building on this theoretical framework, an interactive web application was developed to support a structured learning path for LVCs, articulated around four main stages:

(i) The first stage involves the presentation of the semantic and syntactic features of the LVC in L1 (Italian) and L2 (English), with the aim of fostering metalinguistic reflection. The defining features of verbo–nominal combinations are introduced based on semantic, syntactic, and lexical criteria.

(ii) The second stage guides learners through a contrastive analysis aimed at identifying variations in the constituents of LVCs in the L3.

(iii) The third stage concentrates specifically on the characteristics of LVCs in the L3. Building upon Italian (L1) and English (L2), learners are acquainted with the semantic and structural specificities of corresponding constructions in third languages. Each feature is exemplified through authentic examples, supported by explanatory notes when necessary.

(iv) Finally, to consolidate the productive use of the presented LVCs, learners engage in exercises of increasing complexity (multiple-choice questions), equipped with an integrated self-correction mechanism.

3. Defining Light Verb Constructions

Light verb constructions (LVCs) can be defined as verb-noun predicative combinations formed by a predicate noun and a light verb. Studies on

English LVCs can be traced back to the first half of the 20th century: the expression "light verb" was first identified by Jespersen (1942) to denote semantically low-content verbs – such as *to do, to make, to take, to have* – which are assumed to have no semantic import in V+NP constructions (such as *to make a call*). Geoffrey Leech suggests that a light verb may be defined as:

> A common and versatile lexical verb like do, give, have, make or take, which is semantically weak in many of its uses, and can be combined with nouns in constructions such as *do the cleaning, give (someone) a hug, have a drink, make a decision, take a break*. The whole construction often seems equivalent to the use of a single verb: *make a decision = decide*. (Leech 2006: 60)

Light verbs come to acquire a key role in the analysis of verbo-nominal combinations *as to make a call*, usually termed "composite predicates" (Cattell 1984), "complex predicates" (Butt 2003) or, as the most widely accepted expression in contemporary literature, "light verb constructions" (Kearns 2002). Such multiword units are made up of a verb which is semantically bleached and merely expresses the situation type (*aktionsart*) of the predicate (Butt 2003) and an event nominal which provides the main semantic content of the whole construction. In analyzing the semantic import provided by those "semantically impoverished" verbs (Allerton 2002), Quentin Allan focuses on the concept of "delexical verb" and stresses that this term refers to "a small group of very common transitive verbs which take as their object a noun which can also be used as a verb" (Allan 1998: 1). Focusing on the semantic features of light verbs and describing their meaning as "neutral", Giampaolo Salvi (1991) emphasizes the weak predicative force of an element whose role is merely functional and tied to the encoding of grammatical categories. From this perspective, it can be argued that the semantic contribution of light verbs is limited to the type of action expressed within the construction; this may involve, for example, a process or activity (e.g. *give help*), a state (e.g. *be on hold*), but also inchoativity (e.g. *take into consideration*) or causativity (e.g. *make noise*). In LVCs, light verbs may combine with different kinds of nominals, such as:

– ZERO-DERIVED NOUNS (e.g. *walk* in *to take a walk*)
– DERIVATIVE NOUNS (e.g. *to calculate* (v.) – *calculation* (n.) in *to make a calculation*)
– VERBAL NOUNS (e.g. *drawing* in *to make a drawing*)

4. Theoretical and Empirical Insights into Light Verb Constructions

The label "light verb construction" is relatively uncontested in European languages (denoting combinations of predicative nouns and semantically weak verbs) and indeed, the notion has been widely examined in several studies among different linguistic traditions (e.g. Jespersen 1942; Butt 2003; Ježek 2004; 2011; Salvi 1988; G. Gross 1999; De Pontonx 2004; Bidu-Vrânceanu *et al.* 2005). In providing a formal definition of the notion of *light verb construction*, French linguist Gaston Gross points out that *light verbs* can be defined as « 'Auxiliaires' des prédicats nominaux. Ils jouent le même rôle auprès des prédicats nominaux que les verbes auxiliaires auprès des prédicats verbaux ».[7] (Gross 1999: 73). The definition found in Romanian *Dicționarul General de Științe ale Limbii* also draws on Gross's theory:

> Verb suport în lingvistica franceză, în teoria grupurilor sintactice fixe [M. Gross]: termenul are în vedere o clasă de verbe cu sens vag, care, în combinație cu unele substantive, adjective şi adverbe, transferă acestora rolul semantic esenţial, manifestând şi la nivel sintactic o tendinţă de constituire a sintagmei în grup fix de cuvinte. […] Rolul lor semantic este mai mare sau mai mic, uneori atât de mic, încât a face, de ex., verb esenţialmente de acţiune, de eveniment, poate constitui suport pentru o predicaţie de stare (*a face burtă, a face febră*).[8] (Bidu-Vrânceanu *et al.* 2005: v. *suport*)

A similar perspective is reflected in the definition proposed by Elisabetta Ježek, who conceptualizes LVCs as a particular category within the broader framework of collocations: "[…] le costruzioni a verbo supporto possono essere definite come delle collocazioni che dal punto di vista

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[7]   « Dans les constructions à verbe support, est le substantif en position de 'complément' qui est le prédicat de la phrase, tandis que le verbe qui le précède est, en fait, son verbe auxiliaire d'actualisation, son verbe support. » (Gross 1999 : 77)

[8]   "Light verb in French linguistics, within the theory of fixed syntactic groups [M. Gross]: the term refers to a class of verbs with vague meaning which, in combination with certain nouns, adjectives, and adverbs, transfer to these elements the essential semantic role, while also exhibiting, at the syntactic level, a tendency to form fixed multi-word expressions. […] Their semantic contribution may vary in degree, and is sometimes so minimal that *a face* (to do/make), typically an action or event verb, can serve as a support for a stative predication (e.g. *a face burtă* 'to get a belly', *a face febră* 'to develop a fever')".

semantico sono 'sbilanciate' verso il nome, nel senso che il significato della costruzione è espresso quasi interamente dal nome"[9] (Ježek 2005: 181-182).

Analytical focus is inevitably directed toward the role of verb within the construction, which undergoes a varying degree of semantic bleaching, as observed by Nunzio La Fauci and Ignazio Mirto in their analysis with regard to the verb *fare*: "*Fare* supporto è, infatti, un verbo vuoto, un puro strumento sintattico che sostiene – portando la persona, il numero e il tempo – il vero predicato, un nome, la cui morfologia allude generalmente ad una relazione con un verbo"[10] (La Fauci, Mirto 1985: 34-35). This aspect was also noted by Sextil Pușcariu, who in the 1934 edition of *Dicționarul limbii române*, explains: „Deoarece *face* poate exprima orice acțiune, îl întâlnim foarte adesea, mai ales în literatura veche și populară, construit cu un abstract verbal și exprimând aceeași idee pe care o cuprinde verbul corespunzător"[11] (Pușcariu 1934: v. *face*). Reference is to the following constructions: *a face o încercare = a încerca* [to make an attempt = to attempt]; *a face cerere = a cere* [to make a request = to request][12]. Focusing on syntagmatic relations, it can be asserted that LVCs could represent particular types of collocations that are *noun-headed;* indeed, these constructions share the following semantic-syntactic properties with collocations:

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[9]   "[…V]erb constructions can be defined as collocations that from a semantic point of view are 'unbalanced' toward the noun, in the sense that the meaning of the construction is expressed almost entirely by the noun."

[10]   "*Fare* is, in fact, an empty verb, a pure syntactic tool that supports – carrying the person, number and tense – the real predicate, a noun, whose morphology generally alludes to a relation with a verb".

[11]   "Because *face* [to do/make] can express any kind of action, it is frequently encountered – especially in older and folk literature – constructed with an abstract verbal noun and conveying the same idea as the corresponding full verb".

[12]   By directing her analysis toward the class of so-called polysemous verbs, Florica Dimitrescu situates light verb constructions within the broader linguistic category of verbal locutions: „Verbele plurisemantice *a face, a da, a lua* din anumite locuțiuni verbale au tendința de a-și pierde sensul lexical propriu, având mai ales rolul de a preciza persoana, momentul și modalitatea acțiunii" ([The polysemous verbs *a face, a da*, and *a lua*, when occurring in certain verbal locutions, tend to lose their original lexical meaning, assuming primarily the function of specifying the person, tense, and modality of the action], Dimitrescu 1958: 89-90). For further insightful discussion of the topic in Romanian academic literature, see: Theodor Hristea (1984), Valeria Guțu Romalo (2005).

1. There is a lexical restriction imposed by the noun (e.g. *to do/to take a walk*);
2. The lexical restriction is usage-dependent and varies according to the language in question (e.g. IT *fare una doccia*, Fr. *prendre une douche*, En. *to take a shower*, Ro. *a face un duș*);
3. The meaning of the *collocate* (the dependent element, the verb) is influenced by the *base* (the prominent element, the noun). In *to make a cake* and *to make a promise*, the verb *make* has two different semantic nuances. In the first example, *make* means to create or produce a physical object through a process of assembling or preparing ingredients; it refers to creating, producing something tangible (you combine ingredients, bake them, and thus produce a cake). In the second example, the meaning of *make* is oriented towards the act of committing or expressing an intention, which is abstract or symbolic rather than physical and concrete (you formulate, declare, or commit to a future action or behaviour).
4. The noun within the construction undergoes no semantic modification; its meaning remains consistent with that attested in other combinatorial contexts (e.g. *to make a call*, *to receive a call*, *to miss a call*);
5. On the syntactic axis, the constituents of the construction function as autonomous units[13].

5. Teaching (and Learning) Light Verb Constructions

Due to their semantic and syntactic features, LVCs may pose some difficulties for non-native language learners. One of the complexities in the teaching/learning process of phraseological units for non-native learners is represented by the interlinguistic variation determined by the lack of congruence between the syntactic or semantic systems of the L1, L2, and/or any additional L3. Within the framework of second (and/or third) language acquisition, LVCs and, more generally, phraseological units

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[13] The syntactic autonomy of the constituents within LVCs and their degree of cohesion may be empirically assessed through a series of tests, including passivization, relativization, and topicalization.

contribute to the learner's acquisition of *lexical teddy bears* (Hasselgren 1994), also referred to as *islands of reliability* or *fixed anchorage points* (Dechert 1984)[14]. In the context of third language (L3) acquisition, where cross-linguistic correspondences are amplified due to the presence of a second language (L2), the difficulties faced by a learner engaging in metalinguistic reflection based on contrastive analysis may increase. When comparing their L1, the fully or largely acquired L2, and the L3 in the process of being acquired, the learner faces a potentially high degree of interlinguistic variation, since cross-linguistic correspondences among different languages in LVCs may involve varying degrees of complexity. In this regard, one of the properties of LVCs that may impact the difficulty of the L2/L3 learning process is the polysemy of the light verb. As previously discussed, in the case of *to make a cake*, the meaning of the verb *make* is closely related to a creative act, and the noun *cake* does not select it as the only possible verb (one can also *eat*, *bake*, or *decorate* a cake). Conversely, in the case of *to make a call*, the noun selects a specific verb without the verb contributing – in terms of compositionality – to the overall meaning of the expression.

Once these points regarding the problematization of LVCs in teaching and learning processes have been established, it becomes essential to focus on the systematization of the empirical properties of the light verbs *to make/to do* within verbo-nominal constructions in Italian, English, French, and Romanian. Although there are no clear and well-established rules to distinguish between *make* and *do* in English, it is possible to outline some considerations regarding the properties of these two verbs:

- the verb *do* is generally associated with an action understood as an ongoing process, whereas *make* indicates the end product of an action, that is, the result of an act of creation, realization, or construction of something;

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[14]   In further examining the nature of lexical teddy bears, Hasselgård emphasizes that "words characterized as lexical teddy bears" are not only more frequent in learner language than in native language, but are also "systemically overgeneralized by advanced learners", which leads to their being used in contexts where native speakers would choose a (near) synonym. Thus, a phraseological teddy bear will be "a multi-word unit that learners use more frequently and in more contexts than native speakers do." (Hasselgård 2019: 341)

– both *do* and *make* tend to combine with deverbal nouns (e.g. *make a promise*, *do a dance*) or derived forms (e.g. *make a decision*, *do a translation*);
– both *do* and *make* can be defined as telic verbs, as the noun they select orients the construction towards a completed action or an action being goal-oriented;
– constructions with *do* or *make* may display some variations in terms of complementation patterns. On the one hand, the verb *make* admits a considerable variety of complementation patterns (such as *of + NP*, *on + NP*, *of NP + to NP*, *to + NP*), whereas in constructions with the verb *do*, there is a higher incidence of *of + NP* and *on + NP* patterns.

6. A Software Tool for the Teaching of Light Verb Constructions

From an interlinguistic perspective, the computational approach comes to acquire a key role in the creation of a user-friendly software tool that provides information about LVCs in Italian, English, French, and Romanian on both a semantic and a syntactic level. The purpose of our computational model for LVCs' teaching should be viewed as both theoretical and practical: within the theoretical domain, this tool can help users in the discovery of the syntagmatic properties of light verb constructions in terms of

1) LEXICAL MEANING
2) LEXICAL COMPONENTS
3) STABILITY OF LEXICAL COMPONENTS
4) COMPLEMENTATION PATTERNS,

while, on the other hand, the practical function is performed thanks to some multiple-choice questions carefully crafted to improve the development of the student's phraseological competence. The digital software tool can provide instant feedback to students, which is useful to increase levels of confidence and motivation, promoting a metalinguistic reflection on the phraseological resources of the linguistic system.
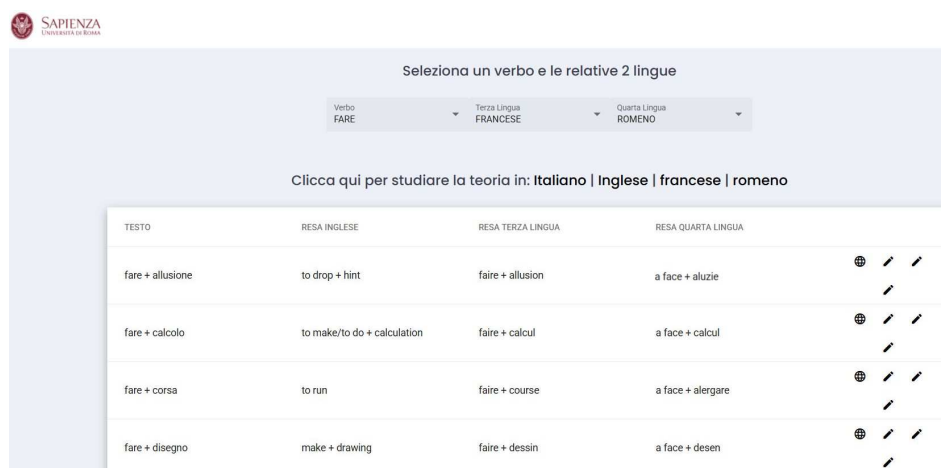
Figure 1. Sample page from the software.
The layout is designed to encourage contrastive metalinguistic reflection, enabling users
to analyse structural and lexical differences across Italian, English, French, and Romanian.
Source: our software tool for LVCs' teaching

7. Analytical Parameters

7.1. Degree of Equivalence

For each LVC, the contrastive analysis begins with the identification of the degree of equivalence between the expressions observed in the languages under examination: *full equivalence*, *partial equivalence*, or *non-equivalence*.

 Full equivalence occurs when the L2/L3 features an LVC that is structurally identical to that of the L1. In such cases, literal translations of all the individual components of the Italian LVC perform the same communicative function (e.g. IT *fare una telefonata* > EN *to make a call/phone call*), thus, we have both a formal and functional equivalence. *Partial equivalence* arises when the L2/L3 exhibits constructions that are only partially equivalent in structure, making literal translations of the individual components incorrect. Within this category, several subtypes must be distinguished:

a) The L2/L3 includes an LVC that fulfils the same communicative function as in Italian, but is composed of different structural elements: IT *fare una telefonata* > RO *a da un telefon*. In this example, interlinguistic variation between the Italian LVC and its Romanian counterpart involves the verbal component. Although both expressions convey a similar meaning, they differ in the choice of verb (IT *fare* > RO *a da*).

b) The L2/L3 features a construction that is structurally equivalent, but does not perform the same communicative function as the Italian LVC. In such cases, interlinguistic variation may concern, for instance, the diaphasic register or involve shifts along the semantic continuum.

c) In cases of non-equivalence, the L2/L3 features entirely different structures. This means that where Italian uses a LVC to perform a given communicative function, the L2/L3 uses a simplex verb (e.g.: IT *fare una corsa* > RO *a alerga*).

7.2. *Meaning*

The second parameter employed in the classification of LVCs pertains to the articulation of the semantic content of the verbo-nominal structure selected by the user. In order to support the development of learners' phraseological competence, definitions must be comprehensive, succinct, and unambiguous, while avoiding references to overly specialized encyclopedic knowledge or technical terminology. Typically, definitions of LVCs follow a standardized explanatory approach, progressing from general to more specific elements, thereby facilitating the gradual identification of the expression's semantic properties by the learner.

7.3. *Usage Label*

The usage label is one of the classification criteria applied exclusively to Italian LVCs (L1). This parameter – which is not found in L2/L3 dictionaries – indicates both the frequency and the register in which a multi-word expression is used, and constitutes one of the defining

features used in the classification of lexical entries in *GRADIT* (*Grande dizionario italiano dell'uso*)[15].

7.4. Simplex Verb

The simplex verb (also known as "full verb") is a verb form that can paraphrase the LVC. It "condenses" the meaning of the construction and, in many cases, corresponds to the verb from which the LVC noun is derived – often a deverbal noun (e.g.: IT *fare un sogno > sognare*; en. *to have a dream > to dream*; fr. *faire un rêve > rêver*; ro. *a avea un vis > a visa*). The simplex verb serves as a fundamental criterion for distinguishing LVCs from other verb-noun combinations, as the ability to paraphrase an analytic structure with a single verb demonstrates semantic equivalence.

While some LVCs match their simplex verbs completely (e.g.: IT *dare un consiglio > consigliare*; *fare una verifica > verificare*), many do not show full symmetry. This occurs, for example, when the match is only partial (e.g.: IT *avere in animo > meditare*; *avere intenzione > progettare*), or when the simplex verb contains a prefix (e.g.: IT *dare fastidio > infastidire*). Other examples include cases where the simplex verb is not derived from the noun (e.g. IT *fare fuoco > sparare*), or where no direct verbal equivalent exists (e.g. IT *fare spazio*; *dare luogo*).

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[15]   The usage labels listed in *GRADIT* (and in the digitized version consulted for this study) are eleven in total: **FO** [*uso fondamentale*]: fundamental usage (this label is assigned to 2,049 entries that exhibit extremely high frequency in Italian); **AU** [*alto uso*]: high usage (2,576 high-frequency words are labeled as such); **AD** [*alta disponibilità*]: high availability (this label is applied to 1,897 words that are "relatively rare in speech and writing, yet well-known due to their association with highly relevant acts and objects in everyday life", see De Mauro, 2005: 60); **CO** [***uso** comune*]: common usage (47,060 entries are labeled as such – terms that are used and understood regardless of the speaker's profession or origin, provided they have at least a secondary level of education); **TS** [*uso tecnico-specialistico*]**:** technical-specialist usage (107,194 entries fall under this label, typically known within specific scientific or technological domains); **LE** [*uso letterario*]: literary usage (5,208 entries typically found in texts belonging to the literary tradition); **RE** [*uso regionale*]: regional usage (5,407 words of regional origin); **DI** [*uso dialettale*]**:** dialectal usage (338 words perceived as dialectal); **ES** [*esotismo*]: exoticism (6,938 foreign or phonologically non-Italian words); **BU** [*basso uso*]: low usage (22,550 words attested in 20th century texts but infrequently used in contemporary discourse); **OB** [*obsoleto*]: obsolete (13,554 words no longer in use but present in historical dictionaries).

7.5. *Constituents of the LVC*

The explicit identification of the grammatical category of each constituent within a LVC contributes to a heightened metalinguistic awareness of morphosyntactic roles among learners and facilitates the internalization of syntactic structures. Across the languages analysed, a recurring morphosyntactic pattern is VERB + DETERMINER + NOUN (e.g. IT *fare un disegno* [V + NP]), wherein the nominal component typically encodes the core semantic content of the predicate.

7.6. *Degree of Fixedness*

LVCs are characterized by a degree of fixedness – an intrinsic property of phraseological units. Structurally, morphosyntactic cohesion manifests across varying levels of flexibility. In this study, the degree of fixedness is established in relation to possible variation in the grammatical categories of the LVC's constituents. The platform applies three labels: high fixedness, medium fixedness, and low fixedness.

LVCs with high fixedness do not allow any modification of their constituents. This is relatively rare, as LVCs, unlike proverbs, are not typically fully fixed expressions and usually permit morphosyntactic variation based on the subject. LVCs with medium fixedness allow some variation, such as topicalization, relativization, or anaphoric reference. For instance, in RO *avea un vis*, the definite article may replace the indefinite one in relativized or topicalized contexts. LVCs with low fixedness regularly allow morphological and syntactic variation across their components.

7.7. *Negation*

In certain languages, LVCs exhibit specific behaviours with respect to negation. For example, in French, negation leads to the replacement of indefinite and partitive articles (*un*, *une*, *des*; *du*, *de la*, *des*) with *de* followed by the noun (e.g. FR *J'ai fait un dessin* > *Je n'ai pas fait de dessin*). In contrast, in Italian, English, and Romanian, LVC negation is typically formed by placing the negative particle directly before the verb.

7.8. *Passivization*

The passivization of LVCs entails not only a structural reconfiguration but may also give rise to subtle shifts in meaning, depending on the specific light verb employed. Typically, the passive form is derived by promoting the deverbal noun – originally functioning as the object of the predicate – to subject position within the clause (e.g. IT *Ho fatto una telefonata > La telefonata è stata fatta da me*).

7.9. *Expansion and Complementation*

Languages differ significantly in the ways they permit the use of determiners – such as articles, adjectives, and adverb – as well as complementation structures to modify or specify the meaning of LVCs. For instance, the Romanian LVC *a face o plimbare* can be expanded through the addition of adjectives (e.g. *o scurtă plimbare*), adverbs (e.g. *ca de obicei*) or complement phrases (e.g. *spre casă; cu o prietenă*).

7.10. *Relativization, Anaphoric Reference, and Topicalization*

The relativization of the nominal component in a LVC entails the insertion of an appropriate relative pronoun (e.g. RO *am făcut un desen > desenul pe care l-am făcut*). In cases involving anaphoric reference, particular attention must be paid to case inflection in languages where such morphological marking remains productive (e.g. RO *desenele, le-am făcut*). Additionally, many languages permit the topicalization of either the entire LVC or its nominal constituent – that is, the syntactic fronting of the relevant element to sentence-initial position for purposes of emphasis or contrast (e.g. RO *Desenul pe care l-a făcut este foarte frumos*).

8. Equivalence in Practice: A Comparative Description

The present investigation will deal with the comparison of Italian LVCs with the verb *fare* and English, French, and Romanian respective translations to reveal similarities and differences in terms of communicative functions

and semantic and syntactic features. To determine what kind of equivalence – whether *total equivalence*, *partial equivalence* and *non-equivalence* – can be traced, the research will focus on three examples.

Cross-linguistic congruence plays a key role in facilitating the acquisition of multi-word expressions in a second or third language. In the case of the Italian LVC *fare una promessa*, a relationship of *total equivalence* (formal and functional equivalence) can be observed with the corresponding LVCs in English *to make a promise*, French *faire une promesse*, and Romanian *a face o promisiune*. In the three cases mentioned, it is possible to spot a complete convergence on both a semantic level (the LVC in the L2/L3 carries the same meaning as the one in the L1) and a syntactic level (all constituents of the LVC in the L2/L3 belong to the same grammatical categories as those of the LVC in the L1).

Inglese
to make + promise

Tipo di equivalenza con la L1: Equivalenza totale. In entrambi i casi si tratta di una CVS con significato analogo. Vi è una convergenza completa nella scelta del verbo (it. "fare", ing. "to make"), dell'articolo (it. "una", ing. "a"), sia per il sostantivo (it. "promessa", ing. "promise").
Significato: To tell someone that one will certainly do something in the future.
Marca d'uso:
Verbo sintetico: To promise (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english-italian/promise?q=to+promise)
Costituenti della CVS: verbo + articolo + sostantivo
Grado di fissità: Basso. Il sostantivo può essere usato sia nella forma singolare (es. "to make a promise") sia nella forma plurale (es "to make promises"). È possibile l'uso dell'articolo determinativo (es. "to make the promise") e indeterminativo (es. "to make a promise").
Negazione: Es. I did not make any promise.
Espansione: La CVS può essere accompagnata da un aggettivo. Es. You made a simple promise.
Complementazione: La CVS regge un soggetto e può essere seguita da alcuni complementi come, ad esempio, complemento di tempo (es. "you made a promise last night"), complemento di luogo (es. "do you remember the promise you made at home?"), complemento di termine (es. "Kate made a promise to me"), complemento d'agente (es. "all those promises were made by parlamentarians").
Forma passiva: La CVS può essere utilizzata nella forma passiva. Es. That promise was made by her sister.
Relativizzazione: Es. I will never forget the promise that you have made to me.
Ripresa anaforica: Es. The promise, I made it.
Topicalizzazione/Dislocazione: Es. The promise he made has been kept.
Note:

Figure 2. English LVC *to make a promise*.
Theoretical schema illustrating the analytical parameters for the syntactic
and semantic characterization of the LVC (total equivalence)
Source: our software tool for LVCs' teaching

In Italian, the verbo-nominal combination *fare una domanda* constitutes a LVC, since it composed of a light verb (*fare*) combined with a predicative noun (*domanda*) and can be paraphrased by a simplex verb (*domandare*). However, a literal translation of the constituents of this LVC into English or French would lead an Italian learner to produce incorrect forms due to cross-linguistic variation; for this reason, the constructions *to make/to do a question** in English and *faire une question** in French are ungrammatical.[16]

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[16]　The construction *faire une question*, although formally correct, does not perform the same communicative function as the Italian LVC because *question* in this case corresponds to *questione* (e.g. *J'en fais une question de principe*).

In English, the preferred verbo-nominal construction is *to ask a question*: although there is convergence in the choice of the nominal component (*una domanda > a question*), in this case the verbal collocate is a semantically-specific verb (*to ask*), rather than a general-purpose verb as in the Italian LVC – thus, we are dealing with *partial equivalence*. Similarly, in the French construction *poser une question* and the Romanian *a pune o întrebare*, variation occurs in relation to the verbal collocate. However, unlike English, these constructions show a certain degree of symmetry with the Italian *porre una domanda*, which conveys a similar meaning to the original LVC but belongs to a more formal register (diaphasic variation).

poser + question

Tipo di equivalenza con la L1: Equivalenza parziale. In entrambi i casi si tratta di una CVS con significato analogo. Non vi è una convergenza nella scelta del verbo (it. "fare", fr. "poser"); vi è, invece, una convergenza nella scelta dell'articolo (it. "una", fr. "une") e del sostantivo (it. "domanda", fr. "question").

Significato: Chercher une réponse à propos de quelque chose.

Marca d'uso:

Verbo sintetico: Questionner (https://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/questionner/65656)

Costituenti della CVS: verbo + articolo + sostantivo

Grado di fissità: Basso. Il sostantivo può essere usato sia nella forma singolare (es. "poser une question") sia nella forma plurale (es. "poser des questions"). È possibile l'uso dell'articolo determinativo (es. "poser la question") e indeterminativo (es. "poser une question").

Negazione: Es. Elle n'a pas posé de questions sur le sujet.

Espansione: La CVS può essere accompagnata da un aggettivo. Es. Émile a posé une question très personnelle.

Complementazione: La CVS regge un soggetto e può essere seguita da alcuni complementi, come, ad esempio, il complemento di termine (es. "J'ai posé des questions à ta sœur"), il complemento di luogo (es. "Il m'a posé des questions dans son bureau"), il complemento di tempo (es. "Jean lui a posé des questions hier").

Forma passiva: Es. Une question a été posée par une étudiante.

Relativizzazione: Es. La question que tu as posée est très bizarre.

Ripresa anaforica: Es. Des questions, ils les ont déjà posées.

Topicalizzazione/Dislocazione: Non comune.

Note: In lingua francese esiste la CVS "faire une demande". Sebbene tale costruzione presenti una totale equivalenza con la CVS italiana sul piano formale, essa viene utilizzata prevalentemente nell'accezione di "exprimer une requête". Es. Comment faire une demande de carte nationale d'identité ?

Figure 3. French LVC *poser une question*.
Theoretical schema illustrating the analytical parameters for the syntactic and semantic characterization of the LVC (partial equivalence)
Source: our software tool for LVCs' teaching

The phenomenon of cross-linguistic variation affecting the translation of the Italian LVC *fare una nuotata* in English, French, and Romanian allows for reflections on *non-equivalence*. While the English LVC *to take a swim* constitutes a case of *partial equivalence*, in French and Romanian semantic and syntactic considerations point to a phenomenon of *non-equivalence*. In both the French construction *prendre un bain* and the Romanian *a face baie*, there is no semantic convergence with the Italian *fare una nuotata*. In Italian, the deverbal noun *nuotata* makes the activity semantically specific, referring to an individual action involving coordinated body movement through water (in the sea, a lake, or a swimming pool). By contrast, the French and Romanian verbo-nominal constructions are more similar to

the Italian *fare un bagno* – a more generic expression that lacks a direct logical link to *fare una nuotata*, as one can *take a bath* in a tub without actually swimming or moving.[17]

9. LVCs in Romanian as L3

A significant difficulty in learning Romanian as a third language (L3) lies in the acquisition of LVCs. The majority of foreign students who begin learning Romanian typically speak two other languages already, which presents both an advantage and a challenge. On one hand, multilingual learners benefit from enhanced metalinguistic awareness and can more easily recognize cross-linguistic patterns. On the other hand, this same ability can lead to negative transfer, where learners apply patterns from previously acquired languages that do not align with Romanian structures. This aspect becomes more visible in the use of LVCs, where the complexity of selecting meaning to structure increases, especially during contrastive analysis and metalinguistic reflection.

To better understand how LVCs are acquired and where difficulties arise, we analysed a corpus[18] of written compositions by students from A1–beginner level to B1–independent user level in the CEFR framework[19], with varied L1 backgrounds, including Italian, Russian, Arabic, Greek and others. The selection focused on compositions containing at least one LVC, enabling us to observe how these constructions are used across different proficiency levels and language backgrounds. The examples presented here are drawn mainly from A2 and B1 level texts. In the CEFR framework, LVCs are treated as fixed collocations and are part of the broader category of fixed expressions (see CEFR: 110-111). At A1-A2 levels,

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[17]   For this reason, the most semantically appropriate – though not structurally equivalent – translations of the Italian LVC are the simple verbs *nager* in French and *a înota* in Romanian.
[18]   For our study, we used the digitized learner corpus for Romanian (LECOR), which includes written and spoken texts produced by foreign students at various proficiency levels between 2022 and 2024 at the University of Bucharest. We also consulted the printed corpus *Româna ca limbă străină*, compiled by Mihaela-Viorica Constantinescu and Gabriela Stoica between 2004 and 2016, and published in 2020 by the University of Bucharest.
[19]   CEFR = *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*, Council of Europe (2001). Available online at: https://rm.coe.int/1680459f97

learners typically have a limited repertoire of collocations, most often with the verbs *a face* ("to do/make") and *a lua* ("to take"). By B1 level, learners are expected to use a wider range of common collocations, however, errors in verb-noun pairing remain frequent. The analysis[20] revealed that the most frequent source of error was, unsurprisingly, the misuse of the light verb. For instance, students often substituted the verb *a face* ("to do/make") with *a lua* ("to take") or vice versa (see examples from (1) to (8)), and used *a face* and *a lua* in contexts where other verbs – such as *a avea* ("to have"), *a da* ("to give"), *a pune* ("to put"), *a primi* ("to receive") – would have been more appropriate (see examples from (9) to (14)). These substitutions indicate a tendency to rely on default or high-frequency verbs, a phenomenon consistent with what Hasselgren (1994) refers to as "lexical teddy bears" – words that learners overuse because they feel safe and familiar (see **§5**).

- *A face* **instead of** *a lua*

  (1) A condus mintea oamenilor, influențându-i să comporte, **să facă decizie**.[21]
      "He led people's minds, influencing them to behave, **to make decisions**."
  (2) Dar când a ajuns acolo, tatăl ei i-a întrebat ce **hotărâre** ea **a făcut**.
      "But when she got there, her father asked her what **decision she had made**."
  (3) Sunt sigur că **am făcut decizie** adevărată, și eu cred că în toată viața când facem ceva nu e bine să îndoim sau să regretăm.
      "I'm sure **I made the right decision**, and I believe that in life, when we do something, it's not good to doubt or regret."
  (4) **Fac micul dejun** cu cappuccino sau caffe latte și o prejitură.
       "I have breakfast with a cappuccino or caffe latte and a pastry."

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[20]   The analysis aims at this stage to provide a qualitative description of how LVCs are used, rather than a quantitative account, and is intended to raise awareness about the teaching and acquisition of LVCs. This preliminary stage aims to map recurring patterns and highlight cross-linguistic influences, which will serve as a basis for a future, more comprehensive quantitative analysis.

[21]   The examples selected from our corpus have been retained in their original form, without any grammatical corrections or intervention on our part.

In examples (1)-(3), we are dealing with lexical calques, likely influenced by the English expression *to make a decision* or the Russian *сделать решение* (sdelat' resheniye). This influence is supported by the corpus metadata, which indicates that the speakers in examples (2) and (3) are native Russian speakers. In Romanian, however, the correct verb in this light verb construction is *a lua* ("to take"), forming the phrase *a lua o decizie* ("to make/take a decision") or *a lua decizii* ("to make/take decisions"). In example (4), the Italian student describes their morning routine. The expression used, *fac micul dejun* ("I make breakfast"), reflects a lexical calque from Italian, specifically from the phrase *fare colazione*, which means "to have breakfast". In Romanian, the appropriate equivalent is *a lua micul dejun* ("to have breakfast").

- *A lua* **instead of** *a face*

  (5) M-am dus acolo cu frații mei mi-a fost frig din lac **am luat** multe **poze** acolo și m-am relaxat.
      "I went there with my brothers, I was cold because of the lake, **I took** many **pictures** there and I relaxed."
  (6) Dar am vazut cateva vedere frumoase și **am luat** catevă **poze**.
      "But I saw a few beautiful views and **I took** some **pictures**."
  (7) Am învațat la limba româna, **am luăt duș** am jucat cu copii sora lui mea.
      "I studied Romanian, **I took a shower**, I played with the children, my sister."
  (8) Vreau să **iau un curs de fotografie**; pentru că îmi place să fac fotografie frumoase.
      "I want **to take a photography course**, because I like taking beautiful photographs."

Examples (5)-(8) highlight a cross-linguistic transfer, since learners apply English structures, like "take a picture", "take a shower", or "take a class", directly to Romanian, where the correct equivalent requires the verb *a face* ("to do/ make"): *a face poze, a face duș, a face/ a urma un curs.*

- *A face* **and** *a lua* **instead of other verbs**

  (9) După ce obții scrisoarea de admitere, aplică pentru viza și vino la Ambasada României, să trimiți și documente și **să faci interviu**.
  "After you receive the admission letter, apply for the visa and come to the Romanian Embassy to send the documents and **give an interview**."

  (10) Scriam povestire în fiecare săptămână, **faceam testele** în fiecare lună.
  "I used to write a story every week, and **take tests** every month."

  (11) Este nu foarte dificil **sa face grija** cu tine.
  "It is not very difficult **to take care** of you."

  (12) **Mi-am facut o dorință**, am suflat lumânările, și am tăiat tortul.
  "**I made a wish**, blew out the candles, and cut the cake."

  (13) Dar pentru mine, ma prefer să locuiesc cu ei pentru **să iau grijă** de ei sau iau o casă lângă ei, să fiu aproape.
  "But for me, I prefer to live with them so **I** can **take care** of them, or get a house near them, to be close."

  (14) În primul rund, putem să trimitem și **să luam mesajele** foarte repede și simple.
  "First of all, **we** can send and **receive messages** very quickly and easily."

Examples (9)-(14) illustrate the tendency of learners to overgeneralize the use of light verbs *a face* ("to do/make") and *a lua* ("to take") in contexts where Romanian requires different lexical verbs (*a da* – "to give"; *a avea* – "to have"; *a pune* – "to put"; *a primi* – "to receive"): *a da un interviu* instead of *a face un interviu* (9), *a da test/examen* instead of *a face test* (10), *a avea grijă* instead of *a face grijă* (11) or *a lua grijă* (13), *a pune o dorință* instead of *a face o dorință* (12), and *a primi un mesaj* instead of *a lua un mesaj* (14). These constructions reflect direct translation from English, where the light verbs "to do" and "to take" are broadly used in expressions like "take care," "make a wish," "take a test," or "take a message."

Beyond incorrect verb choice, another frequent issue in learners' production of LVCs is the misuse of the noun phrase, more precisely when it comes to article selection. The inconsistent nature of article use

within Romanian LVCs makes this especially challenging. For example, *a face patul* ("to make the bed") is a correct LVC, while *a face un pat* changes the meaning entirely, implying the act of building a bed. Similarly, *a face duș* means "to take a shower", whereas *a face dușul* may be interpreted as repairing or installing a shower. Another case is *a face o plimbare* ("to take a walk"), which is acceptable, but the definite form *a face plimbarea* is only appropriate in restricted contexts, such as *a face plimbarea de seară* ("to take the evening walk"). These examples illustrate how article use can significantly affect meaning in LVCs and point to the need for focused instruction on nominal structures within collocations, alongside verb choice.

(15) Ne sărutăm în multe ori, vorbim şi **facem plan**.
   "We kiss many times, we talk and **make plans.**"
(16) Duminică dimineață **fac o curățenie** și spăl rufe.
   "On Sunday morning, **I do some cleaning** and wash clothes."
(17) Dupa-amiază, de obicei, **fac plimbare** cu prietenele mele în oraşul şi vizitez locuri pe care nu le am văzut până acum.
   "In the afternoon, **I** usually **go for a walk** with my friends in the city and visit places I haven't seen until now."
(18) Poliția a suparat pe ea. Pentru că el a gândit că ea **a facut glumă** rea puntru poliția.
   "The police got upset with her because he thought **she made a bad joke** about the police."

In the examples above, we can observe the misuse of the Romanian indefinite article un/o, which is often omitted where it should be used, such as in *a face un plan* (15), *a face o plimbare* (17), and *a face o glumă* (18), or incorrectly inserted where it should not appear, as in *a face curățenie* (16).

In order to avoid errors, students should be encouraged to learn LVCs as fixed phrases rather than translating them word-for-word, as direct translation often leads to errors in verb selection. It is important to raise learners' awareness that each noun typically pairs with a specific light verb, and this pairing is not always intuitive across languages. To support this, teachers can incorporate targeted exercises, such as matching verbs to nouns, choosing the correct verb from a list, or completing fill-in-the-blank activities. Additionally, exposure to authentic materials,

such as dialogues, interviews, or informal texts, can help students recognize these constructions in context and internalize them more naturally.

10. Conclusions

Given the characteristics of LVCs – high frequency in everyday speech; unique meaning and nuances; the tendency to combine with specific nouns and adjectives; challenges in translation and equivalence; the contribution to grammatical diversity and fluency – both teachers and students should be aware of their importance in language acquisition.

While many existing studies analyse LVCs at the intra-linguistic level, cross-linguistic and contrastive investigations remain relatively rare, especially in applied linguistics and foreign language teaching. This study has highlighted the importance of teaching LVCs from a contrastive perspective, as these constructions do not behave the same across languages. Not only do they vary in terms of light verb choice and syntactic structure, but the level of cross-linguistic equivalence also ranges from total (e.g., *fare una promessa > to make a promise*), to partial (*fare una domanda > to ask a question*), to non-equivalence (*fare una nuotata > a face baie*), depending on the language pair. Recognizing this spectrum of equivalence is crucial for language learners, as literal translations often result in ungrammatical or awkward expressions in the target language.

An important contribution to this effort is the development of a multilingual digital project directed by Sabine E. Koesters Gensini, which incorporates LVCs into a computational teaching tool designed for university-level learners of third languages (L3s). The digital tool enables learners to explore the semantic and morphosyntactic behavior of LVCs, receive instant feedback, and engage in metalinguistic reflection through interactive exercises.

Integrating contrastive digital tools into the teaching and learning of LVCs in a target language can benefit both researchers and educators. These tools enhance the understanding of LVC-related challenges and support learners in developing more nuanced, flexible, and fluent language skills.

CORPUS

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