

# Descriptivity of Graphic Verbs in Seychellois Creole

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## Introduction

Human vision of the world is reflected in the way natural facts and phenomena are categorized and nominated in language. As Jackendoff (2002) writes, ‘we must consider the domain of linguistic semantics to be continuous with human conceptualization as a whole’ (p.293). In other words, studying the meaning of words in different languages facilitates better understanding of human cognitive processes in general.

Units of lexicon present different perspectives on the denoted phenomenon or event: synonymous or thematically close as they may be, different lexemes capture the same fragment of reality from different angles and with different degrees of detail. Such lexically encoded detalization has been examined in a number of studies focusing on various languages and different lexico-semantic classes (Snell-Hornby, 1983; Gao and Cheng, 2003; Boars, 2006; Ferez, 2007; Klymenko, 2015; Kudrnáčová, 2016 among others). The present paper analyses the above characteristic in Seychellois Creole (SC), a young and developing language that got its national status in Seychelles in 1993 (Constitution of the Republic of the Seychelles, 1993). The research focus is on the amount of information about the graphic act – the umbrella term for writing, drawing and other related actions – lexicalized by graphic verbs (GVs) in this language. The research questions are: what aspects of the graphic act are captured in SC GV? Are they encoded with the same degree of detail? If the GV's arguments specificity is different, what are the functional implications?

The analysed repertoire of SC GV includes 66 lexemes sampled from the trilingual dictionary of Seychellois Creole, French and English (Gillieaux, 2017). Definitions of SC GV are taken from Lexical Corpus for Diksyoner Monoleng Kreol Seselwa (2019). Cited textual examples come from the above lexicographic resources and from the SC-speaking informants' input.

## 1. Theoretical background

### 1.1 Some approaches to verb meaning

Verb lexicon gets special attention in contemporary semantic studies as verbs not only name some action or state, but denote a whole event with a number of its participants and attending circumstances. For example, SC verb (1) *grifonnen* ‘to scribble’ – *reye*, *ekrir anpaye* ‘to write in an entangled way’, while naming the act of writing, evokes a number

of entities involved (the person who writes, something which is written, the tool it is written with or the surface it is written on, etc.) and also connotes the manner in which this writing is done (in a messy, unclear way).

The intrinsic complexity of the verb meaning leads to various approaches to its decomposition. Though differently conceptualized and labelled, the verb meaning components are usually classified into two main sets: those semantic elements which define the verb status as the lexical category to denote an event (an action or a state), and those which denote some aspects of this event, including its participants and circumstances. Thus, according to Levin (2015), verb meaning consists of two parts: root (core, idiosyncratic meaning) and lexical semantic template indicating the event type in terms of primitives like ACT, BE, CAUSE. For the SC verb *grifonnen* above, its core meaning relates to the particulars of the denoted graphic act. Its lexical semantic template would be rendered as 'someone ACTS to CAUSE something to BE'. Snell-Hornby (1983) defines the verb meaning in terms of 'nucleus' and 'modifier', whereby the act nucleus can be understood as an underlying sense shared by all the members of the semantic group (e.g. creating a graphic object for the above SC verb *grifonnen* and its synonyms). Modifiers include various attending characteristics of the denoted action, such as physical, evaluative or attitudinal features (e.g., *grifonnen* not only refers to writing, but evokes manner of writing).

A number of approaches were suggested to analyze the syntactic development of the verb meaning. Some of these approaches can be grouped under the umbrella term of relational grammar, outlined by the French linguist L. Tesnière (1959). The key point in this line of research is argument taking nature of the verb described in terms of 'valency'. Having valency means having the potential capacity to open positions for a number of semantic arguments representing event participants. The verb semantic arguments are classified, based on their function in the event, into what is known as semantic roles. To illustrate, the role of 'Agent' refers to the entity which performs the action, the role of 'Object' to the entity which undergoes action, etc. Semantic roles are used to describe the meaning of the verb and also to stream verbs into semantic groupings. A number of conceptualizations of the verb argument structure have been developed in course of its extensive cross-linguistic research: frame theory (Fillmore, 1968, 1971; Boars, 2006), semantic and syntactic verb governing models (Apresjan, 1969, 1974), thematic roles (Dowty, 1986, 1991), underlying conceptual configurations (Jackendoff, 1987), linking rules (Levin, 2015) among many others. Though the assortment of verb argument roles and their interpretation varies depending on the focus of the research, the key emphasis is on the link between the verb meaning and its syntactic behavior.

To sum up, the meaning of the verb is compositional and is described by linguists in terms of semantic components relating to its various facets, as well as with reference to the functional engagement of the action participants.

## **1.2 Verb descriptivity**

The present study focuses on those components of verb meaning which are different from the inherent sense of action or state shared by all verbs, but refer to the participants and circumstances of the denoted event. The above components correlate with the notion of ‘descriptivity’ (Snell-Hornby, 1983) – the amount of information about the event lexicalized by the verb. To illustrate, both Seychellois Creole verbs *ekrir* ‘to write’ and *grifonnen* ‘to scribble, to doodle’ denote an act of writing. However, they differ in the amount of information about denoted graphic acts: whereas *ekrir* entails an agent (someone who writes), an object (something which is written), an instrument (a tool with which it is written) and a place (the surface on which something is written), *grifonnen*, in addition to the above participants, encodes the manner in which something is written (carelessly, hastily). Thus, *grifonnen* lexicalizes more information about the graphic act than *ekrir*, at the expense of the manner component, and, accordingly, its descriptivity is higher.

The notion of verb descriptivity introduced by Snell-Hornby (1983) was employed and elaborated further in a number of studies (Boars, 2006, 2008; Kudrnakova, 2016; Feres, 2007; Gao, 2003). On this view, the higher the modificants proportion in the verb meaning, the higher the verbs descriptivity. Another important point is that this semantic characteristic is related to the verb syntactic behaviour, in particular, to its application range, which is considered to be broader for neutral lexemes.

## **1.3 Graphic verbs in SC**

The analysis of the verb descriptivity in the present paper is carried out with a group of verbs which denote graphic representation (e.g., *ekrir* ‘to write’ or *grifonnen* ‘to scribble’ discussed above). ‘Graphic’ originates from Greek *graphē* ‘writing, drawing’ and is used in relation to writing and drawing processes, as well as such reproductive methods as engraving, etching, lithography, photography, serigraphy, and woodcut (<https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/graphic>; and <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/graphic>).

So, GVs in this paper are verbs (examples 1-23) denoting intentional physical actions of the ‘Doer’ which result in the production of a graphic image – a two-dimension symbolic (letters, words, etc.) or iconic (picture) sign.

Graphic verbs correlate with what was introduced as ‘Image Creation Verbs’ in Levin’s (1993) classification of English verbs, based on a verb’s participation in diathesis alternations revealing the relationship between the argument syntactic expression and the verb meaning.

## **1.4 Semantic formula of GVs**

As mentioned above (1.1), one of the approaches to systematize information ‘packed’ in verbs is their argument structure description. GVs license the following semantic arguments: 1. Doer – the one who acts; 2. Created Object – the graphic image that

appears in course of the action; 3. Place – the surface on which the graphic object appears; 4. Image – something which is represented as the created graphic object; 5. Instrument – tools engaged in producing the graphic image; 6. Affected Object – the already existing graphic image to which the created object is added.

Not all verb arguments are mentioned in the verb definition, some of them can be implied (see (2) and (3) below). The first five arguments in the list above represent obligatory action components of GVs, e.g.: (2) *ekrir* ‘to write’ – *tras en seri siny ki reprezant bann mo dan en langaz* ‘to make a series of signs representing words in a language’. From this GV definition Doer (implicitly the one who is acting) produces Created Object (*en seri siny* ‘a series of signs’) which represents Image (*bann mo dan en langaz* ‘words in a language’) with the help of Instrument (implicitly something which can write) in Place (implicitly paper). The Affected Object argument is optional and is licensed in not all GVs, e.g.: (3) *anrezistre* ‘to register’ – *enskri, met non lo lalis ouswa rezis* ‘to register, to put the name in the list or register’. In (3) Doer (implicitly the one who is acting) produces Created Object (*non* ‘the name’) which represents Image (someone registered) with the help of Instrument (implicitly something which can write) in Place (implicitly paper surface) incorporating it in Affected Object (*lalis ouswa rezis* ‘the list or the register’).

GVs’ semantic roles contribute to understanding the prototypical scenario of the graphic act in terms of what in general is happening: a graphic image is created by someone on some surface with the help of some instrument. However, the degree of specification of the above participants varies, which will be shown in Section 2.

## 2. Classification of GVs according to the amount of lexicalized information about the graphic act

Comparison of SC GVs *ekrir* ‘to write’ and *sinyen* ‘to sign’ illustrates the difference in argument specification and GV’s descriptivity. Definition of *ekrir* ‘to write’ (in (2) above) presents a generalized scenario of writing in which every participant stays unlimited or open. Doer, Instrument and Place are not mentioned, that is, they are encoded in a most general way, viewed as entities traditionally associated with these roles. In other words, any literate human can be a doer; a pen, a pencil, a stick, etc., can be used as an instrument for writing; some paper, a wall or sandy beach can be used as a surface to write on. Created Object in (2), *en seri siny* ‘a series of signs’, though presented verbally, is outlined in a general way as any written word. In contrast, in definition of (4) *sinyen* ‘to sign’ – *ekrir sinyatir lo en dokiman* ‘to write a signature in the document’, Created and Affected Object are specified with taxonomic precision: the former being a signature, the latter a document. So, though both verbs (3) and (4) considered above denote graphic acts, they present these graphic acts differently regarding the amount of their characterisation: the action denoted by GV *ekrir* is more general, accommodating a variety of participants’ instantiations, while *sinyen* presents the graphic act of a more specific

nature, whose participants are limited by certain parameters. In other words, descriptivity of the verb *sinyen* is higher than that of the verb *ekrir* at the expense of the Created Object and Affected Object specification.

Analysis of SC GVs' definitions revealed a number of semantic components related to the GVs' descriptivity. Below follow the subgroups of SC GVs, organized around the graphic act participant they specify.

### **2.1 GVs with specified Doer**

As the Doer of the graphic act is inherently conceptualized as an intelligent human being, it is never expressed verbally in GVs' definitions. However, apart from the above generalized perception, the Doer can be encoded in GVs with a different degree of detail. In other words, a number of GVs foreground some additional features of Doer, such as:

- ◆ position of authority, e.g.: *otoriz-e* 'authorize'; *bak* 'to endorse'; *anrezistre, enskrir* (iii) 'to register'; *sinyen* 'to sign'; *dedikas-e* 'autograph';
- ◆ skill of using a specific tool or device as a writing instrument, e.g.: *tatwe* 'to tattoo'; *grav-e* 'to engrave'; *tip-e* 'to type'; *teks* 'to text'; *imel* 'to e-mail'; *skàn* 'to scan';
- ◆ knowledge of specific rules or techniques applied in writing, e.g.: *kaligrafye* 'to calligraph'; *ortografye* 'to orthographize', *ponktye* 'to punctuate'; *redize* (ii) 'summarize'; *disert-e* 'to dissertate'; *minite* 'to minute';
- ◆ stressed or emotional state while writing: *grifonn-en* 'to scribble, to doodle', *barbouye* 'to scribble, to scrawl, to daub'.

### **2.2 GVs with specified Created Object**

GVs in this group encode Created Object which is either sign (2.2.1), concept (2.2.2), or feature (2.2.3) specific.

#### **2.2.1 GVs with sign-specific Created Object**

A number of SC GVs encode a fixed sign produced during the act of writing, e.g.: (5) *aksantye* 'to accentuate' – *met laksan* (*siny grafik lo en let ki servi pour determin prononsyasyon ek sinifikasyon serten mo*) 'to put **an accent** (a graphic sign in the letter which determines pronunciation and meaning of certain words)'. Among other graphic signs encoded in SC GVs are a tick (in *kose* 'to tick off'), a line (in *bar-e* 'to draw a line through'), *souliny-en* ('to underline'), *rey-e*, *zalonn-en* ('to line'), a punctuation mark (in *ponktye* 'to punctuate'), a circle (in *serkle*, *anserkle* 'to encircle, to draw a ring around', *antour-e* 'to encircle').

#### **2.2.2 GVs with concept-specific Created Object**

Another group of SC GVs includes lexemes which encode a certain concept as a Created Object. For example, though the verbal and graphic realization of Created Objects encoded as 'name' and 'signature' in definitions of *anrezistre* 'to



register' (3) and *sinyen* 'to sign' (4) above varies, the concepts themselves remain. Other examples of concept-specific COs of GV in SC are *anrol-e* 'to enroll'; *bak* 'to endorse'; *dedikas-e* 'to autograph'; *otoriz-e* 'to authorize'; *enskrir* (iii) 'to register'.

### 2.2.3 GVs with feature-specific Created Object

A number of SC GVs encode a CO which is specified by a certain feature, such as:

- ◆ elaborate manner of production: (6) *kaligrafye* 'to caligraph' – *fer kaligraf* (*lar fer zoli lekritir avek bann let ki'n formen dan en fason dekoratif oubyen elegan*) 'to do calligraphy (the art of making beautiful writing with **letters produced in decorative and elegant way**);
- ◆ conformance to certain rules or writing: (7) *ortografye* 'to write orthographically' – *ekrir dapre lareg lortograf* 'to write **according to spelling rules**';
- ◆ messiness, illegibility: *grifonn-en* 'to scribble, to doodle', *barbouye* 'to scribble, to scrawl, to daub';
- ◆ special arrangement or fixed position on the surface: (8) *list-e* 'to list' – *prezant keksoz dan laform en lalis* 'to present things **in the form of a list**'; *estanpe, stanpe* 'to stamp', *soulinyen* (i) 'underline';
- ◆ affiliation with certain document genres: (9) *redize* (i) 'to draw up' - *ekrir dapre formil ki'n ganny etabli ouswa ki'n agree* 'to write according to **the way which is established or agreed upon**', *redize* (ii) 'to summarize', *dedikas-e* (i) 'to sign a book', *disert-e* 'to dissertate', *minite* 'to minute', *rikord-e* 'record'.

### 2.3 GVs with specified Place

A group of GVs encode the surface which is limited by some parameters for the denoted graphic act, e.g.: (10) *grav-e* 'to engrave' - *fouy bann tras pour fer desen, let lo en sirfas dir tel ki dibwa, metal...* 'to cut the marks for the drawing, letters **on the hard surface, like wood, metal...**'. Other types of surfaces encoded in the GVs of this group are *lekor* 'body' in *tatwe* 'to tattoo', *papye spesyal* 'special (copy) paper' in *dekalte* 'to trace'.

### 2.4 GVs with specified Instrument

A number of GVs encode certain instruments which are necessary for the denoted graphic act realization, e.g.: (11) *tip-e* 'to type' - *ekrir an servan en konpiter oubyen masin tipe* 'to write with the help of a **computer or typing machine**'. Other instruments specified by the GVs in this group are an implied cutting object in *grav-e* 'to engrave', *stanp* 'a stamp' (in *estanp-e, stanpe, tenbre, tanponnen* 'to stamp'), a needle (implied in *tatwe* 'to tattoo'), photocopier or scanner (in *skàn* 'to scan').

It is worth mentioning that there is extensive overlapping between GVs with specified Place and those with specified Instrument as the same GVs can be assigned to both groups. This semantic connection reflects the physical connection observed in reality: specific surfaces are associated with specific instruments and vice versa, e.g., to produce a graphic image on a hard surface you need a cutting instrument, to make a tattoo it takes a needle. Likewise, using the keyboard of the computer or a smartphone for typing you have your writing on the screen.

### **2.5 GVs with specified Image**

Some SC GVs encode another graphic object as Image of the graphic act. The subdivision within this group is due to the relationship between the Image and the Created Object, as shown further in 2.5.1 and 2.5.2.

#### **2.5.1 GVs of Image imitation**

GVs in this subgroup encode Image which is identical to the Created Object, e.g.: (12) *dekalte* ‘to trace’ - *fer kopi desen, tras porter, etc., an servan papye spesyal* ‘to make a **copy of the drawing**, trace a picture, etc. with the help of the special paper’, *estamp-e, stanpe, tenbre* ‘to stamp’, *kopye* ‘to copy’, *skàn* ‘to scan’.

#### **2.5.2 GVs of Image modification**

The Created Object in GVs of this subgroup is a revisited original Image reproduced with some changes e.g.: (13) *redrafte* ‘to redraft’ – *reekrir, refer en dokiman, plan, etc., me safwasi avek bann lamannman* ‘to rewrite, refer to the document, plan, etc., but this time **with more amendments**’, *reekrir* ‘to rewrite’, *redize* (ii) ‘summarize’, *transkrir* ‘to transcribe’.

**2.6 GVs with specified Affected Object** In some SC GVs Affected Object is an obligatory participant of the graphic act: (14) *soulinyen* (i) ‘underline’ - *fer en tre ouswa laliny anba en mo, teks*, etc. ‘to make a line **under the word, text**, etc.’, *aksantye* ‘to accentuate’; *korize* ‘to correct’, *kose* ‘to tick’; *anserkle* ‘to draw a ring around’; *bar-e, reye* ‘to draw a line through’.

## **3. Descriptivity-related implications for SC GVs**

Boars (2006) postulates the connection between the verb descriptivity and the range of its application: the higher the verb descriptivity, the narrower its application and vice versa (p.140), meaning that the verbs with *open* participants and circumstances can be used in various situations and contexts (ibid). Following this line of reasoning, the present study explored descriptivity-related implications for SC GVs in two specific functional areas: syntactic development in a sentence, and semantic derivation.

### 3.1 Connection between GV argument specificity and its syntactic realization

When used in a sentence, verbs unfold their meaning through their arguments realization: some arguments are expressed lexically while others are not. Analysis undertaken previously has revealed a connection between the degree of specificity of the semantic arguments of SC GVs and their syntactic realization: if the participant of the graphic action is encoded in a specified way, which is reflected in the GV's definition, it is not expressed syntactically. To illustrate, GV (4) *sinyen* 'to sign' (4) encodes a concept-specific Created Object – signature. Explicated in the GV definition, this semantic argument does not appear in the sentences with this GV: (15) *Siny ou tyek pour ou anmenn labank* 'Sign your cheque so that you can take it to the bank'. (16) *Fodre siny tou bann sertifika avan zot gany distribye avek bann etidyan* 'You must sign all your certificates before they are distributed to students'.

If the argument of GV is encoded in an unspecified way or is not mentioned in the definition, it is likely to be expressed lexically in the sentence with this GV. Thus, Affected Object from (4), which is presented in a generic way as 'a document', has to be specified in every instance of the above GV use (*tyek* 'cheque' in (15), *bann sertifika* 'certificates' in (16)). Another example is GV (17) *korize* 'to correct' – *rektifye fot, lerer, oralman ouswa an ekri* 'to rectify a mistake, an error, orally or in writing'. Such arguments as Place and Affected Object which are not presented in this GV definition, are found in the sentences illustrating its use, lexicalized, respectively as *bann kaye* 'copybooks' in (18) and *let* 'letter' in (19): (18) *Sa ansenyan in fini koriz tou son bann kaye* 'This teacher has finished marking all of his copybooks'. (19) *Fodre ki sa let I gany korize avan ki ou anvoy li* 'This letter must be corrected before it is sent'.

### 3.2 GV Specificity and its Semantic Development

Apart from syntactic implications for SC GVs' semantic arguments outlined above in (3.1), the degree of descriptivity also determines GVs' semantic development. As follows from the analysis results, it is rather those GVs which present graphic actions in a generalized way, than those which specify some of its participants, that transgress the domain of direct meaning and are used figuratively, e.g.: (20) *Manifesto lepep in ekri dan son leker* 'The people's manifesto is written in his heart'. (21) *Mon a ekri ou non avek zetwal* 'I will write your name with the stars'. Examples (20, 21) illustrate such use of the GV *ekri* 'to write' whereby lexical expression of Place (*dan son leker* 'in his heart' in (20)) or the Instrument (*avek zetwal* 'with the stars' in (21)) triggers metaphoric presentation through writing of significance or value of something to the person. Unlike *ekrir*, its more specific synonyms are used directly, in writing related situations, e.g: (22) *Mon ti grifonn mon sinyatir lo en bout papye* 'I scribbled my signature on a piece of paper'. (23) *In kaligrafye son let demann* 'He has written his marriage proposal in calligraphic style'.

The availability of cases of transferred figurative use for neutral GVs and the absence of such cases for the descriptive ones suggest the idea that argument specification limits possibilities for GVs' semantic extension, thus blocking the figurative use, generated by



reference to the entity which belongs to a different thematic domain. Indeed, *leker* ‘heart’ in (20) or *zetwal* ‘stars’ in (21) are not related to the situation of writing, and it is their unusual use as graphic act, Place and Instrument, that brings about new meaning component connotation of devotion and eternal affection. Specification of the Created Object in *grifonnen* ‘scribble’ and *kaligrafye* ‘caligraph’ with some characteristics (respectively, messiness and elaborateness) discourages meaning transference and, as a result, limits application of the above GVs to direct, writing-related cases.

## Conclusion

Viewed from the point of view of their descriptivity, verbal lexemes which denote graphic acts in SC capture the latter from different angles and can be streamed into a number of groups according to the specified graphic act participant. In particular, SC has verbs to refer to the graphic act focusing on its Doer, Created Object, Place, Instrument, Image, and Affected Object (2.1-2.6).

Graphic act participants are presented in SC GVs’ definitions with different degrees of detail, ranging from implicit presentation, associated with the most general encoding, to class specification. Specificity of one action component in the verb definition triggers precision of another. Such connection, observed, e.g., between the hard surface and a sharp instrument for graphic image creation on this surface, provides ground for the argument implicit representation and inference.

Word definitions in general, and verb definitions in particular, are closely connected with encyclopaedic knowledge revealed in different sorts of interdependent connections between the components of meaning which lexical definitions establish implicitly or explicitly. As a result, based on innate knowledge, lack or absence in the definition or in the sentence of information about one component of the action caused by the protrusion of another doesn’t hinder the verb interpretation, as the missing components are inferred from those which are explicated.

Specification of semantic arguments has some repercussions for the syntactic development of the SC GV: action participants which are mentioned in the definition are not verbally expressed when the GV is used in the sentence. On the contrary, semantic arguments which are generally presented in the GV definition or not mentioned in it have to be specified in the sentence and, as a result, get lexical expression in every case of the GV use.

Descriptivity of SC GVs also defines their semantic development: descriptive GVs have constrained options for semantic development. The higher the degree of specification encoded in the GV, the less likely it will be found in figurative meaning based on the meaning transference and transgression to other thematic domains, the latter possibility

blocked for descriptive GVs by the specificity of their arguments. Absence of limitations to interpret generally encoded semantic arguments provides the possibility for their instantiation with words unrelated to the process of writing or drawing, contributing, as a result, to figurative meaning.

Overall, presented in the current paper semantic analysis of GVs in Seychellois Creole illustrates such lexical characteristics as shifting nominating focus and gradual descriptive potential. It also points to the connection between the verb meaning and its syntactic and semantic development. The analysis results can be used in a further comparative study of the above phenomena, to explore the universalities and distinctions of semantic processes in different languages.

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