Malayalam Doesn't Need Adpositions: The Case of *v*P-Adjunction

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1. Introduction

Minimalist accounts of c(ategory)-selection often posit that Merge is licensed by the checking of an *uninterpretable* feature [*u*F] and an *interpretable* feature [F] on sibling nodes, such that the remaining features then percolate to the parent node (Chomsky 1995; Adger 2003; Heck & Müller 2007; Zeijlstra 2020, i.a.). Such accounts thus generally assume that c-selection and projection result from one operation.

I argue in this paper that this is descriptively inadequate, and submit an alternative that draws on two heterodox ideas about the licensing of Merge. The first of these is that features of syntactic objects may differentiate projective and non-projective selection (see Frey & Gärtner 2002; Zyman 2023, i.a. for precedents). The second idea is that such selectional features are discharged wherever possible, but this can unproblematically fail if a suitable target is inaccessible, without implicating a crash at the interfaces (Preminger 2014; Longenbaugh 2019; Newman 2021, pace Chomsky 1995). As a baseline, I will assume that Merge of two elements α and β produces the ordered pair ⟨ α, β ⟩ (= {{α}, {α, β}}, Kuratowski 1921) rather than the unordered pair {α, β}, as was common in early minimalism. I also assume that every instance of Merge is licensed by the establishment of at least one featural dependency (Pesetsky & Torrego, 2006; Wurmbrand, 2014; Zeijlstra, 2020).

To apply the first idea, I suggest that selectional features in the syntax may be bifurcated as follows, roughly adopting the notation from Heck & Müller (2007) and Zyman (2023):

(1) a. If an element α bears [•F•] and an element β bears [F], then they may merge to produce an ordered pair ⟨ α, β ⟩.
b. If an element α bears [◦F◦] and an element β bears [F], then they may merge to produce an ordered pair ⟨ β, α ⟩.

Informally, [•F•] on a head licenses the merger of a dependent bearing [F], whereas [◦F◦] on a head allows it to merge as the dependent of an element bearing [F]. In other words, [◦F◦] features may be thought of simply as allowing selection without projection. A crucial point is that two features [•F•] and [◦F◦] cannot be discharged on the same syntactic object within one instance of Merge, as this would lead to an endocentricity violation: ⟨ α, β ⟩ and ⟨ β, α ⟩ are only both true where α = β, a situation that would not normally apply in a syntactic derivation.

The proposal developed here may express syntactic distribution relative to two environments. *Upward distribution* identifies the categories of elements of which an element may be a dependent (i.e. complement, adjunct, or specifier). As an example, prepositions in English may be complements of verbs and auxiliaries, and adjuncts to verbs, nouns, and adjectives. *Downward distribution* identifies the categories of elements that a head may take as its dependents. For instance, verbs in English may take complements which are CPs, TPs, PPs, DPs, etc. or adjuncts which are PPs or AdvPs. In this system, for any selector, [•F•] partly specifies its downward distribution (viz. what its complements/specifiers may be), whereas [◦F◦] partly specifies its upward distribution (what it may adjoin to).

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When a syntactic category is defined, it is often according to its upward distribution; so intransitive, monotransitive and ditransitive verbs are traditionally considered members of the same category (verbs) because they are dependents of the same kinds of elements, e.g. copulae, modal auxiliaries, the infinitival *to*, etc., even though they diverge in their downward distribution. A theoretical model of c-selection must thus accommodate some variability in downward distribution, even for the same category.

This leads us to the second idea: any selectional feature [•F•]/[◦F◦] may fail to apply if a suitable selectional target is unavailable. Such a revision would of course overgenerate, so ungrammatical derivations would have to be filtered out by mechanisms external to the syntax. This is nothing new; processes like l(exical)-selection and s(emantic)-selection, which are independent of c-selection, have long been assumed, for example, in the notion of θ-grids. This is seen clearly in English, where three verbs which express very similar events, such as *eat*, *devour*, and *dine* may differ in their downward distribution, as in (2), depending on whether the θ-grid of the verb includes a theme:

(2) a. *The children ate the pudding.*
b. *The children ate.*
c. *The children devoured the pudding.*
d. **The children devoured.*
e. #*The children dined the pudding.*
f. *The children dined.*

An interpretation of this is that it is not a syntactic requirement that any verb that *may* take a direct object *must* take a direct object. Instead, issues specific to individual lexical elements may control whether the merger of an object is obligatory, optional, or prohibited. If this is right, there is no reason for different verbs to enter the derivation with different selectional features in the syntax, because whether a verb accepts a complement or specifier of a given category is evaluated outside the syntax. Syntactic categories may then be treated as having the set of [•F•] features that they can maximally discharge. Post-syntactic filtering (s-selection, l-selection, etc.) would then be responsible for further determining whether a generated structure is grammatical. This intuition can be implemented in the system above easily if unchecked features do not trigger a crash (Preminger, 2014). As categories are simply descriptions of distribution, what this system amounts to is a means to express categories on the basis of a bundle of features which express their upward and downward distributions in the syntax.

Categoriality issues are an evergreen topic in syntactic research. In this paper, I demonstrate how it can address a perennial debate about the distinctiveness of adpositions and (light) verbs in serializing languages, using Malayalam as a case study.

2. Adpositions vs. (light) verbs in serialization

Serializing languages can very often use certain fixed verbal lexemes together with lexical verbs to introduce new event relations, e.g. lexemes canonically meaning 'take' introduce an instrument in (3).

(3) a. *Sétù zé kpò lɔ́ xò Kɔ̀jó*
S. take stick DET hit Kojo
'Setu hit Kojo with the stick.' (Gungbe, Aboh 2009:16)

b. *avaṉ katti koṇṭŭ appam muṟiccu*
3SG.M knife take.STEM bread cut.PST
'He cut the bread with a knife.' (Malayalam, Jayaseelan 2004:70)

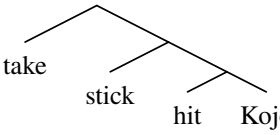
Data of this kind has led some investigations to imply that (some) serializing languages share a partial or total indistinction between adpositions and verbs (Bickerton, 1981; Sebba, 1984; Byrne, 1987). While subsequent work has challenged this notion (Veenstra & Muysken 2017), I will argue here that under the proposed system, it holds some explanatory power at least for Malayalam.

It is well understood that the examples above, while superficially similar, do not have the same underlying structure. Gungbe (Kwa) merges 'take' and 'stick' in (3a) as part of the clausal spine (Aboh, 2009:14), while 'knife' and 'take' form a constituent in Malayalam (Dravidian) that adjoins to the main verb (Jayaseelan, 2004:70). This can be confirmed by the fact that *katti koṇṭŭ* in (3b) can be fronted as a constituent while the lexical VP and subject remain *in situ* (4):

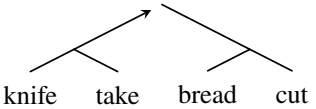
(4) [*katti koṇṭŭ*]$_i$ *avaṉ* ——$_i$ *appam muṟiccu*
knife take.STEM 3SG.M bread cut.PST
'*With a knife*, he cut the bread.'

Thus, two kinds of structures (represented abstractly in 5) underlie these patterns. Upward edges ending in arrows are used here to visually disambiguate adjuncts in the structure.

(5) a. Gungbe type



b. Malayalam type



Aboh (2009:24) proposes that *zé* 'take' in Gungbe (3a) merges in the functional domain of the lexical verb. This analysis is attractive because it is consistent with the instrumental 'take' overlapping in upward distribution with lexical verbs despite not being interpreted eventively; both facts are explained if 'take' here only lexicalizes a functional head (e.g. *v* rather than V), if the event variable ϵ is introduced lower in the structure by a lexical head V at LF, as in a Neo-Davidsonian analysis.

As for the structure in (5b), virtually all analyses of Malayalam (Asher & Kumari 1997; Jayaseelan 2004; Aravind 2021, a.o.) have inferred that a large number of lexical verbs like *koṇṭŭ* 'take' have simply been reanalyzed as adpositions, on the assumption that adpositions in Malayalam are a discrete syntactic category. This is motivated by the syncretism between most of these predicates and lexical verbs in Malayalam (Asher & Kumari, 1997:121), e.g. *ninnŭ* can mean 'from' or 'stand'; *toṭṭŭ* 'from,' 'touch'; *aṭuttŭ* 'near,' 'approach'; *kūṭi* 'with,' 'join,' etc.

This paper scrutinizes this narrative. I argue instead that the Malayalam structure (5b) can actually be explained by the same intuition that motivates Aboh's analysis of light verbs in Gungbe, and that in fact, *all* constructions that are traditionally thought of as PPs in Malayalam should be treated as syntactically verbal. The rationale for this reassessment is an underlying empirical issue that has long been ignored, which is that predicates that are traditionally called adpositions and lexical verbs have the same upward distribution in Malayalam: they can either adjoin to verbs or appear as clausal predicates. As discussed before, this is in definitional contradiction to the view that verbs and adpositions are fully independent categories. Consider the difference in the interpretation of *koṇṭŭ* 'take' between (3b) and (6):

(6) *avaṉ veyil koṇṭŭ purattŭ naṭannu*
3SG.M sunlight take.STEM outside walk.PST
≈ 'He walked outside and took in sunlight.'

Here, we see a multi-event verb series. In contrast to (3b), the adjunct containing *koṇṭŭ* in (6) accepts a full argument structure (an internal and external argument, although the canonical subject is generally shared via an empty category, Jayaseelan 2004), and expresses an event. Impressionistically, the downward distribution of this instance of *koṇṭŭ* differs from the one in (3b), since it has the reading that someone is doing the taking and that something is taken. There has been some discussion in the literature as to what the underlying structure of *veyil koṇṭŭ* (6) would be. This kind of adjunct cannot be independently marked for tense/viewpoint aspect, either via inflectional heads (7a–b) or auxiliaries (7c):

(7) a. *jōṇ vātil tuṟannŭ puṟattēkkŭ naṭannu*
J. door open.STEM outside walk.PST
'John opened the door and walked outside.'
b. **jōṇ vātil tuṟakk-unnu puṟattēkkŭ naṭannu*
J. door open-IPFV outside walk.PST
'John is opening the door and walked outside.'
c. **jōṇ vātil tuṟann=irunnŭ puṟattēkkŭ naṭannu*
J. door open.STEM=AUX.STEM outside walk.PST
'John had opened the door and (had) walked outside.'

This suggests that they are not full clauses (TPs or AspPs, see Swenson 2016 for discussion). As mentioned, they appear to have internal and external arguments, which suggests that they are at least as large as *v*Ps. Some ancillary properties seem to suggest *v*Ps are the right analysis: these adjuncts cannot be negated[1], they are incompatible with TP-level adverbials[2], and they cannot productively have independent overt subjects (Jayaseelan, 1984:626); all of these properties are consistent with so-called *v*P-converbs in other languages (Privoznov, 2021, 2022). I thus assume that *veyil koṇṭŭ* in (7) is underlyingly an *v*P, which in that case adjoins to the main verb.

So both argument-introducing predicates (6) and (3b) adjoin to the same category. In addition to this, both may be clausal predicates; for example, the lexeme *patti* can mean 'happen' as an eventive verb (8a) and 'about' as an argument-introducing predicate (8b)[3].

(8) a. *entŭ patti*
what happen.PST
'What happened?'

b. *pustakam Gāndhi-ye patti=yāṇŭ*
book Gandhi-ACC happen.STEM=be.IPFV
'The book is about Gandhi.'

This means that their upward distributions are *prima facie* quite similar, which in turn calls into question the basis upon which these predicates are treated as members of different syntactic categories. I will use the system introduced above to argue that they should be treated as members of the same category.

3. Feature-checking and c-selection

To generate an adjunct *v*P in Malayalam, *v* must have at least three selectional features in the system above: [•V•] to merge with a VP complement, [•N•] to select an NP argument, and [◦V◦] to adjoin to another verb. For this analysis, I will tentatively adopt the view that *v* (or Voice) does not merge with unaccusative verbs. This raises a question as to what the relationship is between *v* and V. The downward distribution of *v* and V differs, as V does not select a VP complement. But if the assumptions here are correct, the downward distribution of a syntactic category can vary, meaning the fact that *v* may use a [•V•] feature while V does not is insufficient to distinguish them as separate categories. Moreover, *v* and V share an upward distribution, which suggests that they may in fact be the same category (see also Travis 2010, Ramchand & Svenonius 2014, Zeijlstra 2020, a.o. for similar arguments). I take this to mean that *v* and V are variants of the same category with the same selectional features, and the lexical head V simply never uses its [•V•] feature. For the sake of legibility, I will continue use the notation *v* to indicate a head that does not semantically express an event, and V to indicate a head that does, with the understanding that they are both defined by the features [V], [•V•], [•N•], and [◦V◦].

Following this logic, the argument-introducing element in (3b) must use the same selectional features as an adjoining unaccusative verb, viz. [•N•] and [◦V◦], even though it does not express an event. This means that the selectional features used by a putative category P would be exactly those used by an adjoining lexical V with an internal argument, and a proper subset of those used by the Voice head *v*. Since upward distribution is the relevant criterion for the categorial distinctiveness of verbs, the core empirical question of this paper is whether a hypothetical category P in Malayalam, and the category *v*/V can both be complements, specifiers, or adjuncts of the same categories. The data appear to suggest that they can, and thus, we might analyze them as instances of the same underlying syntactic category.

Taking into account our notational convention, argument-introducing adjuncts in Malayalam might be better thought of as impoverished *v*Ps (i.e. that do not express an event) than true PPs. Put differently, since *v*Ps have the property of adjoining to verbs, the non-eventive 'take' in (3b), along with similar predicates, may be more accurately described as adjoined light verbs in the syntax than adpositions.

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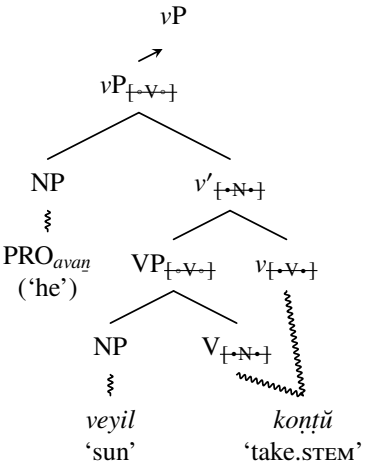
[1] Some claim that this construction can be negated (Jayaseelan, 2004:77). This is dubious; my informants reported that negated converbs in Malayalam productively allow independent subjects while these constructions do not.

[2] My informants judged that *orupakṣe* 'probably' and *eppōḻum* 'always' take scope over all verbs in a series.

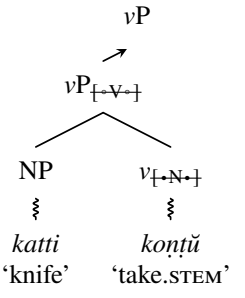
[3] Note that copulae are needed in the latter case, most likely due to semantic issues, given that (8b) does not express an eventuality on its own.

Thus, within the system sketched above, the structures for (6) and (3b) can be represented as in (9a) and (9b) respectively. (9a) represents an adjoining transitive verb structure, where the adjoining category *v* selects the lexical VP as its complement, and then selects an NP as its specifier, and finally selects another *v*P as its host. Note that where *v* selects VP, the [◦V◦] feature on VP could trivially be discharged along with [•V•] on *v*, since both features license an ordered pair ⟨*v*, V⟩. (9b) represents an adjoining light verb structure, where the first merger never occurs, and so [•V•] unprobematically goes unchecked. I represent lexicalization as spanning here (Svenonius, 2016), though nothing hinges on this.

(9) a.



b.



A major motivation for distinguishing projective and non-projective selection can be seen in the trees in (9). It is not clear how an element could ever c-select a complement and host with the same category feature (e.g. [F]) using a single kind of feature ([•F•] or [*u*F], cf. Zeijlstra 2020:45) if features can only be checked once. If the assumption is correct that *v* and V share a category feature [V], it should be impossible for an adjoining *v* to select both a complement and host with [V]. When features are differentiated for projective and non-projective selection, [•F•] and [◦F◦] on one element can naturally only be discharged in separate instances of Merge, since an element cannot project and fail to project at once. In that way, the problem is avoided by dissociating selection from projection. Structures like those in (9) are therefore explicitly predicted to be possible by the system like the one considered above.

Table 1 summarizes which features are used by instances of this category in various contexts. The Voice head *v* would use [•V•] to select a VP complement, and [•N•] to select an external argument in transitives and unergatives. The lexical head V would not use [•V•], and would vary in whether it uses [•N•] depending on whether it merges an internal argument. The argument-introducing light verb *v* would use [•N•] to select an argument, but never [•V•]. The Voice head, the unaccusative V, and the light verb *v* would either use or not use [◦V◦] depending on whether they adjoin to another verb or they appear as clausal predicates. In transitive and unergative structures, [◦V◦] on the lexical head V would trivially be checked by the Voice head *v*, since V would always be a dependent of *v* in those cases.

Table 1: Uses of *v*/V in Malayalam by features used

Head variant	[•V•]	[•N•]	[◦V◦]
v/Voice	+	+	±
transitive V	−	+	+
unergative V	−	−	+
unaccusative V	−	+	±
argument-introducing *v*	−	+	±

3.1. Adjuncts are choosy

Event *v*Ps only adjoin to verbs to generate serialization (and do not adjoin, for example, to nouns); this is entailed by the set of features suggested to define the verbal category in Malayalam: {[V], [•V•], [•N•], [◦V◦]}. A key prediction of this analysis is that light *v*Ps have the same restriction, because they have the same feature structure. The prediction is borne out: predicates that are normally treated as adpositions systematically never adjoin to nonverbal hosts; e.g., the verb *paṯṯi* 'about,' 'happen' cannot adjoin to 'book' (10b). This, of course, would not be expected if they were adpositions, but is completely expected if light verb structures can adjoin to lexical verbs just as other verbal structures can.

(10) a. *avar Gāndhi-ye paṯṯi samsāriccu*
3PL Gandhi-ACC happen.STEM speak.PST
'They spoke about Gandhi.'

b. **enṉikkŭ Gāndhi-ye paṯṯi pustakam iṣṭappeṭṭu*
1SG.DAT Gandhi-ACC happen.STEM book like.PST
'I liked the book about Gandhi.'

This empirical fact seems to have been largely overlooked in the literature, though Krishnamurti (2003:431) notes that 'postpositions' in Dravidian languages attach specifically to verbal hosts. These predicates are erroneously classified as adpositions due to functional similarities with prepositions in English, but syntactic categories should be defined by syntactic distribution, not semantic properties.

To recapitulate, on the present proposal, P would not be a separate category, but would be subsumed under *v* in Malayalam because its selectional features would simply be a subset of those that *v* uses. This crucially distinguishes adjunct light verbs in Malayalam from adpositions in languages like English, which do not overlap in upward distribution with any other category[4], because of their featural makeup. Consider the promiscuity of PP adjuncts in English:

(11) a. *Bears* [$_{VP}$ *hibernate* [$_{PP}$ *in the winter*]].
b. *The* [$_{NP}$ *students* [$_{PP}$ *from Germany*]] *just arrived.*
c. *Frankie is* [$_{AP}$ *happy* [$_{PP}$ *about their promotion*]].

On this approach, P in English minimally needs the selectional features [•D•], [◦V◦], [◦N◦], and [◦A◦] but not [•V•], whereas *v* needs [•V•] and [•D•] but not [◦A◦]. That *v* does not have [◦A◦] but P does guarantees that they have different upward distributions, and are thus categorially discrete in English.

4. Other light verb constructions

I will show here that this system can also generate other light verb constructions in Malayalam. It is well established that *koṇṭŭ* 'take' may also be used as a durative marker when it follows a lexical verb stem. Aravind (2021) suggests that *koṇṭŭ* lexicalizes an adposition which selects a covertly nominalized lexical verb as its complement. This of course conflicts with the evidence presented here that such predicates are insufficiently distinct from verbs to be called adpositions in Malayalam.

(12) *amma pustakam vayiccŭ=koṇṭ=irikk-unnu*
mother book read.STEM=take.STEM=remain-IPFV
'Mother stays reading the book.' (Aravind, 2021:3)

As evidence for covert nominalization, she shows that multiple lexical verbs can be coordinated before *koṇṭŭ*; she claims (maybe following a suggestion by Bhatt 2014) that only nominal elements are coordinable in Malayalam. However, this seems to be empirically incorrect. *v*P-adjuncts of the kind discussed in this paper are coordinable for all speakers of Malayalam[5], shown in (13).

[4] However, *v* and V in English *would* be the same category, if one assumes that unaccusatives do not require *v*, for the reasons mentioned above.

[5] Some even judge coordinations of some finite clauses as grammatical, see Asher & Kumari (1997:137).

(13) *avarŭ paṭhicc-um paṭhippicc-um jōli ceyt-um jīvikk-unnu*
3PL study.PST-CONJ teach.PST-CONJ work do-CONJ live-IPFV
'They live studying, teaching, and working.' (Asher & Kumari, 1997:144)

Thus, alternatives to covert nominalization should be considered. One option is to augment our structure to merge multiple *v*'s in a complementation sequence: this is explicitly an option predicted by the system, since [•V•] also licenses a *v*P complement[6]. Then, *koṇṭŭ* could merge as a functional head over any lower *v*P. Of course, this all fits with a picture in which *v*Ps with *koṇṭŭ* may appear both as adjuncts (14) and clausal predicates (12), just like other *v*Ps.

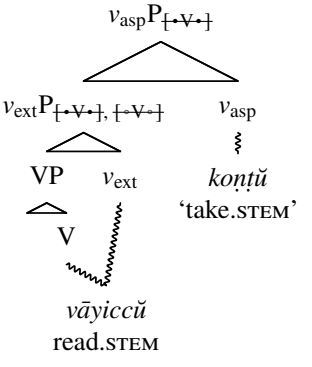
(14) *kaṭṭil-il kiṭannŭ=koṇṭŭ amma pustakam vayiccu*
bed-LOC lie.STEM=take.STEM mother book read.PST
'Lying on the bed, mother read the book.' (Aravind, 2021:3)

Complementation structures with multiple *v*'s seem to be independently necessary, as Malayalam also has a construction in which the verb used lexically to mean 'give' may appear as a light verb following the lexical verb (15). In this construction, a dative argument in the indirect object position is interpreted as a benefactive.

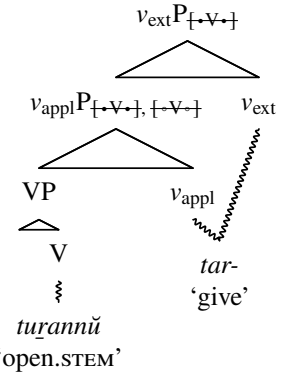
(15) *ñāṉ niṉakkŭ vātil tuṟannŭ=tar-ām*
1SG 2SG.DAT door open.STEM
'I will open the door for you.' (Jayaseelan, 2004:83)

I take it that 'give' merges in the functional domain of the main verb, and that 'door' is its specifier. Because the construction is only compatible with transitive lexical verbs, an obvious analysis of this construction is one where an agentive *v* takes a v_{appl}P as its complement, which then merges the dative argument (à la Marantz 1993) [7]. Thus, the structures for (12) and (15) are generated as in (16a) and (16b). Note the differences in which heads are lexicalized by which verbs in either structure.

(16) a. *koṇṭŭ*-duratives



b. 'give'-benefactives



5. Outlook

I have argued for a construal of c-selection which distinguishes selectors that project and those that do not. I showed that when categories are defined as base sets of features that control distribution in this way, the apparent syntactic distinctiveness of *v*, V, and P in Malayalam dissolves, because they share an upward distribution. This analysis correctly predicts that predicates historically called adpositions in Malayalam are not able to adjoin to nouns or adjectives, as true adpositions would, and also captures other complex predicate constructions, shown using two separate light verb constructions.

[6] As above, [◦V◦] may also trivially be discharged on the lower *v*P and VP.
[7] Sundaresan (2006) attempts a low applicative analysis for a similar Tamil construction, but since an entailed semantic relationship between internal arguments is absent in (16), I exclude this analysis.

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