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Do me a syntax: Doggo memes, language games and the internal structure of English

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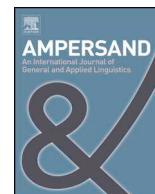
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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a sketch of an analysis of an Internet-based language-game known as Doggo. We show that the properties of the Doggo language game illustrate the underlying syntactic structure of English—where the understood verb is derived from two separate pieces. We also provide suggestions for future research into Internet language games.

Language games (also called 'ludlings'[1]; [1,2] provide insights into the internal structure of languages that may be less apparent in regular use (see: [2–9]; Bagemihl 1989 [10–13]; among others). Much of this work focuses on phonology and morphology, with considerably less attention given to examples of playful syntax (though see Ref. [14] for discussion of Yoda syntax).

In this short paper, we examine an example of playful syntax found in Anglophone Internet communities: **the Doggo meme.** We argue that internet language games such as Doggo may be similarly studied as previously analyzed ludlings. Specifically, we argue that the Doggo language game illustrates the inner workings of the English verb phrase.

Previous linguistic-based discussions of memes are largely descriptive, as in Ref. [15] or [16]. Following Bivens's description (2018), we show that the linguistic content of the Doggo meme has an obligatory structure that is illustrative of the underlying structure of English verbal derivation based on the general approach of [17].

This approach we give here involves a comparison of standard English with the language game Doggo. We argue that verbal structures that may be generally represented in standard English as either a light verb plus a nominal or (preferentially) a single verb (which we argue is a nominal or acategorical element that has been incorporated into a verbalizer) are produced as light verb plus nominal/acategorical in Doggo, with other

grammatical quirks. This light verb plus nominal/acategorial element structure is the chief hallmark of Doggo-speech. Within the game, the higher light verb is typically realized as *do*, but other light elements (e.g. *give, cause*) are possible, though less frequently attested. Evidence for this claim comes from the unavailability of objects with unergative predicates, the availability of light verbs other than *do* that are in line with the pattern, and the overall consistency of the language game with an approach to English verbs as multi-piece structures.

Overall, our goal is to provide an outline for future inquiry into Internet-based language play as a phenomenon that can provide insight into the internal structure of language.

1. The basic structure of the meme

The visual appearance of the Doggo meme is like many other Internet memes: the text is overlaid on a related image, and the interplay between the text and the image creates humor. This combined visual and textual structure is typical for a meme; see Refs. [18–22]; among many others, for descriptions and discussion of meme formation. Doggo is also distinct from Doge, another dog-based meme, though they have some commonalities in their specialized lexicons. Doge is typically defined by the image of a Shibu Inu with semantically/contextually associated but syntactically

[1] Laycock (1969, fn. 36) contrasts the term 'ludling', introducing it with the more general term 'play-language', which he finds "too broad". For him, a ludling involves a "systematic deformation of ordinary language". As evidenced throughout this paper, the Doggo language game certainly falls within Laycock's definition of a ludling. A reviewer notes that playful language is generally not systematic, while language games are. As shown throughout this paper, Doggo exhibits the properties of a language game.

separate words and phrases scattered around the image (see Ref. [15] for further discussion of Doge). What largely defines a Doggo meme is the conventionalized syntax—particularly with respect to verbal structure, which is the focus of this paper. Unlike Doge, Doggo is not limited to a single dog breed and, as argued throughout this paper, the linguistic features better define the meme. The web resource "know your meme" (https://knowyourmeme.com/) provides several examples and definitions for these and other memes.

A general description of the Doggo language game is given by Ref. [16]. She identifies five critical patterns:

(i) do rule
(ii) a specialized usage of *heck*
(iii) pronoun mismatch rules[2]
(iv) spelling changes and
(v) capitalization rules
 [16]:5)

The discussion in this paper primarily focuses on (i), the 'do rule'. Examples of the other patterns can be found in the appendix. Pattern (ii), the specialized usage of *heck*, is seen in appendix examples (6) and (12). Patterns (iv) and (v) are found systematically throughout the examples in the appendix. Pattern (iii), the pronoun mismatch rule, does not appear in any of the examples in the appendix.

We drew our examples from the website borkborkiamdoggo.com (BBIAD hereafter) with collection in the Spring/Summer of 2018—however, the collection date and the original posting date of the meme do not necessarily coincide.

As of now, the BBIAD website was no longer active or publicly available,[3] though the BBIAD Facebook page was still functional. The site had a main page and a separate fan submission page, with fan submissions often appearing on the main page. For the present study, we analyzed 175 random meme examples from the BBIAD main page. Evidence of the Doggo language game can also be found in other forums, including interactive social media venues like Reddit and Facebook; however, for the purposes of this paper, we only examined memes found on BBIAD. Examples of the memes we examined are provided in the appendix.

There is variation in the amount of 'Doggo' characteristics within a Doggo meme, with some requiring familiarity with the language game and others hewing closer to standard English. Many memes use Doggo and more standard English within the same meme.

The property in (ii) is illustrated by examples excerpted from two BBIAD memes (appendix ex. 1–2).

(1) do me a beam up scotty! 'Beam me up, Scotty!'
(2) do Goddo a respect or you go straight to heck 'Respect God or go to hell'

The key property in both examples for the present discussion is the word order, with the object to the left of the lexical verb (relative to the object of the verb in the standard English equivalent of the Doggo sentence (*beam-up, respect*, respectively)). For instance, we may contrast the example in (2) with similar standard English expressions such as *show me respect*; critically, for Doggo, unlike standard English, the light verbal element is *do* and *respect* has an indefinite determiner *a*, which is

ungrammatical in standard English. What is critical for the point raised throughout this paper is that phrases like *show me respect* and *respect me* are roughly analogous in standard English (see Ref. [23]).

Another example is provided below, which is a Mother's Day meme from the main BBIAD page (appendix ex. 3). Example (3) shows many hallmarks of Doggo in terms of syntactic structure, spelling, and vocabulary items, while the sentence in (4) is in standard English, save for some orthographic conventions.

(3) i did u a flur a bring for mommers day! 'I brought you a flower for Mother's Day.'
(4) some of them got eaten on the way but i saved this one

We can generally characterize the differences between Doggo syntactic structures and standard, non-playful English with the following four characteristics:

(i) Standard English intransitive verbs expressed as *do + a(n) + X* (where X is a noun)
(ii) Standard English transitive verbs expressed with *do + OBJ + a (n) + X* (where X is a noun)
(iii) Copula constructions expressed as *am + X* (regardless of subject person)
(iv) Frequent null subjects

Of the 175 memes analyzed, we found that 168 contain at least one example of property (i) or (ii)—keep in mind that each meme may contain multiple clauses or sentences, and as we noted many memes feature a mix of Doggo and standard English. We counted a meme as containing property (i) or (ii) if it is found anywhere within the meme text. There are seven memes that do not exhibit properties (i) or (ii), and four of these show variant constructions wherein the verbal element *do* is replaced with another element (e.g. *cause* or *give*). While less common, these constructions are otherwise identical to the *do* constructions. Thus, combined with the previous 168, we found 172 of the 175 samples exhibit some form of the generalized "*do* construction". We return to these examples in the next section, and they illustrate how essential these properties are to the language game.

The property in (i) is illustrated by examples (5) and (6), which are drawn from the same meme (appendix ex. 4).

(5) he did a bork, she did a mlerm 'He barked, she licked'
(6) can I do a make more obvious? 'Can I make it more obvious?'

The text (6) is a reference to Avril [24] song *Sk8r boi,* which provides us the corresponding English sentence: 'can I make it any more obvious?' [24], though nothing in the Doggo example corresponds to the word *any* in the lyric.

Properties (iii) and (iv) are illustrated by the following examples drawn the same meme. Examples (7) and (8) are drawn from the same meme (appendix ex. 5)—both examples show a null subject with an understood first person and the first person inflected copula. Example (8) also illustrates property (ii).

(7) am luke skyborker 'I'm Luke Skywalker.'
(8) am here to do u a rescue 'I'm here to rescue you.'

There are a number of different contexts where the subject may or may not be present in Doggo. A reviewer suggests that the visual presence of the subject in the related image may play a role, which is a hypothesis worth pursuing. A full analysis of the distribution of overt and null subjects is beyond the goals of this paper.

## 2. Doggo memes and the internal structure of verbs

The 'do rule' of the Doggo language game allows us to probe several

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[2] The pronoun mismatch rule deals primarily with the variation of the pronouns *he, him* and *hims* (a special genitive for the language game) in subject position and the use of plural marking (or potentially the lack of the 3rd singular marking) on verbs in the 3rd singular. These mismatches are subject to a high degree of variation.

[3] Our choice of the BBIAD website was, in part, driven by data collection and other privacy concerns. However, the loss of the website does not prevent future study into the game.

questions about the internal structure of the English verb phrase. While [16] treated the 'do rule' as a transformation that moved the verb into a direct object position, we argue that when speakers are using the Doggo language game, they are playfully manipulating the syntactic formation for complex verbs in English. This may be described in theoretic terms via the non-incorporation of the root into *v* or *Voice*.[4] In short, to create Doggo, speakers are pronouncing both a light verb, typically *do,* and a nominal version (marked with an indefinite) of the equivalent verb in standard English. Thus, a simple verb (like *laugh*) can be turned into Doggo into predictable ways because it follows from robust grammatical principles. *Laugh* would become *do a laugh* with *do* representing the light verb, *laugh* being a nominal, and *a* being a general requirement of Doggo. Such an analysis is more predictive than a transformation-based account (such as [16] because it assumes that speakers are relying on the same grammatical knowledge used in the standard language to generate the language game.

The rest of the section is dedicated to providing a clear theoretic account of how Doggo may be accounted for with a general, generative syntax framework. The analysis here assumes the tenets of Distributed Morphology [25] and the Minimalist Program [26], but attempts to maintain a level of general applicability.

[17] propose that unergative verbs like *dance, sneeze,* etc. and location/locatum verbs like *saddle, shelve,* etc. are composed of a more complex structure involving incorporation (à la [27]. Under this view, an unergative verb like *dance* is underlying transitive, with the nominal *dance* head-moving and incorporating into the verb. The relevant portions of the trees are illustrated in (9) below:

(9) [17] structure of an unergative verb (see p. 54–55)
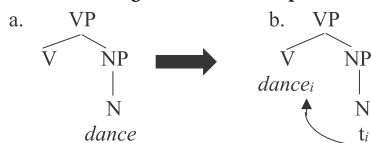
Ref. [23] notes that "… [Hale & Keyser] intended these [structures] to have semantic properties similar to those of their paraphrases, such as *do a dance* …" Thus, we should not be surprised to see these 'paraphrases' used in the language game.[5] In less theoretic terms, even in standard English, it is possible to find illustrations of the Doggo-like light verb + nominal constructions that are equivalent to single verb constructions: *did the laugh ≈ laughed.* What makes Doggo Doggo is the widespread use of this construction along with the obligatory use of the indefinite on the nominal. This is illustrated by example (5), repeated as (10) below (see again appendix ex. 4).
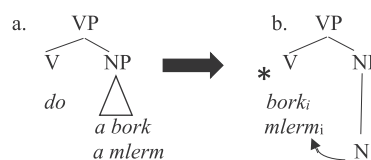
(10) he did a bork, she did a mlerm

Excepting the specialized vocabulary, there is nothing remarkable about such examples. They are essentially the paraphrases that [23] discusses. Such examples can be captured by not incorporating an unergative as in (11) below.

(11) [17] style analysis of an unergative verb

Indeed, if the game were limited to intransitives, we might reasonably argue that the game was about paraphrasing and not about verbal syntax. However, recall that the 'do rule' of the Doggo language game may also be found with transitives. This is seen with examples (1), (2) (repeated as (12) and (13)), and (14) (drawn from appendix ex. 1, 2, and 6 respectively).

(12) do me a beam up scotty! 'beam me up, Scotty'
(13) do Goddo a respect or you go straight to heck 'Respect God … '
(14) u r doin' me a discamfert'You are discomforting me/you are making me uncomfortable.'

We can conclude the same process is at work to generate the Doggo language game. The (nominal) predicate does not move into the verbalizing head,[6] but rather stays low in the structure, where this head receives a determiner (typically indefinite, though it may be definite in the right context), and the verbalizing head is then typically realized as *do*.[7] This game can cover a much wider array of possible expressions than the typical English light verb constructions.

Perhaps just as interesting as what syntactic conventions the meme exhibits are the patterns that do not seem to appear (with the usual caveats about the impossibility of proving a negative). One such pattern is the apparent lack of hyponymous objects in the Doggo language game.Following [17] analysis, wherein unergative verbs are underlyingly transitive, the question of how hyponymous objects (as in (15) below) arise is a matter of some concern.

(15) Mary danced **a jig.**

However, in Doggo we have encountered no forms similar to the example provided in (16). (We choose to annotate this failure with the symbol 💣*, because other more traditional grammatical/ungrammatical notations (*, #, %) were inappropriate.)

(16) 💣*u do a jig a dance

As noted in Refs. [17,28,29] approach to unergatives makes a *prima facie* incorrect prediction about the grammaticality of hyponymous objects.

(17) Derivation of an unergative verb and hyponymous objects (adapted from Ref. [29]: 246)
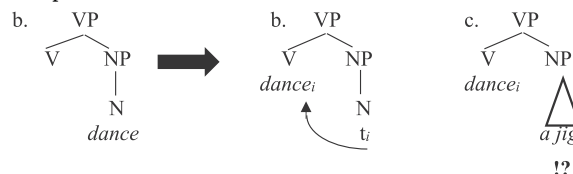
A number of theoretic solutions, well beyond the scope of this paper, are proposed to address this issue, including [28] delinking account, Hale and Keyser's (2002) distinction between conflation and incorporation, and [29] approach based on Copy Theory [30] and Late Insertion (à la [25]. What is critical for each of these accounts is that the verb is underlyingly low, as in Ref. [17].

Let's briefly consider [29] approach to illustrate why a Hale and Keyser-style analysis predicts the lack of objects (hyponymous or root identical) universally which should apply in the Doggo language game. Haugen assumes the Copy Theory of movement and Late Insertion, along with an incorporation structure like those in (9) or (17). For Haugen, there are three possibilities that may happen to the lower copy of the incorporating chain:

(18) Three possibilities for spell-out of a lower copy of a chain [29]:260)
  1. Identical morphophonological material—cognate object
  2. Different morphophonological material—hyponymous object
  3. Non-insertion—"stranded modifers"

We illustrate each of these three properties in English in the examples below—noting that standard English does not allow stranded modifiers.

(19) *I did a dance.
(20) ?I danced a dance.[8]
(21) I danced a jig.
(22) I danced.

For Haugen, the derivations of (19), (21), and (22) are fundamentally identical—involving incorporation of a lower element into *v*. The lower copy may then be pronounced or not—Haugen argues that pragmatics determines the content (hyponymy).

(23) [29] style analysis of an unergative verb
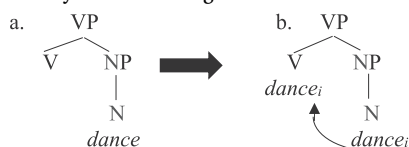
Returning to the Doggo language game, it is apparent why hyponymous objects are apparently not available even when they are readily used in English.

(24) [29] style analysis of an unergative verb
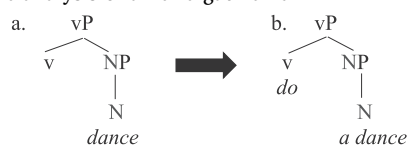
Because the root never incorporates into *v*, there is only one copy that may be pronounced in the game; thus, additional objects with unergatives are not expected. If Doggo were the product of a transformation or some other type of operation on the linear order of standard English, we would expect to find objects in Doggo in these contexts. The fact that we do not is a clear indication of the split verb analysis given here.

One further prediction of a non-incorporation account is that it should be possible to find other higher light verbal elements instead of *do* (cf [31]. This is something that is not predicted by a rule that makes direct reference to *do*. While such forms are not common, they are attested. For instance, while most examples of Doggo involve a split in which *do* fills higher projection (*v/*Voice), it is possible to find other overt elements in there, such as *cause* and *give*, as found in the examples below (appendix ex. 7 and 8).

(25) am ready to cause bad guys a concern 'I am ready to cause bad guys concern.'
(26) you givin me a underestimation 'You are underestimating me.'

The fact that speakers can access and use light verbs other than *do* in this construction indicates that the pattern is not a surface-level template being used, but rather that the underlying grammar being accessed based on a split verb and (non-)incorporation, which is grounded in the [17] proposal outlined here.

Verbs such as *give* are potentially ambiguous with a ditransitive interpretation. We can distinguish the *give* found in (26), where the low object is the verb, from other *give* constructions, where the low object is an object (thus a true ditransitive structure, as in (27)). Compare also to the ditransitive in example (28), where the low object is an object (appendix ex. 9 and 10).

(27) givin me a paradox 'You are/It is giving me a paradox.' Or 'This is causing me a paradox.'
(28) sparing me a cheese toast[9]

Interestingly, *make* only appears in light verb contexts in the most standard English sentences of the meme corpus—within the context of the 'do rule', it is treated as any other verbal root and left low. This is seen in example (6) repeated as (29) and also in (30) (from appendix ex. 16).). An example of make as a light verb in standard English is given in (31).

(29) can I do a make more obvious?'Can I make it more obvious?'
(30) am doing pancooks a make 'I am making pancakes.'
(31) Make a wish upon a star./Wish upon a star

This suggests that treatments of *make* as a light verb, as in Ref. [23]; may need to be reconsidered to the extent that a language game like Doggo informs our knowledge of underlying grammar in non-playful English. One possibility is that two versions of *make* exist— one light and one lexical— and that the Doggo game is only accessing the lexical one. However, why the light version of *make* would be inaccessible in such circumstances remains an open question.

3. Conclusions and further work

We've provided evidence that the main hallmark of the Doggo meme, the 'do rule', involves the non-incorporation of a root into the verbalizing functional element in the sense of [17] and subsequent work. While other related analyses are possible, we did not explore them. One such example is the hypothesis that the object is the same as that of standard English, given AGR-based accounts VO-adjacency (cf. [32]; others; see also [33] for a phenomenon in Irish possibly similar to the Doggo *do*-rule.). We further show that this analysis is consistent with the lack of hyponomous objects.

We assume that speakers are using underlying grammatical principles to conduct the language game—however other hypotheses cannot be fully discounted. Given the productivity of the *do*-rule, which can include light verbs other than *do*, we suggest that a templatic account is

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[8] Generally acceptable with appropriate intonation or context. Strongly improved by the presence of a modifier: *I danced a little dance.*

[9] A reviewer suggests that examples like these may not be true instances of Doggo.

unlikely; however, we again emphasize the limits of the present study. Further, while the idea that language games are illustrative of underlying linguistic structures is common, it is not without detractors (see the discussion in Ref. [13]. We may also want to examine this phenomenon in terms of more general grammatical innovation (see Ref. [34]; among others).

One question that remains is how a novice Doggo user becomes proficient in its use. We argue that the basics of the game are already accessible to English speakers through the grammatical principles outlined in this paper. Additionally, demonstrated proficiency does not necessarily determine what makes a Doggo meme. While Doggo memes generally exhibit the hallmarks discussed here and in Ref. [16]; the community of BBIAD and other places that use Doggo on the Internet

may promote a meme with no linguistic hallmarks if it is found to be especially funny (particular visual interactions, etc.). We acknowledge that the role of the community is important to consider, though well beyond what we can fully address here.

Finally, given that we are analyzing an example of playful language that recently developed and can draw on a geographically and linguistically diverse set of participants, we expect to see variation and evolution in the meme's linguistic content. Since memes are transmitted via the Internet, which does not require that meme-makers necessarily be proficient speakers of English, we concede it is possible these examples are examples of construction mimicry and do not tell us anything about the underlying forms of language.
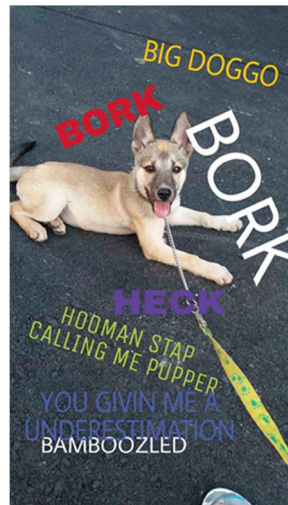
Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amper.2019.100052.
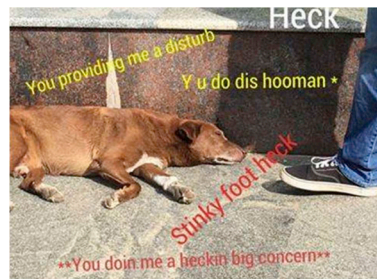
Appendix

All images from BorkBorkIAmDoggo with permission.
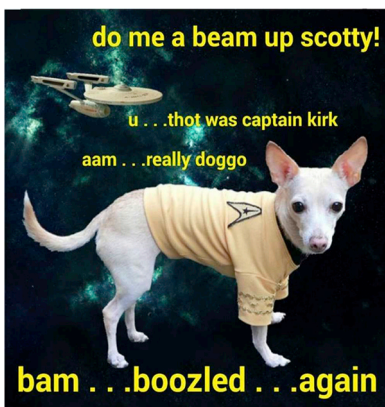
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