



Auxiliary Verb Constructions and Decategorialization in Gĩkũyũ

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Abstract

Gĩkũyũ (E.51) exhibits several verbs that can be used both as lexical verbs and as auxiliary verbs. We compare the lexical and auxiliary usages of four verbs and show that all auxiliary verb usages display uniform restrictions concerning valency-related morphology (object marking, voice morphology). We interpret these as signs of decategorialization. Furthermore, we compare the auxiliary verbs with other desemanticized verb usages – light verbs – and argue that they differ in that light verbs do not exhibit decategorialization (compared to the corresponding lexical verb). From this, we conclude that decategorialization is a valid criterion – at least in Gĩkũyũ – for distinguishing different types of desemanticized verbs.

Keywords: auxiliaries, grammaticalization, Bantu, Gĩkũyũ, light verbs

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1 Introduction

Gĩkũyũ (< Bantu, E.51), like many other languages, has pairs of verb usages in which one of the usages can be called a ‘lexical verb’ and the other an ‘auxiliary verb’. The clearest example is the verb *korwo*, which in (1a) is the passive form of the lexical verb *kora* ‘find’. In its use in (1b), on the other hand, it is classified as an auxiliary verb by various authors (Barlow 1960; Johnson 1977, 1980; Mugane 1997). While neither Mugane nor Johnson gives a concrete indication of the meaning of the auxiliary verb construction (AVC) in (1b), Barlow (1960, 268) classifies it as a perfect aspect construction.

- (1) a. *Tũ-a-kor-wo* *ha-ha* *nĩ* *mũ-tumia*.
 2PL-PST-find-PASS 17-here by 1-woman
 ‘We were found here by the woman.’
- b. *Tũ-a-korwo* *tũ-a-rĩ-a* *irio*.
 2PL-PST-AUX 2PL-PST-eat-FV 5.food
 ‘We have just eaten food.’

In addition to *korwo*, other auxiliaries are mentioned in the literature: Barlow (1960) lists the verbs *cooka* ‘to return’, *tiga* ‘to leave’, and *rika* ‘to get into, to sink’,¹ among others, but without going into the meaning of the corresponding AVCs. Benson (1964, 386) mentions *rika* ‘to get into’, which he ascribes an inceptive meaning. In other works on Gĩkũyũ, however, auxiliaries are not mentioned at all (e.g., Mareka Gecaga and Kirkaldy-Willis 1960; Bennett et al. 1985; Englebretson 2015), or only very marginally (e.g., Johnson 1977, 1980; Mugane 1997). In particular, there have been no detailed studies on individual auxiliaries to date. A relevant question for the grammatical description of the language – namely, whether and if so how auxiliaries differ grammatically from lexical verbs – has thus not yet been addressed for Gĩkũyũ. The aim of this study is to fill this gap, at least partially.

Auxiliary verbs are the result of an auxiliarization process in which a lexical verb is successively grammaticalized into an auxiliary verb. In the course of this process, the verbs undergo desemanticization and eventually decategorialization. The present paper deals with both processes. We argue that auxiliary verbs cannot be characterized solely by the fact that they are desemanticized verbs. This is because other verbs – so-called light verbs – also exhibit this feature. Rather, we argue that auxiliary verbs show additional signs of decategorialization that we do not find in light verbs. The latter is relevant because the literature occasionally establishes a connection between light verbs and auxiliary verbs. Hook (1991) argues, based on language data from Indo-Aryan languages such as Hindi/Urdu and Marathi, that light verbs – he speaks of ‘vector verbs’ – represent an intermediate step in the auxiliarization process and stand between lexical verbs and auxiliary verbs (similarly Allerton 2002, 7; see also the discussion in Hopper and Traugott 1991, 112–114 and Anderson 2006, 17). According to Croft (2022, 423), light verb constructions – which he treats under the label ‘support verb construction’ – are “neither clear cases of auxiliary constructions, nor clear cases of lexicalization” but rather between these two poles and, as Croft says, difficult to distinguish from AVCs. A similar claim is made by Berg (2014, 501), who states that light verbs show signs of auxiliarization and “blur the distinction between main and auxiliary verbs”. Thus, he seems to argue for a continuum

¹ Barlow actually writes the verbs as *tigia* and *rikia*; we have standardized the orthography to match the one used in this paper.

‘lexical expression > light verb (construction) > auxiliary verb (construction)’ – which is not necessarily to be understood as a diachronic sequence. With explicit reference to the Bantu languages, Bernander (2024, 114) states in his analysis of the auxiliary *pata* in Swahili that “the auxiliary status associated with *-pata* can be seen as a natural progression from its basic semantic structure manifested in its use as a light verb”.

Based on four case studies, we demonstrate that the auxiliary verbs *korwo*, *rika*, *enda*, and *itĩka* (lit. meaning ‘to pour’) show signs of decategorialization. Since we cannot consider all relevant grammatical contexts, we focus on valency-related aspects in the broader sense, i.e., object realization and voice constructions (passive, applicative, causative, reciprocal, neuter).² In comparative studies of the auxiliary verbs and their corresponding lexical verbs, we show that the auxiliary verbs exhibit identical restrictions with respect to object realization and voice constructions, while the lexical verbs show more variance (a similar claim is made by Hendrikse and Mkhathshwa 1993 for isiZulu). Furthermore, we compare the light verb usage of the verb *hũra* with its corresponding lexical verb (meaning ‘beat, hit’), as well as the auxiliary verbs mentioned, to show that auxiliary verbs but not light verbs show signs of decategorialization. This provides criteria (at least for Gĩkũyũ) for distinguishing the verb types ‘lexical verb’, ‘auxiliary verb’, and ‘light verb’.

The paper presents a first detailed investigation of auxiliary verbs in Gĩkũyũ and also contributes to the differentiation between auxiliary verbs and light verbs (light verbs are a topic that has so far been largely ignored with respect to Bantu languages, with the exception of a few works on light verb constructions in Swahili, e.g., Martin 2019; Olejarnik 2009, 2011; Tramutoli 2022; and some initial analysis of light verb constructions in Gĩkũyũ by Fleischhauer and Kihara 2025).

Our analysis is limited to four verbs that are used as auxiliary verbs and one verb that is used as a light verb. The selection is partly random and partly based on the fact that they are mentioned in the literature on Gĩkũyũ as representatives of their respective categories (see above). The language data comes either from the literature or, unless otherwise stated, was contributed by the second author of the paper, who is a native speaker. The language data was tested for acceptability with other native speakers.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In Section 2, we introduce the notion of an auxiliary verb and discuss criteria by which we can distinguish auxiliaries from other verb usages. Section 3 presents the relevant grammatical data on Gĩkũyũ, which serves as a background for the discussion of the auxiliarization of verbs. We compare the auxiliary verbs with their corresponding lexical verbs in Section 4. There, we also discuss which signs of decategorialization the auxiliary verbs in question show. A comparison of the investigated auxiliary verbs with light verbs is made in Section 5.

2 Desemantized verbs and auxiliarization

With regard to the term ‘auxiliary verb’, we adopt Anderson’s (2006) explication. According to him, an auxiliary verb is “an element that in combination with a lexical verb forms a monoclausal verb phrase with some degree of (lexical) semantic bleaching that performs some more or less definable grammatical function” (Anderson 2006, 5). In contrast to Anderson, we do not

²One reason why we do not consider TAM morphology is that the AVCs we examine realize aspectual meanings and thus stronger interference effects with the meaning of the AVCs are to be expected. To describe this systematically requires a more intensive semantic analysis of the AVCs than we are able to provide in this paper.

speak of an auxiliary verb forming a verb phrase with a lexical verb, but instead we speak of a complex predicate (we explicate this notion in more detail in Section 4.5). The advantage is that the term ‘complex predicate’ does not entail a phrase-structural interpretation and is therefore compatible with syntactic approaches that do not assume the existence of a verb phrase – for example, Role and Reference Grammar (e.g., Van Valin 2005). The central point is that the auxiliary verb forms a predicative unit with a lexical verb, whereby the lexical verb can be realized in a finite (2a) as well as in a non-finite form (e.g., as an infinitive (2b) or, as in the English example in (2c), as a participle).

- (2) a. *Ma-ra-kor-et-wo* *ma-ak-a* *nyũmba*.
 2-PST-AUX-PFV- PASS 2-build-FV 9.house
 ‘They had just built a house.’³
- b. *Ngaari* *ĩ-kũ-end-ag-a* *kũ-gũ-a*.
 9.car 9-PST-AUX-IMPF-FV 15-fall-FV
 ‘The car was about to crash.’
- c. *The boy was sleeping.*

Without the lexical verb, auxiliary verbs do not form complete predications. Auxiliary verbs do not denote eventualities⁴ and are thus semantically defective. This is not to say that auxiliary verbs do not contribute to the meaning of the predication, but only that their semantic contribution is not to introduce the eventuality denoted. This is evident when we contrast AVCs of the same type but with different lexical verbs. If we compare the example in (2b) with those in (3), we see that the sentences are identical, except for the infinitives. The event denoted varies depending on the infinitive: in (2b) a crashing event is denoted, in (3a) an event of starting the engine, and in (3b) a burning event. The function of the auxiliary verb as a component of the AVC is to contribute to event perspectivization; in the case of the examples in (2b) and (3) to represent the denoted event as prospective, i.e., among other things as not yet realized at the reference time (we discuss the notion of ‘prospective aspect’ in somewhat more detail in Section 4.2).

- (3) a. *Ngaari* *ĩ-kũ-end-ag-a* *kũ-rurum-a*.
 9.car 1-PST-AUX-IMPF-FV 15-start.engine-FV
 ‘The car was about to start.’
- b. *Ngaari* *ĩ-kũ-end-ag-a* *kũ-hĩ-a*.
 9.car 9-PST-AUX-IMPF-FV 15-burn-FV
 ‘The car was about to burn.’

Desemanticization – what Anderson (2006) calls ‘semantic bleaching’ – plays a central role in the auxiliarization process.⁵ It is a gradual process in which lexical verbs are grammatical-

³ It should be noted that the perfective aspect marker separates the original passive marker *-wo* from the original stem *cor-*, as is the case with the corresponding lexical verb. Such discontinuous stems – i.e., interrupted stems – are also found in other cases in Gikūyū, as we will briefly outline in Section 3.

⁴ We use the term ‘eventuality’ in the sense of Bach (1986) as a cover term for states and events.

⁵ See Kuteva (2001) for a comprehensive discussion of desemanticization in the context of auxiliarization and also

ized into auxiliary verbs (e.g., Bolinger 1980, 295). In the course of the grammaticalization process, the verbs undergo not only desemanticization but also decategorialization, i.e., the loss or change of grammatical properties. Auxiliary verbs and the lexical verbs from which they developed often exist in parallel in a language. We already pointed out in the introduction that the auxiliary verb *korwo* is identical in form to the passivized version of the lexical verb *kora* ‘find’. But there is also a lexical verb identical in form to the auxiliary *enda*, with the meaning ‘want, like’, and the same holds true of the other auxiliary verbs *rika* and *itika*, which we analyse in this paper and for which corresponding lexical verbs meaning ‘to dip into’ and ‘to pour’ exist.⁶

We can determine decategorialization on the basis of objectively observable criteria, for example in the development of restrictions in relation to inflectional and derivational morphology. This assumes, of course, that we have a suitable standard of comparison by which we can see that the restrictions are indeed a consequence of the auxiliarization process. Since, as mentioned above, (emerging) auxiliary verbs and lexical verbs can exist in parallel in a language, the lexical verb usage of a lexeme can serve as a standard of comparison for answering the question of whether and, if so, in what form an auxiliary verb shows signs of decategorialization.

Desemanticization, i.e., the loss of lexical meaning, is often shown indirectly (see, for example, Heine 1993, 54). For example, changes in the subject selectional restrictions of a verb are interpreted as an indicator of desemanticization. Although changes in the selectional restrictions indicate a semantic change, they are not sufficient to indicate that the corresponding verb has assumed the status of an auxiliary verb. An illustrative example can be found in German, where the verb *stehen* ‘stand’ means that the subject referent is in an upright posture at a certain location (4a). In this usage, *stehen* ‘stand’ contrasts with other posture verbs such as *liegen* ‘lie’ or *sitzen* ‘sit’, in which the subject referent has a different posture. The subject argument must have certain properties (a salient axis, which can be vertically aligned; cf. Gamerschlag et al. 2013). If this is not the case, the subject referent is not compatible with this use of *stehen* (e.g., *ball* ‘ball’ – as well as other round objects like ‘moon’ – is excluded as a subject referent in 4a). However, we also find usages in which the subject referent has no salient axis and cannot be positioned in an upright posture (4b). Interestingly, *stehen* in (4b) also no longer contrasts with other posture verbs such as *liegen* ‘lie’ or *sitzen* ‘sit’.

- (4) a. *Der Hund steht vor dem Baum.*
the dog stands in_front_of the tree
‘The dog is standing in front of the tree.’
- b. *Der Mond steht vor den Sternen.*
the moon stand in_front_of the stars
‘The moon is in front of the stars.’ (Kaufmann 1995: 111)

We can say that *stehen* in (4b) is desemanticized in comparison to its use in (4a). While in (4a) a state predication is made about the location and posture of the subject referent, (4b) only makes a predication about the subject referent’s location (see Kaufmann 1995, 111; Fleischhauer

the classification of ‘bleaching’ as one of several processes subsumed under the notion of ‘desemanticization’.

⁶ Auxiliarization has also played a role in the development of aspectual suffixes, such as the perfect morpheme *-il*, which according to Voeltz (1980) developed via intermediate stages from the proto-Bantu verb *-gid-e* ‘finish’. Such developments of verbs via auxiliaries to bound morphemes are not the subject of the present study.

2021). The two uses of *stehen* differ in their selectional restrictions, but both are classified as lexical verb usages.

We therefore resort to the criterion of semantic defectiveness to determine the presence of a desemanticization process. As we have explained above, auxiliary verbs are semantically defective, i.e., they do not denote a specific eventuality type; rather, the reference depends on the semantic head of the complex predicate, i.e., the lexical verb. When used as a lexical verb, however, the verbs corresponding to the auxiliary verbs are not semantically defective. As a lexical verb, *enda* has a desiderative meaning and expresses that the subject referent is in the cognitive state of wanting. If we replace *ngaari* ‘car’ in (5a) with an infinitive (5b), for example, only the object being wanted changes, but not the fact that the subject referent does want it (i.e., is in the state of wanting something).

- (5) a. *Ndĩ-ra-end-a* *ngaari*.
 1SG-PRS-want-FV 9.car
 ‘I want a car.’
- b. *Ndĩ-ra-end-a* *gũ-kom-a*.
 1SG-PRS-want-FV 15-sleep-FV
 ‘I want to sleep.’

We propose that it is necessary for auxiliary verbs not to denote a specific eventuality type. However, this criterion is not sufficient to identify auxiliary verbs, since it is not only auxiliary verbs that are desemanticized in such a way that they do not denote a specific eventuality type. Another type of verb showing this property is light verbs.

Light verbs form a complex predicate together with a phrasal element – usually an NP, but in some languages also a PP – which is referred to as a ‘light verb construction’ (LVC). Like auxiliaries, light verbs are attested in numerous unrelated languages. They have been well studied in various branches of the Indo-European language family – e.g., Germanic, Romanic, and Indo-Iranian (see Pompei et al. 2023 for references) – but also in Japanese (e.g., Kishimoto 2025), Korean, and Mandarin Chinese (e.g., Kuo 2025). For the Bantu languages, LVCs have so far only been studied extensively for Swahili (Martin, 2019; Olejarnik 2009, 2011; Tramutoli 2022).

LVCs are similar to AVCs in that the finite verb does not determine the eventuality denoted. Instead, the eventuality denoted is determined by the phrasal element. This is evident for LVCs whose phrasal element contains an eventive noun. An illustrative example is English *to give a kiss*, which can be paraphrased as ‘to kiss’ and denotes a kissing event. Gikūyū has, among other things, the light verb *hūra* ‘beat, hit’, which is used with non-eventive nouns, e.g., *hūra thimũ* ‘make a call’ (lit. beat phone).

- (6) *Mũ-tumia* *nĩ=a-ra-hūr-a* *thimũ*.
 1-woman FOC=1-PRS-beat-FV 9.phone
 ‘The woman is making a call.’

Eventive nouns, although they are nouns, refer to an eventuality just like verbs do. Non-eventive nouns, on the other hand, refer to a non-temporal entity, such as animate beings (*mũtumia*

‘woman’), inanimate concrete objects (*thimũ* ‘phone’), or abstract concepts (*thiriti* ‘friendship’); see Fábregas et al. (2012) for criteria to distinguish between eventive and non-eventive nouns.

Although *thimũ* ‘phone’ is not an eventive noun, the event denoted by the LVC in (6) can be inferred from its meaning. In the case of *thimũ*, an event is inferred in which the referent takes on the instrumental role: a phone is the instrument in a calling event. In other words, to call someone is what phones are used for.

Whether light verbs are the result of a desemanticization process is controversial in the research literature (see Butt and Lahiri 2013); however, it is stated – for instance by Butt and Lahiri – that light verbs, unlike auxiliary verbs, show no signs of decategorialization (see also Butt and Geuder 2003 on this issue). In Section 5, we compare *hũra* LVCs with the AVCs under investigation and show that the language data from Gĩkũyũ also argue against the decategorialization of light verbs. This results in two characteristics that we can use to differentiate between lexical verbs, auxiliary verbs, and light verbs. Auxiliary verbs and light verbs are semantically defective, which – at least in the case of auxiliary verbs – is due to desemanticization. Auxiliary verbs but not light verbs show signs of decategorialization. The differentiation criteria are summarized in Table 1. The following sections serve to show evidence for the decategorialization of auxiliary verbs and the absence of decategorialization in (Gĩkũyũ) light verbs.

Table 1: Criteria distinguishing lexical verbs, auxiliary verbs, and light verbs

	Semantically defective	Decategorialized
lexical verb	no	no
light verb	yes	no
auxiliary verb	yes	yes

Before we can investigate the grammatical behaviour of auxiliary verbs, we first need to work out how lexical verbs behave in Gĩkũyũ. It will be the task of future research to test the claims made in this paper, which are based on a small dataset, using additional data from the language, as well as cross-linguistic data.

3 Gĩkũyũ: Grammatical background

Gĩkũyũ (E.51) is a Central Kenyan Bantu language spoken by slightly more than 8 million people (according to the 2019 census). In this section, we briefly discuss the grammatical features of the language relevant to our analysis: verbal morphology and argument realization. To illustrate the relevant grammatical properties, we use, among others, the verb *hũra* ‘beat, hit’, whose light verb usage we will return to in Section 5.

Like other Bantu languages, Gĩkũyũ has a rich verbal morphology. Subject and object markers, as well as negation and tense, are realized before the verbal roots (see Johnson 1977, 1980 and Cable 2013 on tense and aspect marking in Gĩkũyũ). We can distinguish between subject and object markers based on their phonological form – at least in the examples in (7) – and their linear position. The tense marker separates subject and object marking (7a). The negation prefix has different allomorphs that either precede the subject marker (7a) or follow it (7b).

- (7) a. *Nd-a-na-mũ-hũr-a.*
 NEG-1-PST-1-beat-FV
 ‘S/he did not beat him/her.’
 b. *Tũ-ti-na-mũ-hũr-a.*
 1PL-NEG-PST-1-beat-FV
 ‘We did not beat him/her.’

In addition to verb prefixes, Gĩkũyũ also has a number of suffixes, including voice markers (passive (8a), reciprocal (8b), neuter (8c), causative (8d), applicative (8e)) and aspect markers (perfective, imperfective, and perfect).

- (8) a. *Ngui nĩ=ĩ-ra-hũr-ir-wo nĩ mũ-tumia.*
 9.dog FOC=9-PST-beat-PFV-PASS by 1-woman
 ‘The dog was beaten by the woman.’
 b. *Mũ-irĩtu na mw-anake*
 1-girl with 1.boy
nĩ=ma-a-gũth-an-ir-e.
 FOC=2-PST-hit-RECP-PFV-FV
 ‘The girl and the boy beat each other.’
 c. *Thimũ n-dĩ-ra-hũr-ĩk-a.*
 9-phone 9-NEG-PRS-beat-NEUT-FV
 ‘The phone is not going through.’ (lit. The phone is not beatable.)
 d. *Mũ-thuri nĩ=a-ra-hũr-ithi-a mũ-tumia ngui.*
 1-man FOC=1-PRS-beat-CAUS-FV 1-woman 9.dog
 ‘The man caused the woman to beat the dog/ The man helped the woman the beat the dog.’⁷
 e. *Mũ-tumia nĩ=a-ra-mũ-hũr-ĩr-a ngui.*
 1-woman FOC=1-PRS-1-beat-APPL-FV 9.dog
 ‘The woman is beating the dog for him/her.’

The passive is realized morphologically as verb-final; the suffix *-wo* replaces the final vowel (FV). Syntactically, the passive is canonical in Gĩkũyũ, as the object of the active construction becomes the subject of the passive construction and the subject of the active construction is

⁷ In Gĩkũyũ – as in other Bantu languages (see Schneider-Zioga and Mutaka 2019) – causative constructions in some cases have a ‘sociative’ interpretation (see Shibatani and Pardeshi 2001) in addition to a strictly causative meaning, in which the causer performs a joint action with the causee.

optionally realized in an oblique *nĩ*-PP ‘by-PP’ (see 8a). Another morpheme that falls into the category of ‘voice’ is the reciprocal marker *-an* (8b). This marker expresses that the eventuality denoted by the verb is performed reciprocally, i.e., mutually. Frajzyngier and Curl (2000, vii) note that in a reciprocal scenario, two or more participants bear the same semantic role. In (8b), *mũirĩtu* ‘girl’ and *mwanake* ‘boy’ are both agents and patients of the hitting. Such an interpretation requires a plural subject argument. In addition to realizing the reciprocal meaning, *-an* can also be used to realize the antipassive voice (see Kihara 2024; see also Bostoen et al. 2015 for a general discussion of the antipassive voice in Bantu). This use is most evident with singular subject arguments, as these exclude a reciprocal interpretation. The object argument can either not be realizable – as in (9) – or it is realized in an oblique *kũrĩ*-PP ‘to-PP’ (see Kihara 2024 for examples).

- (9) *Nyina nĩ=a-a-hũr-an-ir-e*
 1.mother FOC=1-PST-beat-RECP-PFV-FV
 ‘The mother beat someone.’

The neuter suffix *-ĩk*, which also leads to a valency reduction, functions similarly to the aforementioned voice markers. Dom et al. (2016) classify the neuter marker as belonging to the category ‘middle voice’.⁸ Middle voice itself refers to a summary of different functions, including anticausative or, as in (8c), ‘patient-oriented potentials’ (Dom et al. 2016, 133). A characteristic feature is that in a middle voice construction, one of the object arguments becomes the subject; however, unlike in the passive voice, the subject of the active sentence is no longer realizable.

Many Bantu languages have two morphological causative markers; in Gĩkũyũ these are the short causative *-i* and the long causative *-ithi*. The long causative is composed of two segments: *-ith + -i*, where the second segment is identical to the short causative and can be separated from the first segment (10). Note that (10) differs from (8d) only with respect to the perfective aspect suffix *-ir* which separates the two segments of the causative marker. We gloss both segments as ‘CAUS’, without implying that this is an instance of double causativization. In fact, the iteration of causative markers is not possible in Gĩkũyũ, unlike in, for instance, Lingála (Meeuwis 2008, 453–454).

- (10) *Mũ-thuri nĩ=a-ra-hũr-ith-ir-i-e mũ-tumia ngui.*
 1-man FOC=1-PRS-beat-CAUS-PFV-CAUS-FV 1-woman 9.dog
 ‘The man caused the woman to beat the dog/ The man helped the woman the beat the dog.’

The short causative marker *-i* also occurs in lexicalized usages. In these, it does not contribute a causative meaning, i.e., an increase in valency compared to a non-causative verb form. This is the case with *ikia* ‘throw’, for instance. A corresponding verb form *ika* – from which *ikia* could be derived – does not exist in the synchronic language. That the occurrence of *-i* in the verb is a lexicalized causative marker is evident from the fact that the segment *-i* can be separated from

⁸ A characteristic feature of the Bantu languages seems to be that the various functions subsumed under the term ‘middle voice’ are not realized by a single marker (Dom et al. 2016). In Gĩkũyũ, in addition to the neuter suffix *-ĩk*, the reflexive marker also functions as an exponent of the middle voice category (Kihara 2024).

the stem (11). We gloss such forms as discontinuous stems (see Good 2007 for a more detailed discussion of discontinuous morphology in the Bantu languages).

- (11) *Nĩ=tũ-ra-ma-ik-ĩr-i-a* *mũ-bira*.
 FOC=1PL-PRS-2-throw-APPL-STEM-FV 3-ball
 ‘We are throwing them a ball.’ (Wittke 2015, 7)

The applicative marker *-ĩr* in (8e) introduces a new non-subject argument. However, like the causative, *-ĩr* also occurs in uses in which it does not cause an increase in valency. This can be observed, for instance, with the transitive verb *rũga* ‘jump (over)’ in (12). The applicative marker in (12b) does not introduce an additional argument compared to (12a). Rather, the marker has a semantic function that transforms a semelfactive event description (i.e., an iteration of single events of jumping) into a punctual (i.e., unique) event description (see Pacchiarotti 2020, 2024 for a comprehensive discussion of different uses of applicative markers from a cross-Bantu perspective).

- (12) a. *Ngui nĩ=y-a-rũg-a* *mw-ene*.
 9.dog FOC=9-PST-jump-FV 1-owner
 ‘The dog jumped over the owner.’
 b. *Ngui nĩ=y-a-rũg-ĩr-a* *mw-ene*.
 9.dog FOC=9-PST-jump-APPL-FV 1-owner
 ‘The dog jumped (just once) at the owner.’

In the remainder of the paper, we will restrict ourselves to productive valency-increasing uses of causative and applicative morphology when discussing its use in the context of auxiliarization. Uses as in (11) and (12b) are explicitly excluded.

Morphosyntactically, Gikūyū can be classified as a symmetrical non-doubling language. The distinction between symmetrical and asymmetrical languages goes back to Bresnan and Moshi (1990). Symmetrical languages treat the two non-subject arguments of a ditransitive verb in the same way with regard to the relevant object criteria. These include the realization of an argument by a bound object marker, as well as the realization of an argument as the subject of a passive construction (see Hyman and Duranti 1982). The examples in (13) and (14) show that Gikūyū is symmetrical with regard to both properties and that no distinction can be made between a direct object and an indirect object on the basis of these properties.

- (13) a. *Mũ-tumia a-a-he-ir-e* *mw-anake i-buku*.
 1-woman 1-PST-give-PFV-FV 1-boy 5-book
 ‘The woman gave the book to the boy.’
 b. *Mũ-tumia a-a-rĩ-he-ir-e* *mw-anake*.
 1-woman 1-PST-5-give-PFV-FV 1-boy
 ‘The woman gave it to the boy.’

- c. *Mũ-tumia a-a-mũ-he-ir-e i-buku.*
 1-woman 1-PST-1-give-PFV-FV 5-book
 ‘The woman gave him/her a book.’
- (14) a. *Mw-anake a-a-he-ir-wo i-buku nĩ mũ-tumia.*
 1-boy 1-PST-give-PFV-PASS 5-book by 1-woman
 ‘The boy was given the book by the woman.’
- b. *I-buku rĩ-a-he-ir-wo mw-anake nĩ mũ-tumia.*
 5-book 5-PST-give-PFV-PASS 1-boy by 1-woman
 ‘The book was given to the boy by the woman.’

Furthermore, Gikūyū is a non-doubling language (see, e.g., van der Wal 2022; Fleischhauer 2023a), which means that a bound object marker cannot co-occur with a coreferential non-subject NP within the same clause. A coreferential NP is either not realized at all or is left- or preferably right-dislocated (see Lambrecht 2001 on the notion of ‘dislocation’). If a constituent is right-dislocated, the realization of the bound object marker is obligatory, as is an intonation break between the dislocated constituent and the last constituent in the clause (in (15) after the verb).

- (15) *Ka-hĩ nĩ=ka-ra-mĩ-hũr-a, ngui.*
 12-boy FOC=12-PRS-9-beat-FV 9.dog
 ‘The boy is beating it, the dog.’

Subject arguments can always be doubled, as can be seen, for instance, in (15). However, the realization of the subject with an overt NP is not obligatory, since the subject marker can be interpreted pronominally.

Lexical verbs behave regularly with respect to the grammatical properties outlined above:

- when verbs are (di)transitive, they allow one of the non-subject arguments to be pronominalized by a bound object marker;⁹
- when verbs are (di)transitive, they can be passivized and one of the non-subject arguments can become the subject of the passive construction;
- when verbs are (di)transitive, they can undergo other valency-reducing processes as well (reciprocal, antipassive, neuter);
- verbs can (as a rule) undergo valency-increasing processes through causative and applicative morphology.

However, idiosyncratic deviations from this general pattern are possible, as we will see in the next section.

⁹ Jeon and Mauney (2015) show that some verbs in Gikūyū even allow both non-subject arguments to be realized by bound object markers on the verb.

4 Auxiliary verbs and decategorialization: Case studies

Auxiliaries have been treated rather marginally in the literature on Gĩkũyũ. The only work that presents a comprehensive list of auxiliaries is Barlow’s (1960) *Studies in Kikuyu Grammar and Idiom*. But even Barlow does not address the question of how auxiliary verbs differ from lexical verbs. In the following four case studies, we compare the grammatical behaviour of the auxiliary verbs *korwo*, *rika*, *itĩka* and *enda* with the grammatical behaviour of their corresponding lexical verbs with regard to valency-related properties (voice marking, argument realization) in the broadest sense.

4.1 *korwo*

Korwo is the only verb that is treated as an auxiliary by several authors. Barlow (1960, 183) attests to its “important” use as auxiliary. While Mugane (1997, 124) glosses it as ‘be’, Barlow (1960, 268) lists ‘be found to have’, ‘be found to be’ and ‘be found doing’ as the “primary meaning” of the auxiliary. Johnson (1980, 315) just calls it an auxiliary without an indication of its function. According to Barlow, the auxiliary verb construction realizes perfect aspect; Mugane does not explicitly specify its meaning. However, the English translations of his examples suggest that he also assumes perfect aspect to be expressed by the AVC.¹⁰

The ‘primary meaning’ that Barlow gives to the auxiliary verb is a reflection of the fact that *korwo* is a fossilized passive form of the lexical verb *kora* ‘find, meet’. While in (16a) *korwo* is used as a passive form of *kora*, in (16b) it is used as an auxiliary verb. The optional actor argument in a passive construction can be realized in Gĩkũyũ in a *nĩ*-PP, as shown in (16a). Such a PP cannot be added in (16b), as it behaves formally as an active voice construction.

- (16) a. *Tũ-a-kor-wo* *ha-ha* *nĩ mũ-tumia*.
 2PL-PST-find-PASS 17-here by 1-woman
 ‘We were found here by the woman.’
- b. *Tũ-a-korwo* *tũ-a-rĩ-a* *irio*.
 2PL-PST-AUX 2PL-PST-eat-FV 5.food
 ‘We have just eaten food.’

Not only does the auxiliary verb use of *korwo* have no passive meaning, but the lexical meaning ‘find’ is also not realized. In addition to semantic differences, there are also clear grammatical differences. *Kora* ‘find’ is a transitive verb that takes two arguments. If the object is realized by a free form and not by a bound object marker, then it takes the form of an NP (cf. the active construction in (17)). In its auxiliary use, *korwo* combines with a finite verb instead of an NP. *Tũarĩa* ‘we ate’ in (16b) is a finite indicative verb form that bears a subject prefix as well as a tense marker and has its own argument (*irio* ‘food’) licensed.

- (17) *Tũ-a-kor-a* *mũ-tumia* *ha-ha*.
 2PL-PST-find-FV 1-woman 17-here
 ‘We found the woman here’.

¹⁰ *Korwo* is also used as a conditional marker, then it appears as an uninflected particle; see Kihara (2023) for a discussion of this usage.

Korwo AVCs represent what Anderson (2006, 2011a, 803–805) terms a ‘doubled inflectional pattern’ as inflectional marking occurs twice: on the auxiliary verb as well as the lexical one. Both the subject marker and the tense marker – identical in both cases – are realized in (16b) on the auxiliary and its finite verb complement.

In addition to the passivization of *kora* (16a), it is also possible for its object argument to be realized by a bound object marker (18a). *Kora* also allows the realization of the reciprocal marker (18b). In contrast, the verb cannot realize either the neuter marker or the applicative marker, nor can it be causativized. Thus, the lexical verb shows idiomatic restrictions concerning its compatibility with voice suffixes.

- (18) a. *Tũ-a-mũ-kor-a* *ha-ha*.
 2PL-PST-1-find-FV 17-here
 ‘We found her/him here.’
- b. *Mũ-irĩtu* *na* *mw-anake* *nĩ=ma-a-kor-an-ir-e*
 1-girl with 1-boy FOC=2-PST-find-RECP-PFV-FV
bara.
 9.road
 ‘The girl and the boy found / met each other at the road.’

As an auxiliary, *korwo* has the same restrictions as the lexical verb: it is neither compatible with the neuter marker nor with the causative or the applicative marker. Furthermore, the auxiliary *korwo* can neither be passivized nor can a bound object marker be affixed or the reciprocal marker be suffixed. The fact that passivization is excluded may be attributed to the fact that the verb already formally corresponds to a passivized verb form. However, this does not explain why bound object marking is excluded, since (at least some) passivized ditransitive verbs in Gĩkũyũ do license bound object marking. This is illustrated by the minimal pair in (19). Nor does the morphological form of the verb explain why none of the other voice markers is possible.

- (19) a. *Mũ-tumia* *a-a-he-ir-e* *mũ-thuri* *ka-ana*.
 1-woman 1-PST-give-PFV-FV 1-man 12-baby
 ‘The woman gave the baby to the man.’
- b. *Mũ-thuri* *nĩ=a-a-ka-he-ir-wo* *nĩ* *mũ-tumia*.
 1-man FOC=1-PST-12-give-PFV-PASS by 1-woman
 ‘The man was given it by the woman.’

We attribute the fact that *korwo* does not license a bound object marker in its auxiliary verb use to the fact that the finite verb – *tũarĩa* ‘we ate’ in (16b) – is not the object argument of *korwo*. We will come back to this issue in more detail later.

Table 2 summarizes the morphosyntactic behaviour of the lexical verb *kora* and the auxiliary *korwo* with regard to bound object marking and voice marking.

Table 2: Comparison of the relevant morphosyntactic properties of the lexical with the auxiliary use of *kora/korwo*

	<i>kora</i> _{lexical}	<i>korwa</i> _{aux}
bound object marking	yes	no
passive	yes	no
reciprocal	yes	no
neuter	no	no
causative	no	no
applicative	no	no

4.2 *Enda*

Enda has two uses in Gikūyū which are identical in form: first as a lexical verb with the meaning ‘want, like’ (20a) and second as the verbal component of a prospective construction (20b).

- (20) a. *Ndĩ-ra-end-a* *ngaari*.
 1SG-PRS-want-FV 9.car
 ‘I want a car.’
- b. *Nĩ=kũ-r-end-a* *kũ-ur-a*.
 FOC=17-PRS-want-FV 15-rain-FV
 ‘It is about to rain.’

The use of a desiderative verb with the meaning ‘want’ is a strategy frequently found across languages for the realization of prospective aspect (see Heine 1994, 35). In addition to other Bantu languages such as Swahili, such grammaticalization paths are also found in unrelated languages (e.g., Tok Pisin < Creole (Romaine 1999); Persian < Indo-European (Davari and Naghsguy-Kohan 2017, 180–184); see Heine 1994 and Kuteva 2001 for more languages).

Prospective aspect – also called proximative (e.g., Heine 1994; Kuteva 2001) – together with perfect aspect represents a subtype of perspectival aspect in Dik’s (1997, 221) typology of grammatical aspect. Both prospective and perfect represent a relation between an eventuality and a state. With perfect aspect, the state in which the argument of the predication is located – this can be the subject as in *I already have eaten* but also the object as in *John has opened the door* – is represented as a post-state of the eventuality denoted by the lexical verb. Often, but not always, the state is interpreted as the resultant state. In the prospective aspect, the state in which the subject argument is located is understood as the pre-state of the eventuality denoted by the lexical verb (Fleischhauer and Gamerschlag 2019, 146). The subject referent is in a state such that if nothing intervenes, the eventuality denoted by the lexical verb is realized (e.g., Fleischhauer 2023b, 374–375; Boogards and Fleischhauer 2023, 16). With respect to (20b), the conditions are such that if nothing intervenes, e.g., if the wind does not drive away the clouds, it will rain.

The fact that *enda* no longer has a desiderative meaning in the prospective construction can be recognized, among other things, by the fact that it also occurs with non-animate subjects. The subject marker in (20b) is a locational marker that can be translated into English by an expletive. The changes in the selectional restrictions – as a lexical verb, *enda* requires animate subjects – are (in this specific case) an indication of the desemanticization that took place in the

course of auxiliarization. However, we also see that *enda* as the head of a prospective aspect construction is semantically defective and that the eventuality, i.e., the prospective event, is denoted by the infinitive rather than the finite verb.

As a lexical verb, *enda* is transitive and can take an NP with a lexical noun as head (20a), a subordinate clause (21a), or an infinitive (21b) as complement.

- (21) a. *Ndĩ-ra-end-a* *wũ-in-e*.
 1SG-PRS-want-FV 2SG-sing-FV
 ‘I want you to sing.’
- b. *N-di-end-et-e* *gũ-kom-a*.
 1SG-NEG-want-PFV-FV 15-sleep-FV
 ‘I do not want/ like sleeping.’

In its auxiliary verb use, *enda* is more restricted and only occurs with an infinitival complement. Infinitives are verbal stems that have an NC15 noun class marker. According to Mugane (1997), infinitives have both nominal and verbal properties. Verbal properties include the fact that infinitives can exhibit verbal morphology (aspect marking, voice marking, bound object marking). The NC15 marker replaces the subject marker and these infinitives behave syntactically like nouns. The infinitive in (21b) has object properties, which can be recognized by the fact that it can be pronominalized by a bound object marker. Since Gĩkũyũ is a non-doubling language, the NP coreferential with the bound object marker is realized as left-dislocated (22).

- (22) *Gũ-kom-a, n-di-kũ-end-et-e*
 15-sleep-FV 1SG-NEG-15-want-PFV-FV
 ‘Sleeping, I do not like it.’

While *enda* as a lexical verb allows a pronominalization of the infinitive (22), this is not possible in the prospective construction. A further asymmetry with regard to the infinitive can be seen in passivization. In general, infinitives can become the subject of a passive construction (23), but this does not apply to the infinitive complements of the auxiliary verb *enda*. This means, for example, that *kĩũura* ‘to rain’ cannot become the subject of the prospective construction in (20b). However, this is not a consequence of the fact that it is an infinitive, but rather a characteristic of the auxiliary verb construction, as the discussion of example (23) has shown.

- (23) *Gũ-kom-a* *gũ-ti-end-et-wo* *nĩ* *ci-ana*.
 15-sleep-FV 15-NEG-want-PFV-PASS by 2-child
 ‘Children don’t like sleeping.’ (lit. Sleeping is not liked by children)

As with the comparison of *kora* and *korwo*, we can see that the obligatory complement of the auxiliary has no object status and that the relationship between auxiliary and complement cannot be described as a predicate-argument relationship.

As a lexical verb, *enda* is compatible with the reciprocal marker (24a). However, this marker is excluded in the auxiliary use. One reason for this – which also applies to other auxiliaries – is that it does not denote a process that can be performed reciprocally. It should therefore come as

no surprise that the reciprocal marker can actually be realized in the infinitive (24b). In terms of meaning, the marker has scope over the event denoted by the infinitive, so that it should also be realized on the infinitive. It makes a difference in meaning whether we have a prospective event in which the subject referent hits someone or in which this activity is performed by two subject referents on each other.

- (24) a. *Mũ-irĩtu na mw-anake nĩ=ma-end-an-ĩt-e.*
 1-girl with 1-boy FOC=2-PST-love-RECP-PFT-FV
 ‘The girl and the boy like each other.’
- b. *Mũ-irĩtu na mw-anake ma-kw-end-ag-a kũ-gũth-an-a.*
 1-girl with 1-boy 2-PST-want-IMP-FV 15-hit-RECP-FV
 ‘The girl and the boy were about to hit each other.’

The same restriction that we observed with regard to the reciprocal marker also applies to the neuter marker. As a lexical verb, *enda* licenses the neuter marker (25), but as an auxiliary, it does not. Unlike, for example, *hũra* in (8c), the neuter marker in (25) does not lead to a patient-oriented potential reading, but can best be described as an agentless passive (Dom et al. 2016, 132).

- (25) *Mũ-nene n-da-r-end-ek-a.*
 1-leader 1-NEG-PRS-like-NEUT-FV
 ‘The leader is not liked.’

The lexical verb *enda*, unlike *kora*, licenses an applicative marker. In (26), the applied object – the benefactive argument – is realized by a bound object marker. Like *korwo*, the auxiliary verb usage is not compatible with applicative morphology.

- (26) *Tũ-a-kũ-end-er-a mũ-thenya mw-ega.*
 2PL-PRS-1-want-APPL-FV 3-day 3-good
 ‘We wish you a good day.’ (lit. We want a good day for you)

Neither as a lexical verb nor as an auxiliary verb can *enda* be causativized. A summary of the morphosyntactic properties of the two verb uses can be found in Table 3.

Table 3: Comparison of the relevant morphosyntactic properties of the lexical with the auxiliary use of *enda*

	<i>enda</i> _{lexical}	<i>enda</i> _{aux}
bound object marking	yes	no
passive	yes	no
reciprocal	yes	no
neuter	yes	no
causative	no	no
applicative	yes	no

4.3 *rika* and *itika*

Like *enda*, *rika* is used as a lexical verb and as an auxiliary. As a lexical verb it means ‘to get into/ sink’ (27a), while as an auxiliary it is used to express inceptive aspect (27b).

- (27) a. *Nĩ=ma-a-rik-ir-e* *mũ-taro.*
 FOC=2PL-PST-get.into-PFV-FV 3-trench
 ‘They got into the trench.’
- b. *Ma-a-kiny-ir-e* *ma-kĩ-rik-a* *kũ-in-a.*
 2-PST-arrive-PFV-FV 2-NARR-start-FV 15-sing-FV
 ‘They arrived and they started to sing/ singing.’

Inceptive aspect is a subtype of phasal aspect. This type of aspect indicates “whether an action begins, continues or ends” (Longacre 1976, 238). In addition to the inceptive aspect, ‘durative’ and ‘terminative’ are two other subtypes of phasal aspect (e.g., Longacre 1976, 238; Noonan 2007, 139–140; Croft 2022, 559–560). Besides *rika*, inceptive aspect can also be expressed by using the auxiliary *itika* (28). The two AVCs have the same meaning and, as the comparison of (27b) and (28) shows, can be used at least partially with the same infinitives. We cannot make any statements about frequency differences or other differences between the constructions at this point, but require a more intensive comparative study of both AVCs. First we deal with the grammatical behaviour of *rika* and then we move on to *itika*.

- (28) *Ma-gĩ-itĩk-a* *kũ-in-a.*
 2-NARR-AUX-FV 15-sing-FV
 ‘And they started to sing/ singing.’

The two uses of *rika* differ again with regard to their complement. As a lexical verb, *rika* takes an NP complement, whose head can be a noun of any noun class but not an infinitive. As an auxiliary, *rika* combines with infinitives only. The complement NP of lexical *rika* has the usual object properties: it can be pronominalized by a bound object marker (29a) and it can become the subject of a passive construction (29b). This is different for the infinitive complement in the auxiliary usage. As with the other auxiliary verbs, it should be noted here that the infinitive cannot be pronominalized by a bound object marker nor can it serve as the subject of a passive construction.

- (29) a. *Nĩ=ma-a-ũ-rik-ir-e.*
 FOC=3PL-PST-3-get.into-PFV-FV
 ‘They got into it (e.g., the trench).’
- b. *Nĩ=ũ-a-rik-ir-wo.*
 FOC=3-PST-get.into-PFV-PASS
 ‘It (e.g., the trench) was got into.’

According to Benson (1964, 386), *rika* is polysemous. He assigns both meanings attested in (27) to the same lexeme. We deviate from Benson’s analysis and argue that diachronically both forms belong together, but synchronically we can observe that the two forms have different

morphosyntactic properties. As a consequence, we assume the existence of two clearly distinguished lexemes: an aspectual auxiliary verb and a lexical one. Evidence for this is, among other things, that in the aspectual construction no pronominalization of the infinitive is allowed and the verb cannot be passivized. Furthermore, *rika* can be causativized as a lexical verb (30a), but not as an auxiliary. And, as with the other auxiliaries discussed above, lexical *rika* is compatible with the reciprocal marker (30b) as well as the neuter marker (30c), but not in its auxiliary usage.

- (30) a. *Ma-ma-rik-i-ir-i-e* *mũ-taro.*
 2-2-get.into-CAUS-PFV-DC-FV 3-trench
 ‘They made others to get into the trench./ They dipped them into the trench.’
- b. *Thaburia* *nĩ=ci-a-rik-an-a.*
 10.cooking_pot FOC=10-PST-get.into-RECP-FV
 ‘The cooking pots have got into each other.’
- c. *Mũ-taro* *nĩ=ũ-ra-rik-ĩk-a.*
 3-trench FOC=3-PRS-get.into-NEUT-FV
 ‘One can dip into the trench.’ (lit. The trench is dippable/ can be deepened.)

Neither use of *rika* licenses an applicative marker.¹¹ A summary of the morphosyntactic behaviour or object properties and voice of both uses of *rika* can be found in Table 4.

Table 4: Comparison of the relevant morphosyntactic properties of the lexical with the auxiliary use of *rika*

	<i>rika</i> _{lexical}	<i>rika</i> _{aux}
bound object marking	yes	no
passive	yes	no
reciprocal	yes	no
neuter	yes	no
causative	yes	no
applicative	no	no

Itĩka, in its auxiliary verb usage, is derived from the verb *ita* ‘to pour’. The auxiliary contains the neuter voice marker *-ĩk*, which, like the passive marker in the case of *korwo*, can be considered lexicalized. In the following examples, we compare the auxiliary verb usage of *itĩka* with the neuter voice form of the lexical verb.

It(iĩk)a differs in its lexical usage from *rika* in that it also licenses an applicative marker (31a). Reciprocal marking is possible, as shown in (31b).¹² The examples in (31c) and (31d)

¹¹ There exists a verb form that morphologically appears like *rika* with an applicative morpheme (*rikĩra*), but has the meaning ‘to get deep into.’, i.e., for instance, into a philosophy or religion, meaning to get a better understanding. We analyse this as a derivational function of the applicative marker, which derives a new lexeme and thus does not present the relevant valence-increasing usage that we are exclusively considering.

¹² The example has an antipassive interpretation but it can also have a reciprocal reading, if, for instance, water is pouring simultaneously from different sources (e.g., fountains). In the latter case, we can retain a locative object

show that the applicative argument has object properties. However, *itĩka* is an intransitive verb due to the presence of the intransitivizing neuter marker. Unlike *rika*, valency-increasing morphology has to be added to *itĩka* to add an object argument (this, however, is different for *ika* which is a transitive verb). If valency-increasing morphology is realized, both bound object marking and passivization of the verb are possible. Unlike *rika*, however, *itĩka* does not license a morphological causative. The examples in (31) have consistently shown that the verb licenses the neuter marker.

- (31) a. *Maaĩ nĩ=ma-ra-itĩk-ĩr-a i-higa.*
 9.water FOC=9-PRS-pour-APPL-FV 5-rock
 ‘Water is pouring on the rock.’
- b. *Maaĩ nĩ=ma-ra-itĩk-an-ĩr-a*
 9.water FOC=9-PRS-pour-RECP-APPL-FV
 ‘The water is pouring (on something).’
- c. *Maaĩ nĩ=ma-ra-ri-itĩk-ĩr-a.*
 9.water FOC=9-PRS-5-pour-APPL-FV
 ‘Water is pouring on it.’
- d. *I-higa nĩ=rĩ-ra-itĩk-ĩr-wo nĩ maaĩ.*
 5-water FOC=5-PRS-pour-APPL-PASS by 9.water
 ‘The rock is being poured on by water.’

As an auxiliary, *itĩka* behaves exactly like *rika*: valency-increasing morphology is not possible, nor is valency-decreasing morphology (passive, reciprocal, neuter) or pronominalization of the object argument licensed. The impossibility of realizing the neuter marker may, of course, simply be due to the fact that it has already been realized formally. However, since the same restriction is observed with the other auxiliaries – which do not bear reflexes of this marker – we do not attribute the restriction to the form of the auxiliary but consider it as a general restriction of auxiliary verb usages in Gĩkũyũ.

Table 5: Comparison of the relevant morphosyntactic properties of the lexical with the auxiliary use of *itĩka*

	<i>ita</i> _{lexical}	<i>itĩka</i> _{aux}
bound object marking	yes	no
passive	yes	no
reciprocal	yes	no
neuter	yes	no
causative	no	no
applicative	yes	no

argument *i-higa-inĩ* ‘on the rock’ (lit. 5-rock-LOC).

4.4 Decategorialization of the auxiliary verbs

In Sections 4.1– 4.3 we compared the auxiliary verbs *korwo*, *enda*, *rika*, and *itika* with their corresponding lexical verbs in terms of voice morphology and the object properties of the complement. We summarize the results in Table 6.

Table 6: Comparison of the relevant morphosyntactic properties of the lexical use and the auxiliary use of the three verbs under discussion.

	<i>kora</i> _{lex.}	<i>korwo</i> _{aux.}	<i>enda</i> _{lex.}	<i>enda</i> _{aux.}	<i>rika</i> _{lex.}	<i>rika</i> _{aux.}	<i>ita</i> _{lex.}	<i>itika</i> _{aux.}
bound object marking	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no
reciprocal	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no
neuter	no	no	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no
passive	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no
causative	no	no	no	no	yes	no	no	no
applicative	no	no	yes	no	no	no	yes	no

The lexical verbs differ from each other with regard to the licensing of voice morphology. Each of the four lexical verbs – unlike *hūra* ‘beat, hit’ (see Section 3) – has restrictions regarding its combination with causative and/or applicative morphology. Irrespective of the idiosyncratic restrictions of the lexical verbs, which may at least partially result from the verb meaning, none of the auxiliary verbs licenses valency-related morphology. This difference is not noticeable between *kora* and *korwo*, but the other auxiliary verbs definitely prove it. It is most clearly observed in bound object marking and passivization, as both are possible with all the lexical verbs examined, but not with the auxiliary verbs.

The auxiliary verbs show signs of internal decategorialization (Narrog and Heine 2021, 73), namely “loss of the ability to be inflected and to take on derivational morphology”. We can say that the auxiliary verbs have a smaller paradigm than their corresponding lexical verbs. Since our analysis was limited to only one area of verbal morphology, we cannot make any statement about how advanced the internal decategorialization of the four auxiliary verbs is. The auxiliary verbs also show signs of external decategorialization (Narrog and Heine 2021, 75) in the form of an “increasing dependence on some other form”. For all four auxiliary verbs, it is required that the finite complement (with *korwo*) or the infinitive (with the other three verbs) be obligatorily realized in order to obtain a complete predication. The reason is that the auxiliary verbs are semantically defective and require an eventuality-denoting expression as their complement. As a consequence, auxiliary verbs form a complex predicate with the finite complement/infinitive. We refer to this as the non-subject complement of the auxiliary.

An essential aspect of external decategorialization is that the relationship between the verb and its non-subject complement changes. Lexical verbs take object arguments as complements. In the case of auxiliary verbs, however, the complement no longer has any object properties, as it has syntactically become part of the predicate complex. It still complements the auxiliary verb, but the semantic relation between the two has changed and with it the syntactic status. This is accompanied by a detransitivization of the verb, as it now only takes one argument instead of two. The next step in the development is a categorical change in the complement: instead of an NP – with an infinitive as head – the auxiliary requires a verb. We can represent this development as follows:

(32) NP > NP_{inf} > VERB

We have no direct evidence to support the intermediate step – the change in the complement from NP to NP_{INF} – in the diachronic development of *korwo* AVCs. Indirect evidence is provided by the auxiliarization of *enda*. As a lexical verb, *enda* can be combined with NPs, NP_{INF} and also verbs as complements. As an auxiliary verb, *enda* only combines with NP_{INF}. As an auxiliary, *enda* is thus categorically more restricted than as a lexical verb. The reason is that *enda* with a verbal complement is a biclausal structure, whereas AVCs are monoclausal. The detour via a restriction to NP_{INF} before combining an auxiliary with other verbs can therefore be seen in the fact that biclausal structures are avoided in this way.¹³ We will not discuss the process(es) that create monoclausal from biclausal structures but there exists an extensive literature on this issue which the reader is referred to (e.g., Harris and Campbell 1995 and Bentley and Eythórsson 2004, among others).

4.5 Auxiliary verb constructions are complex predicates

We claimed above that AVCs are complex predicates. Butt (1997, 108) lists the following definitional characteristics for complex predicates:

- The argument structure is complex (two or more semantic heads contribute arguments).
- The grammatical functional structure is that of a simple predicate. It is *flat*: there is only one subject, one object, etc.

We mentioned above that auxiliary verbs only license one argument, even if the corresponding lexical verbs are transitive. The infinitive or finite verb complement has no argument status. The only required argument is the subject, which is only marked on the auxiliary verb in the *rika*, *enda*, and *itika* AVCs, and on the auxiliary verb plus the complement in the case of the *korwo* AVCs. The infinitive complements do not allow subject marking morphologically, as the infinitive marker occupies the subject slot. However, the requirement of the *korwo* AVCs' for the subject argument to be marked on the auxiliary verb and on the verb complement is identical. Thus, the AVC has only one subject.

Any existing non-subject arguments of the AVC are licensed by the complement. Depending on the valency of the complement, different numbers of non-subject arguments can be realized. We illustrate this with the auxiliary verb *rika*. In (33a) we have an infinitive derived from the intransitive verb *rîra* 'to cry'. Accordingly, no object argument can be realized. The addition of a post-verbal NP results in an ungrammatical sentence. In (33b), on the other hand, we have a transitive verb *ina* 'to sing something', so that a post-verbal NP (*rwîmbo* 'sing') is licensed.

¹³An alternative is that biclausal structures are reinterpreted as monoclausal. Since *kora* as a lexical verb does not occur with a verbal complement, we exclude this as a plausible scenario for the auxiliarization of *korwo*. An anonymous reviewer noted that our conclusion was "a bit too hasty." As the reviewer writes: "If the auxiliary *korwo* originated from a passive construction meaning 'be found that V', its development may have followed a resultative or inferential path, distinct from the inceptive and prospective auxiliaries. This could explain why it combines with a finite verb rather than an infinitive. The compatibility of *korwo* introducing or relating clauses can also be seen in its conditional use." We agree that this is not only a plausible scenario, but also one that fits well with conditional use. However, in order to decide which of the scenarios is most plausible, a more detailed study is needed that tests the different predictions using adequate (historical) language data.

- (33) a. *Ka-hĩĩ* *ga-kĩ-rik-a* *kũ-rĩr-a*.
 12-boy 12-NARR-AUX-FV 15-cry-FV
 ‘And the boy began to cry.’
- b. *Nĩ=ma-a-rik-ir-e* *kũ-in-a* *rw-ĩmbo*.
 FOC=2-PST-AUX-PFV-FV 15-sing-FV 11-song
 ‘They began to sing a song.’

The fact that AVCs have a joint argument structure in which each grammatical function is only assigned once is also shown by the valency-related morphology discussed in this paper. So far, we have shown that bound object marking and voice marking are not possible on the auxiliary verb. Instead, however, both can be realized on the infinitive or verbal complement.¹⁴ In (34a) we can see that the object argument of the infinitive can be pronominalized.¹⁵ In (34b) we can see that passivization of the object argument is possible. Passive marking occurs on the infinitive and the passivized argument is realized as the subject of the AVC (as well as being realized by the subject marker on the auxiliary).

- (34) a. *Nĩ=ma-a-rik-ir-e* *kũ-rũ-in-a*.
 FOC=3PL-PST-AUX-PFV-FV 15-11-sing-FV
 ‘They began to sing it.’
- b. *Nĩ=rũ-ra-rik-ir-e* *kũ-in-wo* *nĩ mũ-tumia*.
 FOC=11-PST-AUX-PFV-FV 15-sing-PASS by 1-woman
 ‘It [e.g., a song] was begun to be sung by the woman.’

The same applies to causative morphology, as shown in (35a). The causative is marked on the infinitive; the argument marked on the auxiliary verb is interpreted as the causer (i.e., the one causing the singing). The causee *andũ* ‘people’ does not have to be realized overtly. The sentence has several interpretations, including a causative interpretation and the reading ‘to conduct a song’. In (35b), the argument extension is also shown by the realization of the applicative morpheme on the infinitive.

- (35) a. *Ma-a-rik-ir-e* *kũ-in-ithi-a* (*a-ndũ*) *rw-ĩmbo*.
 2-PST-AUX-PFV-FV 15-sing-CAUS-FV 2-people 11-song
 ‘They began conducting the song/ They were making the people sing the song/
 They were leading the people to sing the song.’

¹⁴ For reasons of space, we illustrate this using the *rika* AVCs as an example, but the other AVCs discussed in this article have the same properties.

¹⁵ If the bound object marker is analysed as object agreement, (34a) can be analysed as a clear instance of a ‘split inflectional pattern’ (Anderson 2006, 2011a, 806–808, 2011b, 38–42), in which subject information is marked on the auxiliary verb and object information on the lexical verb. Arguments against an analysis of the bound object marker in Gikūyū are given in Fleischhauer (2023a), so we do not adopt the ‘split inflectional analysis’ for (34a).

- b. *Nĩ=ma-a-rik-ir-e* *kũ-in-ĩr-a* *a-geni* *rw-ĩmbo*.
 FOC=3PL-PST-AUX-PFV-FV 15-sing-APPL-FV 2-guest 11-song
 ‘They began to sing a song for the guests.’

The data show not only that the auxiliary verb and the complement have a joint argument structure, but also that all valency-related properties can be realized in AVCs. However, the realization takes place on the semantic head of the construction, i.e., the complement. There is a plausible explanation for this. We have already shown in the discussion of the auxiliary usage of *enda* in Section 4.2 that although the auxiliary verb does not allow reciprocal marking, the marker is possible in the infinitive. This can be justified semantically, since it is not the aspectual meaning specified by the auxiliary that can be performed reciprocally, but rather the eventuality denoted by the infinitive. The fact that the reciprocal marker is realized on the infinitive and not on the auxiliary is thus motivated by the principle of relevance (Bybee 1985). As Bybee et al. (1994, 22) write: “Relevance is the extent to which the meaning of a grammatical category affects the inherent meaning of the lexical stem with which it is associated.” Since it is the eventuality denoted by the infinitive that is reciprocally performed, the realization of the reciprocal suffix in relation to the infinitive and not the auxiliary is most relevant. The same applies, of course, to the other voice categories, since they either directly affect the eventuality denoted by the infinitive (i.e., represent it as caused or introduce another participant affected by the eventuality) or foreground the participants involved in this eventuality (i.e., foregrounding of the object argument in the passive or neuter voice).

5 Light verbs

In Section 4, we argued that auxiliary verbs exhibit both internal and external decategorialization. In this section, we argue that light verbs are desemantized, but show no signs of decategorialization compared to their corresponding lexical verb – also called ‘heavy verb usage’ in the literature (see Riccio and Fleischhauer 2025). Since we argue that light verbs are not auxiliary verbs, the question arises as to what grammatical status they then have. We follow Butt and Geuder (2003) and Butt and Lahiri (2013), among others, and treat them as lexical verbs, so that lexical verbs have a light and a heavy verb usage. Accordingly, in this section we contrast light verbs with the heavy usage of the same lexical verbs (heavy verbs for short).

Light verb constructions, like AVCs, are complex predicates, but differ from AVCs in that they take neither an infinitival nor a verbal complement. Rather, their complements can only be NPs with lexical nouns as heads. Illustrative examples are given in (36). The light verb *hũra* ‘beat, hit’ takes different nouns – e.g., *thimũ* ‘phone’, *nguo* ‘clothes’, and *baĩni* ‘fine’ – as complements and denotes eventualities that are determined by the nouns.¹⁶ The eventuality denoted is not arbitrary and can be derived from the noun’s meaning – e.g., it is the event in which *thimũ* ‘phone’ plays a salient role as an instrument, or in which it fulfils its actual function. For reasons of space, we cannot go into the details of semantic composition here, as our focus is on

¹⁶ Light verb constructions are an underrepresented topic in Bantu linguistics. In addition to a study on Gĩkũyũ (Fleischhauer and Kihara 2025), there are several studies on LVCs with the light verb *piga* ‘hit, beat’ in Swahili (Olejarnik 2009, 2011; Martin 2019). The extent to which Gĩkũyũ has other light verbs besides *hũra* cannot be answered at this point due to a lack of relevant research. However, *piga* LVCs are comparable in various respects to the *hũra* LVCs examined in this paper. This allows for a contrastive comparison with corresponding constructions in Swahili (see Fleischhauer and Kihara 2025).

a comparison of the grammatical properties of LVCs with those of AVCs (but see Fleischhauer and Riccio 2025, 10–11 for a brief, informal discussion).

- (36) a. *Mũ-tumia nĩ=a-ra-hũr-a* *thimũ.*
 1-woman FOC=1-PRS-beat-FV 9.phone
 ‘The woman is making a call.’
- b. *Mũ-tumia nĩ=a-ra-hũr-a* *nguo.*
 1-woman FOC=1-PRS-beat-FV 10.clothes
 ‘The woman is washing the clothes.’
- c. *I-goti nĩ=ri-a-hũr-ir-e* *mũ-ndũ* *baĩni.*
 5-court FOC=5-PST-beat-PFV-FV 1-person 9.fine
 ‘The court fined the person.’

Jespersen (1942), who coined the term, proposed that light verbs are semantically empty. Such a position is still sometimes held; for example, Anderson (2011a, 811) writes that “the ‘light’ verb merely serves as an inflectable verbal stem or a kind of dummy placeholder to bear obligatory verbal inflectional material in order to render the clause grammatical and well-formed”. However, numerous studies have shown that light verbs are not semantically empty. Rather, they contribute to the meaning of the complex predicate (e.g., *Aktionsart* or phasal aspect, but also passive voice meaning; see Bower 2008; Butt 2010; Butt and Geuder 2003; Fleischhauer and Neisani 2020, among others; see also the literature cited in Riccio and Fleischhauer 2025). At this point, we therefore deviate from Jespersen’s and Anderson’s position and assume that light verbs are semantically reduced (compared to the corresponding lexical verbs) but not semantically empty. This is important to note because Anderson argues that certain complex predicates in Hindi/Urdu should be analysed as AVCs and not LVCs, “since the verb under consideration adds a functional specification to the overall formation” (Anderson 2011a, 811; see also Anderson 2006, 17). In our view, this is not a sufficient criterion for characterizing a complex predicate as an AVC rather than an LVC. Although we do not present a precise definition of the terms ‘light verb’ and ‘light verb construction’, we think that they can be distinguished from AVCs – at least in Gikūyū – on the basis of morphosyntactic properties (but see Fleischhauer and Riccio 2025, 14 for a definition of the term ‘light verb construction’).

We have already discussed the grammatical properties of the heavy verb corresponding to the light verb *hũra* in Section 3. With regard to the valency-based properties addressed in the current analysis, *hũra* shows no restrictions in its heavy verb use: the object can be pronominalized by a bound object marker and can become the subject by passivization; applicative and causative morphology is licensed by the verb and leads to an increase in valency. Reciprocal and neuter marking result in valency reduction and can be added to the verb stem.

In its light verb usage, *hũra* shows no grammatical differences from its heavy verb usage. To illustrate this, we take the LVC *hũra thimũ* ‘to make a call’ in (36a) as an example. In (37) we see that *thimũ* can be pronominalized, so the noun must be realized as right-dislocated. Pronominalization creates an intensifying function that we cannot currently explain and that does not show up in other LVCs.

- (37) *Nĩ=a-ra-mĩ-hũr-a, thimũ.*
 FOC=1-PRS-9-beat-FV 9.phone
 ‘S/he is (really) calling the phone regularly. / He is calling extensively.’

The example in (38a) shows that *thimũ* can become the subject of a passive construction, so the nominal complement of the light verb has direct object properties. In (38b), we see that a reciprocal marker can be realized with the light verb. As the translation indicates, the reciprocal marker can result both in a reciprocal interpretation and in an antipassive one.

- (38) a. *Thimũ nĩ=ya-a-hũr-wo.*
 9.phone FOC=9-PST-beat-PASS
 ‘A phone call was made.’
 b. *Nĩ=ma-a-hũr-an-ĩr-a thimũ.*
 FOC=2-PST-beat-RECP-APPL-FV 9.phone
 ‘They have called each other. / They called someone on behalf of other people.’

The neuter marker *-ik* is incompatible with the LVC *hũra thimũ*. The realization of the marker leads to a heavy interpretation of *hũra*, and the sentence takes on a patient-oriented potential reading (‘The phone is not going through’ lit. The phone is not beatable; cf. 8c). However, the neuter marker is compatible with other *hũra* LVCs, such as *hũra bairi* ‘to fine someone’ (39a). Unlike *hũra thimũ*, *hũra bairi* is ditransitive. *Bairi* ‘fine’, which is part of the complex predicate, is not affected by the neuter marker, but the patient argument becomes the subject (for a more detailed discussion of the LVC *hũra bairi*, see Fleischhauer and Kihara 2025).

- (39) a. *I-goti nĩ=rĩ-a-hũr-ir-e mũ-ndũ bairi.*
 5-court FOC=5-PST-beat-PFV-FV 1-person 9.fine
 ‘The court fined the person.’ (Fleischhauer and Kihara 2025, 95)
 b. *Ma-ti-ngĩ-hũr-ĩk-a bairi.*
 3PL-NEG-POSS-beat-NEUT-FV 9.fine
 ‘They cannot be fined.’

Finally, we see in (40) and (41) that the light verb allows applicativization and causativization.

- (40) *Mũ-tumia nĩ=a-ra-hũr-ĩr-wo thimũ nĩ nyina.*
 1.woman FOC=1-PRS-beat-APPL-PASS 9.phone by 1.mother
 ‘The woman is being called by her mother.’
 (41) *A-tũ-hũr-ith-ir-i-e thimũ ci-a tũhũ.*
 1-2-beat-CAUS-PFV-DC-FV 10.phone 10-ASSOC useless
 ‘S/He had made us make useless calls.’

The examples discussed in this section show that the valency-related morphology that cannot be realized with auxiliary verbs can be realized with light verbs. Unlike AVCs, however, LVCs

do not allow this type of morphology to be realized on the complement, as they are genuine nouns and not nominalized infinitives. Thus, the only option is to have this kind of marker realized on the light verb. If we now compare light verbs with auxiliary verbs, we see that although both are desemanticized – in comparison to the corresponding lexical verb /heavy verb – the grammatical restrictions that we find with *korwo*, *rika*, *enda*, and *itĩka* do not apply to the light verb *hũra*. Thus, there are no signs of decategorialization of the light verb with regard to the properties examined.

6 Conclusion

Gĩkũyũ has various verbal lexemes which, in combination with a verbal root – realized either as a verb or as an infinitive – form a monoclausal construction which differs aspectually from the use of the verbal root as the (only) finite element in the sentence. We have summarized these uses under the term ‘auxiliary verb’, whereby we have used the label for all four verbs examined, *korwo*, *enda*, *rika*, and *itĩka*, in an idealizing way. Auxiliarization, however, is a gradual process (Anderson 2011a, 797), at the end of which there is a highly grammaticalized auxiliary whose use is conventionalized. We do not observe this in the auxiliaries examined in Gĩkũyũ. Accordingly, it would also have been possible to use a label such as ‘semi-auxiliary’ or ‘quasi-auxiliary’ to indicate that the auxiliarization process is still ongoing. Due to the lack of clear criteria for differentiating between genuine auxiliaries and ‘semi-’ or ‘quasi-auxiliaries’ (see Bolinger 1980: 297), we have refrained from using such a terminological distinction.

With regard to auxiliarization, we have considered two processes: desemanticization and decategorialization (we have not addressed the related process of context extension; see Heine 1993, 48–52; Narrog and Heine 2021, 57–66). We operationalized desemanticization – as a result and not as a process – as ‘semantic defectiveness’, i.e., the loss of the denotative meaning (and thus also the denoted eventuality) of a verb. Both auxiliary verbs and light verbs prove to be semantically defective. Both are thus – in the result reading – desemanticized. Whether the semantic defectiveness of light verbs is the result of a desemanticization process is disputed in the research literature (see Butt and Lahiri 2013). For our argument, however, it is only central that ‘semantic defectiveness’ is a feature that auxiliary verbs share with light verbs and that distinguishes both from lexical verbs (heavy verb usages).

A comparison of valency-related properties has shown that auxiliary verbs exhibit morpho-syntactic constraints that their corresponding lexical verbs do not possess. We attributed these restrictions primarily to changes in the verb-complement relationship. While the non-subject complement of lexical verbs has argument status – even if it is realized by an infinitive – it has no argument status in the AVCs. However, it remains a complement in the sense that it is required as a necessary supplement to complement the predication. Auxiliary verbs and their complements form complex predicates.

We have interpreted the morphosyntactic differences between auxiliary verbs and their corresponding lexical verbs as decategorialization resulting from the formation of the complex predicate. Light verbs show no signs of decategorialization, although they also represent complex predicates. The central difference between AVCs and LVCs, however, is that the complement of an auxiliary verb is (at least originally) verbal in nature (whether a finite or nonfinite verb), whereas light verbs take NPs with genuine nouns as heads as their complements. In his definition of the term ‘light verb’, Jespersen (1942) writes that the function of the light verb is to license a noun as a predicative element and to realize verbal features that the noun cannot trivially carry. Jespersen is right about this aspect: since the light verb combines with a non-verbal

element, it must itself carry the relevant verbal features, which cannot be realized in any other way than via the light verb. Therefore, we argue, light verbs show no signs of decategorialization, since otherwise there would be a loss of verbal functions (e.g., increase in valency) that cannot be compensated for (similarly Anderson 2011a, 812). In the case of auxiliary verbs, the decategorialization of the verbs is compensated for by the fact that the affixed morphology can be realized at the semantic core – which is also relevant for licensing the arguments. This means that AVCs do not lose any functionality compared to lexical verbs. This also reflects the greater relevance of finite complements or infinitives compared to auxiliaries for the realization of voice-related markers.

Based on the results of the present study, we make the following generalizations (for Gĩkũyũ) for the categories ‘auxiliary verb’ and ‘light verb’:

1. Auxiliary verbs always show signs of decategorialization resulting from the fact that they form a complex predicate with their complement.

Accordingly, we would terminologically restrict the term ‘auxiliary verb’ to verb usages that show signs of decategorialization.

2. Light verbs never show signs of decategorialization although they form a complex predicate with their complement.

Although we use the term ‘complex predicate’ for both constructions, the analysis shows that they are two fundamentally different types of complex predicates, which require a clear terminological distinction between ‘auxiliary verb construction’ and ‘light verb construction’.

Whether light verbs are an intermediate step in the development of auxiliaries – desemantized but not yet decategorized – is left open at this point. We also cannot make any statements about the specific grammaticalization path and can only indicate the order of the steps in which the auxiliary formation of the verbs discussed took place. The reason is that we do not have any historical data for Gĩkũyũ that would allow us to draw conclusions about earlier uses of auxiliaries or light verbs.

We see the present study as a prelude to a better understanding of the categories ‘auxiliary verb’ and ‘light verb’ in Gĩkũyũ, but also in general, and hope that it inspires further studies investigating the categories of auxiliary verbs and light verbs from a contrastive and cross-linguistic perspective. Thus, the next steps in order to test whether the generalizations made above form valid language-specific or, in the best case, cross-linguistic categories, will involve examining additional desemantized verbs – both in Gĩkũyũ and in other languages – regarding the presence of possible signs of decategorialization.

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Abbreviations

APPL: applicative, ASSOC: associative, AUX: auxiliary, CAUS: causative, DC: dislocated element, FOC: focus marker, FV: final vowel, IMPF: imperfective, INF: infinitive, LOC: locative, NARR: narrative tense, NEG: negation, NEUT: neuter, PASS: passive, PFT: perfect, PFV: perfective, PL: plural, PRS: present, POSS: possibility, PST: past, RECP: reciprocal, SG: singular, Arabic numbers: noun classes

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