The reanalysis of argument structure: changing light verbs

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Argument structure is sometimes seen as the most stable cross-linguistically and diachronically: similar verbs have similar theta-roles. However, if one thinks of argument structure in terms of light verbs (as in Hale & Keyser and others), variation is expected. In this paper, I will look at one change in argument structure in detail, namely *psych*-verbs in the history of English, and will briefly mention a few other changes involving the inventory of light verbs.

It is well-known from the literature (e.g. Allen 1995) that Object Experiencers are reanalyzed as Subject Experiencers, as between (1) and (2).

(1) *Þa   bodan   us   færdon*   =ObjExp
     the   messengers   us   frightened
     `The messengers frightened us.' (OED, Ælfric *Deut* i. 28)
(2) We **feared** the messengers.   =SuExp

This is not only true in English but in other Indo-European languages as well. The paper then demonstrates (a) that Object Experiencers are constantly renewed through external borrowing and internal change and (b) that Subject Experiencers are reanalyzed as Agents. For instance, verbs such as *worry* meant 'to kill by strangling/compressing the throat' in Old and Middle English, as in (3), with an Agent and Theme and is reanalyzed as an experiencer verb in contemporary English. Likewise, the verb *thrill* meant `to pierce', as in (4).

(3) Harald ... threwe hym to the grounde and had **wyried** hym with his hondes
     (OED, 1387 Trevisa tr. R. Higden Polychron. VII. 534)
(4) & scharp lance þat **thrilled** Ihesu side. (OED, c1330 Mannyng Chron.)

Examples of Experiencers reanalyzed as subjects are given in (5) and (6).

(5) I **am liking** private life a lot right now. (COCA Spoken 2009)
(6) Wall Street is **fearing** a bloodbath (COCA Magazine 2007)

The paper then turns to an investigation of possible factors relevant in the change. I look at the appearance of light verbs and reflexive objects in Middle English and ambiguous contexts (as known from Fischer & van der Leek's 1980 work). As a descriptive framework, I use a vP shell without necessarily adhering to an exo-skeletal view of the lexicon-syntax connection, as in e.g. Borer (2005). The conclusion is that, as the morphological causative is lost, there is a restructuring of this vP and in the inventory of light verbs.