

Lesson 9

Verb Complexes

Promises

Bé

Type-of-Sentence Word: Promise

Up until this point, we've only seen “bíi” the Type-of-Sentence word introducing declarative sentences—ordinary statements. We now have a second: “bé,” which introduces a promise. Similarly to Evidence Words, when making a series of connected sentences that would all use the same Type-of-Sentence word, it need not be repeated for each sentence—unless for emphasis.

Along with the Type-of-Sentence word, “bé” (said as a promise), we also get a verb, “díbé” (to promise), which is an entirely appropriate verb to include in our vocabulary for this lesson. Of course “díbé” is also a perfectly fine noun, meaning “a/the promise.”

When Suzette Haden Elgin created Láadan, she created a word “bédi” (promise); the second generation developing Láadan, as part of a systematic approach to Type-of-Sentence communication verbs, considers that word as obsolete, replaced with “díbé.” This allows the application of the Mood Suffixes to the Type-of-Sentence part of the speech verb. We won't be using “bédi” in these lessons, but you may want to recognize it when you see it.

Examples

Bíi aril hal le wa.

I will work.

Bé aril hal le wa.

I will work (a promise).

Bíi ril hal le wa.

I work.

Bé ril hal le wa.

I work (a sworn statement).

Bíi eril hal le wa.

I worked.

Bé eril hal le wa.

I worked (a sworn statement).

Note that in standard English a promise always refers to the future—except that a small child who has not internalized this rule may say something to the effect of “I promise I didn't break the dish!” to mean that she is stating on her honor that someone else must have been to blame. This usage is an error in English, but is perfectly normative in Láadan. A “promise” made referring to present or past events simply means that the speaker is making the statement under oath.

Verb Complexes

[(Aux) Verb Complex (Neg) CP–S]

dom

to remember;
remembering

dush

to have to; to be
obligated; must

néde

to want; wanting; desire

nédeshub

to intend; intention

nime

to will; to be willing;
willingness

thad

to be able; ability

them

to need; need

ul

to hope; hope

The sequence “to want + to VERB” in Láadan forms a single unit called a Verb Complex, which is used just like an ordinary verb. The auxiliary goes before it, the negative follows it, and nothing can go between its two parts. Since two verbs are used, both must be marked plural if either is.

Linguistic note: The underlying form here is that of an embedded sentence whose subject is the same as the subject of the sentence as a whole. An example of this would be the sentence “I want to help you.” Its underlying structure is the sentence “I want [I help you],” with “I help you” as the embedded sentence. It is common practice in such cases among human languages to drop the duplicate subject of the embedded sentence. In English we usually substitute “to” in that place; in Láadan we treat the two verbs as a Verb Complex. We will address other types of embedded sentences in Láadan in other lessons.

There are many verbs in addition to “néde” (to want) that can become the first element in a Verb Complex; some of these form the bulk of our vocabulary for this lesson.

Examples

Bíi di le wa.

I speak.

Bíi dush le wa.

I have to.

I must.

Bíi dush di le wa.

I have to speak.

I must speak.

Bíi aril medathim lezh wa.

We will needlework.

Bíi aril methad lezh wa.

We will be able.

Bíi aril methad medathim lezh wa.

We will be able to needlework.

Notice that the Auxiliary marking time applies equally to both verbs in the Verb Complex. If we need to put different times on the two verbs, a different type of embedding would be required. We will study the other types of embedding in future lessons.

Bíi rilrili dibé ne wa.

You might promise.

Bíi rilrili dibé ra ne wa.

You might not promise.

Bíi rilrili yod ne wa.

You might eat.

Bíi rilrili yod ra ne wa.

You might not eat.

Bíi rilrili dibé yod ne wa.

You might promise to eat.

Bíi rilrili dibé yod ra ne wa.

You might not promise to eat.

You might promise not to eat.

You might not promise not to eat.

Notice that the Verb Complex structure in the negative does not allow the speaker to disambiguate whether the negative applies to the first or second verb. There are other types of embedding that will; we will study them in future lessons.

Bíi eril lalom le wa.

I sang.

Bíi eril néde lalom le wa.

I wanted to sing.

Bíi eril nalalom le wa.

I began to sing.

Vocabulary

be

he/she/it (third person pronoun, not gender-marked, singular)

du-

Prefix (verb): try to VERB

Note that “be,” the third person pronoun, is not gender-marked. This means that it does not carry the meaning of “he” (marked as male) or “she” (marked as female); neither is it the neuter “it,” (marked as *neither* male *nor* female). Just as with “with” (person), you can specify that a given pronoun refers to a female or a male by use of the suffixes “-izh” (female) or “-id” (male); thus “behizh” and “behid” (remember the “h” to separate the vowels) would mean “she” (explicitly female) and “he” (explicitly male), respectively. Because Láadan’s native gender-neutrality can be difficult to render in English, we sometimes resort to “X” to translate the problematic “be;” more often, we supply a gender based on context.

And, as may by this time go without saying, along with “be” (X, singular) come “bezh” (X, few-to-several: 2 to 5) and “ben” (X, many: more than 5). The gender suffix, if used, would be attached to the already-formed plural: bezhizh, bezhid, benizh, benid. No “h” need be inserted in these forms, as the plural forms already end in consonants.

Note that the prefix “du-” (try to VERB) seems in the English to be the first element of a Verb Complex. In Láadan, however, it is just another prefix that can be used to modify any verb. Others we’ve seen of this type include “na-” (begin to VERB) and “ná-” (continue VERBing).

Exercises

Translate the following into English.

1 Bí eril néde lalom Therísha wa.

E: _____

2 Bí aril mehul medi withizh wáa.

E: _____

3 Bí aríli medom mehal ra Thíben waá.

E: _____

4 Bí ril methem mehina lezh wa.

E: _____

5 Bí eríli héeya yod éesh wáa.

E: _____

6 Bé menédeshub meym lezh wa.

E: _____

Transform the following into Verb Complex form & translate into Láadan.

7 William promised [William follow].

E: _____

L: _____

8 Would that Margaret be able [Margaret be strong].

E: _____

L: _____

9 The horses are willing [the horses be quick].

E: _____

L: _____

10 Anthony may not have to [Anthony be warm].

E: _____

L: _____

11 Long ago, Elizabeth hoped [Elizabeth laugh].

E: _____

L: _____

12 Nobody needs [nobody be busy].

E: _____

L: _____

Translate the following into Láadan.

13 I will remember to think (a promise).

L: _____

14 Of course mice are afraid to be slow.

L: _____

15 May the parents intend to be good.

L: _____

16 Anna will not be willing to be cold.

L: _____

17 Suzette and Marsha don't want to be correct.

L: _____

18 The cow long ago began to be large.

L: _____

Did you notice that #18 is a “trick question?” It doesn't actually involve a Verb Complex. Instead we have a prefix to impart a meaning that might be mistaken for a Verb Complex.

Answers

- 1 Theresa wanted to sing.
- 2 A woman will hope to speak.
- 3 Steven will, long hence, not remember to work—I'm told, but I doubt it.
- 4 We-few need to sleep.
- 5 A sheep was, long ago, afraid to eat, I'm told.
- 6 We-few intend to be safe (a promise).
- 7 William promised to follow.
Bíi eril dibé doth Wílem wáa.
- 8 Would that Margaret be able to be strong.
Bíi wil thad do Mázhareth wa.
- 9 The horses are willing to be quick.
Bíi ril menime meralóolo omid wo.
- 10 Anthony may not have to be warm.
Bíi rilrili dush owa ra Átheni wi.
- 11 Long ago, Elizabeth hoped to laugh.
Bíi eríli ul ada Elízhabeth wáa.
- 12 Nobody needs to be busy.
Bíi them shóod rawith wa.
- 13 Bé aril dom lith le wa.
- 14 Bíi mehéeya melóolo edemid wi.
- 15 Bíi wil menédeshub methal thul wa.
- 16 Bíi aril nime rahowa ra Ána wáa.
- 17 Bíi ril menéde medóon ra Shuzhéth i Másha wa.
- 18 Bíi eríli narahíya dithemid wáa.