Three-Participant Serial Verbs in LFG: A Papuan Case Study

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Serial verb constructions (SVCs) have proven to be a challenge for our notions of syntactic and semantic composition, and their frequent occurrence has resulted in a proliferation of diverse explanations for the phenomenon, which consequently, has led to an influx of unnecessary variation and inconsistency across analyses. While SVCs have received much attention elsewhere, analyses couched within the framework of LFG have been rare (Bodomo 1997, Andrews & Manning 1999, Nordlinger 2005, Seiss 2009, Lovestrand 2018). The present case study seeks to contribute to this area of the literature by proposing that SVCs are rare, and majority of so-called SVCs are merely manifestations of covert coordination or grammaticalized complex predicates.

Serial Verb Constructions SVCs have been reported in West Africa, Southeast Asia, New Guinea, Oceania, Central America, the Amazon, and Creole languages (Givón 1975, Foley 1986, Sebba 1987, Durie 1988, Hale 1991, Seuren 1991, Bisang 1992, Lord 1993, Crowley 2002). SVCs have been characterized as a heterogeneous set of structures that consist of a sequence of verbs, and their objects, juxtaposed without an overt marker for coordination or subordination. These constructions represent a unified event, with identical TAM/polarity/negation, a single intonational contour, and shared arguments (Lefebvre 1991, Durie 1997, Aikenvald 2006, Bowern 2008, Cleary-Kemp 2015, Haspelmath 2016). Depending on the scholar, certain properties are considered to be more or less important than others; object sharing being the most controversial (Baker 1989, Stewart 2001, Seiss 2009). The descriptive literature makes a distinction between asymmetric SVCs, which contain a major and a minor verb, and symmetric SVCs, which contain two or more major verbs; asymmetric SVCs are more frequent than symmetric SVCs. Another distinction is made between nuclear serialization and core serialization, where nuclear SVCs are V-V while core SVCs are V-Obj V-Obj. Majority of the languages in the case study exhibit core-type SVCs, which is often the case for Papuan languages that lack a dedicated lexical item for three-place predicates. In such languages, a three-participant event is typically expressed by juxtaposing two monotransitive verbs along with their objects (Reesink 2008, Foley 1986).

The Serial Verb Problem There is ongoing debate about the definitional criteria, formal properties, and the appropriate use of the term 'SVC'. Haspelmath (2016) speculates the lack of consensus defining SVCs cross-linguistically is due to them being treated as natural kinds and not comparative concepts, leading to the term SVC being applied to different phenomena that do not share the same formal properties. Likewise, Cleary-Kemp (2015) finds the descriptive literature has contributed to an "over-application of the term [SVC]" leading to "potentially obscur[ing] any true universal generalizations about the nature of SVCs" (2015:99). This research will substantiate these claims in an even stronger way by providing evidence that constructions belonging to the category SVC are less frequent than previously described.

The Proposal I propose that the putative class of "serial verb constructions" is in fact three distinct natural classes. The analysis is based on a case study done on Teiwa, Kamang, Imonda, Maybrat, and One. These are five (largely) unrelated isolating Papuan languages that are all purported to make frequent use of verb serialization (Foley 1986, Reesink 2008, Klamer 2010). Particular attention will be given to three-participant serial verbs that express a *give*-relation or a *benefactive*-relation. The focus will primarily be on how the three classes fulfill Cleary-Kemp's (2015) cross-linguistic definition of SVCs, specifically her 'main verb hood criteria'; it emphasizes the lexical autonomy of the verbs and requires the semantic and morpho-phonological properties of the verbs remain unchanged while in the SVC. The analysis focuses on synchronic features of each class, so constructions that share diachronic features with SVCs no longer meet the criteria for the term, and therefore will be treated as different phenomena. Class (A) are constructions with two verbs that come together to form a single predicate; these constructions are rare and would best fit the term Serial Verb Construction. Class (B) constructions are covertly coordinated Vs or VPs, and Class (C) constructions are monoclausal constructions with functional items such as light verbs or auxiliaries that arise via grammaticalization of a verb.

Class (A) ***Serial Verb Constructions***	Class (B) ***Asyndetic Coordinated V/VPs***	Class (C) ***Grammaticalized Multi-Headed Constructions***
2(+) lexical verbs	2(+) lexical verbs	1 lexical verb or 2(+) light verbs
1 event	2(+) events	1 event
Asymmetric object extraction	No asymmetric object extraction	Asymmetric object extraction
No connective, pause, linker	Connective, pause, linker possible	No connective, pause, linker
Same subject; Same Object	Same subject; Different Objects	Same subject; Same Object
Same TAM, intonation, negation	Different TAM, intonation, negation	Same TAM, intonation, negation
Mavea, Koro, Paamese	*Maybrat, One*	*Kamang, Teiwa, Imonda*

Analysis One of the challenges to composing SVCs in LFG is their violation of the Principle of Uniqueness, which requires each instantiation of a PRED value to be treated as unique. More than one PRED value results in a *PRED clash* which has to be resolved via predicate decomposition. The resolution proceeds in two steps. The first step is resolving the clash with the *Restriction* operator following Kaplan & Wedekind (1993). The use of the *Restriction* operator allows the f-structures of two verbs to share all attributes besides their PRED values, thus no violation of the Principle of Uniqueness. After eliminating the PRED clash, the PREDs then have to be combined. The attribute *FN* (Kaplan & Maxwell 1996, King 1997, Asudeh et. al 2013) allows reference to certain parts of a PRED, in this case the named function, and outputs only that component so they can be combined. For example, if the PRED value is 'kick < .. >', then the PRED FN is kick. Only the constructions in Class (A) will result in a *PRED clash* and be composed via predicate decomposition. The f-s in (1) contains the complex PRED 'go-find <SUBJ,OBJ>' comprised of the lexical verbs *la* 'go' and *kah* 'find', both verbs contribute to the semantic content of the sentence and share the same roles for the arguments.

(1)
$$\begin{bmatrix} \text{PRED} & \text{'go-find <SUBJ,OBJ>'} \\ \text{MOOD} & \text{IRR} \\ \text{SUBJ} & \begin{bmatrix} \text{PRED} & \text{'pro'} \\ \text{NUM} & \text{PL} \\ \text{PERS} & 1 \\ \text{EXCL} & + \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{OBJ} & \begin{bmatrix} \text{PRED} & \text{'betelnut'} \\ \text{NUM} & \text{SG} \\ \text{PERS} & 3 \end{bmatrix} \end{bmatrix}$$

(2) Class (A) Asymmetric SVC in Koro
yourun k-a la
1PL.EXCL IRR-NON.SG go.to:ANDAT
kah pamei
find betelnut
'We are going to go and look for betelnut'
(Cleary-Kemp 2015:6.38)

Class (B) will be analyzed with the traditional LFG accounts for coordination. The categorial level (i.e., "height" in the tree) of the coordination will vary within this class, but in theory even two roots can be coordinated. In the case of (3-4), since both verbs are monotransitive and the agent is the only shared argument, the coordination starts below TP.

(3)
$$\left\{ \begin{bmatrix} \text{PRED} & \text{'take <SUBJ,OBJ>'} \\ \text{TENSE} & \text{PRES} \\ \text{SUBJ} & \begin{bmatrix} \text{PRED} & \text{'pro'} \\ \text{NUM} & \text{SG} \\ \text{PERS} & 2 \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{OBJ} & \begin{bmatrix} \text{PRED} & \text{'tobacco'} \\ \text{NUM} & \text{SG} \\ \text{PERS} & 3 \end{bmatrix} \end{bmatrix}, \begin{bmatrix} \text{PRED} & \text{'give <SUBJ,OBJ>'} \\ \text{TENSE} & \text{PRES} \\ \text{SUBJ} & \begin{bmatrix} \text{PRED} & \text{'pro'} \\ \text{NUM} & \text{SG} \\ \text{PERS} & 2 \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{OBJ} & \begin{bmatrix} \text{PRED} & \text{'him'} \\ \text{NUM} & \text{SG} \\ \text{PERS} & 3 \end{bmatrix} \end{bmatrix} \right\}$$

Class (B) Asyndetic Coordinated VPs in Maybrat

(4) N-o tapak n-e ait
2-take tobacco 2-give 3SG.M
'Take the tobacco and give (it) to him' (Dol 2007:218)

Class (C) constructions typically contain one lexical verb plus a grammatical head that introduces the extra argument. In (5-6), *-an* 'give' maximally selects for a subject and a recipient object, the morpheme *ma* 'come' is a non-projecting preposition that introduces the optional displaced theme, *sen* 'money'.

(5)
$$\begin{bmatrix} \text{PRED} & \text{'give <SUBJ,OBJ>'} \\ \text{TENSE} & \text{PST} \\ \text{SUBJ} & \begin{bmatrix} \text{PRED} & \text{'person'} \\ \text{NUM} & \text{SG} \\ \text{PERS} & 3 \\ \text{DIST} & + \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{OBJ} & \begin{bmatrix} \text{PRED} & \text{'my.father'} \\ \text{NUM} & \text{SG} \\ \text{PERS} & 3 \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{ADJ} & \left\{ \begin{bmatrix} \text{PRED} & \text{'come <OBJ>'} \\ \text{OBJ} & \begin{bmatrix} \text{PRED} & \text{'money'} \\ \text{NUM} & \text{SG} \\ \text{PERS} & 3 \end{bmatrix} \end{bmatrix} \right\} \end{bmatrix}$$

Class (C) Grammaticalized Asymmetric SVC in Teiwa

(6) Ui ga'an u sen ma
person 3SG DIST money come
n-oma' g-an
1SG-father 3SG-give
'That person gave money to my father' (Klamer 2010:42)

Summary A fine-grained analysis into the purported SVCs within the five languages reveals that none of them have constructions belonging to Class (A), with most if not all instances of the purported SVCs being variations of Class (C). This project builds on the claims (and attempts to avoid the concerns) of Haspelmath and Cleary-Kemp, by revealing how surface isomorphisms can be misleading and the importance of careful grammatical analysis. It is the isomorphisms among these three classes that has been the source of complications in previous work, leading many to claim these very different constructions form a single (heterogeneous) syntactic class, contrary to fact.

References

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