Serial Verb Constructions: 
a distributional and typological perspective

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Illinois Language and Linguistics Society 7
April 17th, 2015
Serial Verb Constructions (SVCs)

• Examples from Sranan (Sebba, 1987: 43, 46):

  (1) A waka go na wowoyo.
      He walk go LOC market
      ‘He walks to the market.’
  (2) Mi fringi a batra broko.
      I throw the bottle break
      ‘I threw the bottle and broke it.’
History of Research on SVCs

• Earliest observations in the 1800s:

• “The natives [of Fiji] frequently, by compounding verbs, express themselves with astonishing clearness, and force; which cannot be imitated in English.”

   (Hazlewood 1850: p.v-vi)
History of Research on SVCs

• Term “compound or serial verbs” originally used by Balmer & Grant (1929) for Akan (West Africa).
• Term popularized by Stewart (1963) for West African languages.
• Later adopted by others in the 1970s and 1980s for use in other regions and for unrelated languages, often applying the definition loosely.

“a pretheoretical umbrella term… or as a historically faithful term… [not theoretical]” (Zwicky 1990)
History of Research on SVCs

• Substantial variation in the definition today.

• Few broad cross-linguistic comparisons.
• Those that do exist use inconsistent definitions.

• Often cited now is Aikhenvald (2006), which presents a prototype definition due to variation.
Defining Serial Verbs

• Our definition is compiled from over 20 main sources from the history of research on SVCs, identifying trends and finding the core properties.

Technical Definition (1)

- Constructions involving a series of two (or more) different juxtaposed verbs
  - Not joined in a one-word compound verb
  - Each of which could be used independently
  - In a series that may be finite
  - Including not only idiomatic or syntactically frozen collocations,
  - But one verb
    - may be of a limited class
    - and may have "light" (less than lexically full) semantics
- within a single clause
  - With no pause between the verbs,
    - [no orthographic indication otherwise, such as a comma]
  - Prosodic realization of a single predicate, and
  - No clause boundary markers
  - Expressing a single, possibly complex, event
- with no overt operator linking the verbs
  - No coordinator
  - No subordinator
  - No morphological dependency
  - No "serial" linker or general ligature
Technical Definition (2)

• with shared values
  – represented either only once on the first or last verb, or
  – on each verb, for:
    – Tense, aspect and mood/modality
    – Polarity (negation), such that the verbs cannot be negated independently
    – In a shared scope of auxiliaries

• with obligatorily shared arguments:
  – The subject of following verb is the subject or object of preceding verb
  – And each argument is expressed overtly only once in the series

• and potential and expected adjacency for these verbs
  – except for interposed shared arguments

• which may render several different relationships between the verbs including
  – Subordination; and
  – Coordination
Simplified Working Definition

• Serial verb constructions (SVCs) are:
  – two or more juxtaposed verbs
  – with no marker of dependency or linking element
  – expressing a single event in a single clause
  – with shared values for Tense-Aspect-Modality and negation
  – and shared arguments (subject and/or object)
  – encoding various semantic relationships.
Not serial verb constructions:

_Pseudocoordination_

Let’s go **and** see a movie! (English)

- Overt conjunction linking the verbs.
- Similar to SVCs, but does not match definition.
Not serial verb constructions:

Converbs

Hi-ga sizun-de it-ta (Japanese: Shibatani 2003:271)
sun-NOM sink-CONJ go-PAST
‘The sun went down.’

• Overt suffix linking the verbs.

• Similar to SVCs, but does not match definition.
Not serial verb constructions:

**Compound Serial Verb Constructions**

xig + ab + op  
(Pirahã: Everett 1986:301)

take turn go

‘bring back.’

- Compounds, not independent words

- Similar to SVCs, but does not match definition.
Not serial verb constructions:

*Parataxis; Asyndetic coordination*

ka-korro-pakjung nga-majiyn nga-warntadlkpun
SE: he-there-sat SE’: I-shot SE”': I-missed
‘He alighted, I shot and missed.’ (Gunbalang: Harris 1969:42)

- Juxtaposted verbs, but no structural cohesion, no required shared morphology or arguments.
- Similar to SVCs, but does not match definition.
Not serial verb constructions:

• All of those varied constructions have been proposed as SVCs in the literature.

• In fact, “exceptions” have been proposed for essentially every element of the definition.

• We maintain our strict definition to facilitate cross-linguistic comparison.
General Conjunction

• ‘And’ that is used to conjoin both
  – Noun+Noun (“Mother and father”)
  – Verb+Verb (“Sing and dance”)

• And that is NOT the same as ‘with’.
  – For example, Swahili *na* means ‘and’ as well as ‘with’ in the sense of accompaniment.
Feature 64A: Nominal and Verbal Conjunction

This feature is described in the text of chapter 64 by Martin Haspelmath.

Values

- Identity: 161
- Differentiation: 125
- Both expressed by juxtaposition: 15

You may combine this feature with another one. Start typing the feature name or number.
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Abkhaz, Abun, Acehnese, Acoma, Agarabi, Ainu, Alamblak, Alyawarra, Ambae (Lolovoli Northeast), Amele, Apurinã, Arabic (Egyptian), Araona, Arawak, Arop-Lokep, Arrernte (Mparntwe), Babungo, Badimaya, Bagirma, Baka (in Cameroon), BalI-Vitu, Banoni, Basque, Batak (Karo), Bawm, Berber (Middle Atlas), Binin Gun-Wok, Bozo (Tigemxao), Brahui, Brokskat, Buduma, Buma, Burushaski, Busa, Cahuilla, Canela-Krahô, Cantonese, Cayuga, Chamorro, Chechen, Chemehuevi, Chichewa, Chocho, Chukchi, Coahuilteco, Coos (Hanis), Coptic, Dagbani, Dargwa, Degema, Dhaasanac, Dhivehi, Djagugay, Doyayo, Drehu, Dullay (Gollango), English, Erromangan, Evenki, Ewondo, Fijian, Finnish, Fongbe, French, Gapapaiwa, Garo, Georgian, German, Gola, Gooniyandi, Greek (Modern), Greenlandic (West), Guarani, Gujarati, Gunbalang, Gurr-goni, Haida, Hamtai, Hatam, Hausa, Hawaiian, Hebrew (Modern), Hindi, Hixkaryana, Hmong Njua, Hoava, Hungarian, Hunzib, Ika (Arhuaco), Imonda, Indonesian, Iraqw, Italian, Itzaj, Jabêm, Jakaltek, Jaminjung, Japanese, Ju'hoan, Kairiru, Kalkatungu, Kamaiurá, Kambera, Kana, Kannada, Kanuri, Karen (Pwo), Karok, Kashmiri, Kâte, Kera, Ket, Kham, Khanty, Khasi, Khmu', Khoekhoe, Kiribati, Koasati, Kobon, Kolami, Kombai, Korean, Korku, Koromfe, Korowai, Koyraboro Senni, Krongo, Kugu Nganhcarra, Kukú, Kuot, Kutenai, Kwaio, Lai, Lak, Lakhoti, Lamang, Lango, Latvian, Lavukaleve, Laz, Lele, Lepcha, Lezgian, Lillooet, Longgu, Luvala, Maale, Ma'di, Madurese, Maithili, Malayalam, Mam, Mandarin, Mangarrayi, Mangghuer, Maori, Mapudungun, Marathi, Maricopa, Marquesan, Matsés, Maybrat, Mbay, Mbilí, Meinthei, Midob, Mixtec (Chalcatongo), Miya, Mocoví, Mohawk, Monumbo, Mosetén, Mundari, Mupun, Musgu, Mussau, Nabak, Nagatman, Nahuatl (Mecayapan Isthmus), Nahuatl (Tetelcingo), Nambikuára, Navajo, Ndebele (in South Africa), Ndéjébbana, Nelemwa, Nepali, Newar (Dolakha), Nez Perce, Ngalakan, Nhandu, Nias, Nisga, Niufo'ou, Niuean, Nivkh, Nkore-Kiga, Nsenga, Nuaulu, Obolo, Ojibwa (Eastern), O'odham, Oromo (Harar), Otomí (Mezquital), Paamese, Páez, Paiute (Northern), Palawan, Passamaquoddy-Maliseet, Pech, Pero, Persian, Pirahã, Pitjantjatjara, Popoloca (Metzontla), Puluwat, Purépecha, Qafar, Qiang, Quechua (Huallaga), Quechua (Imbabura), Returã, Rotuman, Russian, Saami (Kildin), Saami (Northern), Salt-Yui, Sango, Sangu, Sanuma, Selkup, Sentani, Shoshone, Siar, Sisuwlaw, Slave, So, Somali, Southeast Ambrym, Spanish, Squamish, Sudest, Suena, Sundanese, Supyire, Tab, Tagalog, Taiñof, Tamabo, Tamil, Tarao, Taula, Tepehuan (Southeastern), Teribe, Tetun, Thai, Thompson, Tibetan (Shigatse), Tidore, Tigrinya, Tikar, Tinrin, Tiwi, Tobelo, Tommo So, Totonac (Xicotepec de Juárez), Tsireai, Tsat, Tugun, Tukang Besi, Turkish, Tuvaluan, Tzutujil, Udihe, Udmurt, Uliothian, Upper Kuskokwim, Urubù-Kaapor, Usan, Vafsi, Vietnamese, Walman, Warao, Wardaman, Wari', Wichi (Mataca), Wolof, Yagua, Yaqui, Yawelmani, Yawuru, Yidiny, Yimas, Yoruba, Yukaghir (Kolyma), Zapotec (Quiegolani), Zoque (Chimalapa), Zulu, Zuni, Arapesh (Mountain), Asmat, Barasano, Burmese, Cree (Plains), Daga, Dani (Lower Grand Valley), Grebo, Kayardild, Kewa, Khalkha (Mongolian), Kiowa, Makah, Malagasy, Martuthunira, Maung, Ngiyambaa, Oneida, Rama, Rapanui, Swahili, Wichita, Irish, Selknam
Language Sample

Four criteria for selecting languages in WALS:

• Genetic diversity
• Geographic distribution
• Include some familiar languages (e.g., English)
• Availability of grammatical description
Methodology

• Identify source(s) for a language
  • Usually descriptive grammars
• Locate that source
• Identify relevant morphosyntactic features
• Meet together and check results
• Add to database
• Look for correlations
Distribution of SVCs

250 languages; **109** (red) have SVCs, 44%; **141** (blue) do not.
Another 29 languages without SVCs have **compound SVCs**.
Correlates of SVCs

• This is the first large-scale distributional study of SVCs.
• Many proposals have been made for typological correlations, even for a “serialization parameter” (Baker 1989).
• But not widely tested (plus inconsistent use of the term)

• Morphological type (isolating) said to correlate with SVCs. But this is biased by the definition.

• The data presented here show correlations with word order...
Word order and SVC distribution

- S-V-O languages often have serial verbs (70%)
- S-O-V languages do not (23%).
  - (Statistically significant, p<.0001)

- Why? Probably because S-O-V languages have converbal/absolutive constructions with very similar properties.
  - (of the form *Eating, I left* ‘Having eaten, I left’)

- S-V-O languages rarely have converbal constructions (12%)
- S-O-V languages do (53%).
  - (Statistically significant, p<.0001)
Converbs within S-O-V languages

Total: 43 languages; 20 (red) have conversbs; 2 (blue) have SVCs; 3 (pink) have both; 18 (black) have neither.
Why SVCs in S-V-O languages?

• Recall *pseudocoordination*
  – Its distribution must be a subset of languages with an appropriate conjunction
  – Pseudocoordination shares many properties with SVCs; in fact, the only difference may be the requirement that there is no conjunction linking the verbs in SVCs.
  – Found most often in S-V-O languages.

*Go and get a book; Come and visit us tomorrow.*

*I will try and win the race.*
Pseudocoordination

Total: 32 languages identified with pseudocoordination.

Example: *Go and get; come and see*
Why SVCs in S-V-O languages?

- Does the type of conjunction found in a language correlate with SVCs?
  - In fact, it does, within the S-V-O languages:

- Having a generalized ‘and’ conjunction (as in English) is determined by:
  1. Having a single, overt conjunction used for both noun+noun & verb+verb/ clause+clause
  2. Where that conjunction is not identical to comitative ‘with’

- 59% of languages with a generalized ‘and’ have SVCs
- **81%** of languages without such a conjunction have SVCs.
  - This is marginally statistically significant (p=.0588)
SVCS as multi-verb predicates

• Issues of terminology set aside, SVCS are best thought of as belonging to a larger class of *multi-verb predicates* along with converbal and pseudocoordination constructions
  – (Rephrased, converses and pseudocoordination are types of SVC)

• The distribution of subtypes is determined by typological properties of the surface form of the languages.

• Given that in general languages have similar communicative needs, we can assume similar semantic structures for these constructions. Therefore, languages differ in mapping to form.
Pidgins and Creoles

• Often have SVCs, discussed frequently.
• May be due to history (contact/influence from substrate languages that have SVCs).

• Preliminary study using *Atlas of Pidgin and Creole Structures* (Michaelis et al. 2013); designed like *WALS*.

• Three specific types of SVC identified in the database, other types not considered.
APiCS 84: Directional serial verb constructions with 'come' and 'go'

Nengee: *A subi go anda.*  
he climb go over.there  
‘He climbed over there.’
Pidgins and Creoles

• Including all three types of SVCs in APiCS,
• 53 of 75 languages have SVCs
  – More frequent than in non-pidgin/creole sample.
• More frequent in SVO pidgins/creoles, but not statistically significant (p=0.12)
• No other correlations identified
• May be due to sampling: few pidgins/creoles described, most (directly or indirectly) related.
Sign Languages

• We have not identified any sign languages with general conjunctions. Several have AND but none where it is described as obligatory or even widely used.

• SVCs found:

  **WEIGH CL:SS-PUT-ON-SHOULDERS CL:\-BEND-KNEES-UP-AND-DOWN**

  ‘I do knee bends with weights on my shoulders.’

• Supalla (1990) identified SVCs in ASL with motion verbs, as means of encoding manner and path.
SVCs identified in all but French Sign Language (no information found).
Sign Languages

- SVCs develop without contact from spoken languages with SVCs (ASL, Nicaraguan SL, etc.)

- SVCs appear very common in signed languages, but more research is needed, especially for details of morphology.
Other Correlations with SVCs?
(for fun)
Everett et al. 2015 identify a correlation between *humidity* and *tonal languages*. 
Tonal languages in WALS

Maddieson 2005: white (no tone); pink (simple tone); red (complex tone)
Similar distribution for SVCs...
Tone and SVCs

• Among the overlapping languages in these samples:

  • 35/102 (34%) have SVCs in the no-tone or simple-tone languages.
  • 12/18 (67%) have SVCs in the complex-tone languages.

• This is statistically significant: $p < .02$
  • (But remember, correlation does not imply causation.)
Conclusions

• Establishing a consistent definition allows us to identify SVCs in over 40% of languages.
• Most common in West Africa, Oceania and Southeast Asia, but found all over the world.
• Distribution correlated with word order and other typological properties (like conjunctions).
• Similarity to other constructions may be best accounted for by considering SVCs one form of multi-verb predicate.
• Next step: compare morphological types of languages with and without SVCs.
Thank you!

- Questions?
Bibliography

Bibliography

- Hazlewood, D. 1850. *Feejeean and English dictionary: with examples of common and peculiar modes of expression, and uses of words. Also, containing brief hints of native customs, proverbs, the native names of the natural productions of the islands, notices of the islands of Feejee, and a list of the foreign words introduced.* Vewa, Feejee: Wesleyan Mission Press.

*References for individual languages omitted, available on request.*