Expressing adverbial relations in clause linkage with converses: definitional and typological considerations

Daniel Ross
djross3@gmail.com
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Premise of this talk

- Converbs are often defined as adverbial verb forms

- They should be ideal for research on adverbial clauses

- From the perspective of research on adverbial clauses, however, converbs may not play a major role
  - Partly due to tendencies of limited semantic functions

- Definitional and typological issues are also relevant
Converb example

- Khalkha Mongolian (Haspelmath 1995:1)

  Xot-od or-ž nom aw-aw
  town-DAT go-CONV book buy-PAST

  ‘Going to town I bought a book.’
Defining converbs

- Non-finite verb forms
  - usually suffixed
  - usually missing other verbal inflection

- Dependent on another verb
  - often involved in clause-chaining
  - often occurring before the finite verb

- Definitions used by different researchers vary not only in details but also in core properties; strong disagreement
Defining converbs

• Terminology varies also

• “Converbs” is used commonly, but often confused with similar terms:
  • Gerunds
  • Participles

• Other terms sometimes overlap, depending on usage:
  • “Serial verbs”; “Compound verbs”
  • Medial verbs
  • etc.
Defining converbs

- Converbs can function in:
  - Clause-chaining
    - Nearly independent clauses except for the verb form
    - In some languages this strategy substitutes for finite verb coordination with an AND conjunction
  - Adverbial modifiers within a clause (e.g. circumstance)
  - Complex predicates
    - Not unlike serial verbs, but with one marked dependent verb

- At least if we do not adopt one of the stricter definitions
  - But these vary, and would include different subsets above
Defining converbs

- Introduced by Ramstedt (1902), writing in German about Mongolian, as Latin *converbum*:
  - “Those [verbal forms] that occur only as modifiers of the predicate, never as predicates of complete sentences” (p.3)
  - “...verbal forms that do not function as predicates of an independent clause ... semi-verbal, semi-nominal ... called by others gerunds, gerundives, supines...” (p.55)
- Several types in the language

- This represents primarily the clause-chaining type
Defining converses

• Nedyalkov & Nedyalkov (1987):
  • “A non-combined or prototypical converb (=adverbial participle) may be defined (a) positively – as a verb form related to another verb form, and (b) negatively – as a verb form which does not occur in the position (I) of the predicate of a simple sentence, (II) of the attribute to a noun, (III) of the predicate actant, (IV) of the subjective actant.”
  • Opposed to finite verbs, participles, infinitives and gerunds
Defining converbs

• Haspelmath (1995):
  • “A nonfinite verb form whose function is to mark adverbial subordination” (p.3)

• “According to my definition, [clause-chaining] is not a central, typical use of the converb because it is not really adverbial” (p.8)
Defining converbs

- Rapold (2010):
  - “The term ‘converb’ is used in a bewildering variety of senses, all while the label itself remains little known in mainstream linguistics…”
  - “…generally taken to be dependent verb forms that are neither argumental nor adnominal, i.e. that are – roughly – neither used like a typical noun nor like an attributive adjective.”

- Also provides a good overview of previous definitions
Defining converbs

- Brown & Miller’s (2013) Linguistic Dictionary
  - “A reduced form of verb, lacking tense and often person too, associated with clause chaining.”

- This definition, one of many examples, focuses on one specific use of converbs; not representative
  - Or it may be choosing one popular definition and rejecting the other usage as some linguists do
  - Similar cases are found for other perspectives
Defining converbs

- Role and Reference Grammar provides a useful distinction for juncture types with the features \([\pm \text{embedded}]\) and \([\pm \text{dependent}]\) (cf. Van Valin 1984)

- Coordination is \([-\text{embedded}]\) and \([-\text{dependent}]\)
- Subordination is \([+\text{embedded}]\) and \([+\text{dependent}]\)
- Co-subordination is \([-\text{embedded}]\) and \([+\text{dependent}]\)

- Converbs are \([+\text{dependent}]\) but \([\pm \text{embedded}]\), so they represent either subordination or co-subordination
Laughing, he entered. He started laughing.
The laughing man. Laughing is fun.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English -\textit{ing}</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Laughing, he entered.</strong></td>
<td><strong>He started laughing.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>\textit{Converb}</td>
<td>\textit{Infinitive}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The laughing man.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Laughing is fun.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>\textit{Participle}</td>
<td>\textit{Gerund}</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Typology of non-finite verbs

- Ylikoski (2003) provides a clear and coherent discussion of the differences in these similar verb forms
  - There is often overlap in usage
- Converbs are optional adverbial modifiers
- Infinitives are arguments of verbs
- Participles are deverbal adjectives (adnominals)
- Gerunds (or action nominals) are deverbal nouns
Form vs. function

- There is not always (even rarely) a clear distinction between the different types of non-finite verbs in *form*
  - Consider the extreme English example
  - Or that English has two forms that function as infinitives:
    - start *laughing*
    - start *to laugh*

- Despite this, converbs are typically defined by their form (a verb inflected to indicate dependency)

- We must be careful to distinguish *form* and *function*
Working definition

• A verb form that is not an argument
  • But not necessarily “adverbial”
• Found in at least one of:
  • Clause-chaining
  • Adverbial clauses
  • Complex predicates
• Overlap with other functions is not excluded
• Dependency indicated morphologically
  • and by lack of full verbal inflection
• Productive verb form in the language (not fossilized)
• Typically can appear without an overt subject
Cross-linguistic survey

Based on Haspelmath (2005) and WALS recommended 100-language sample.
Sample based on Ross et al. (2015).
Cross-linguistic survey

34% of the languages have conversbs
Converbs cross-linguistically

- The survey includes prototypical and less usual cases

- Frequency of usage varies greatly
  - English convverb clauses are rare
  - Very common in clause-chaining or medial-verb languages

- The most common type is a “general convverb” but some languages have many different types including semantically specific adverbial types (e.g. purpose)
Converbs cross-linguistically

- Almost all conversbs are suffixal
  - There are several exceptions, but not typical conversbs

- Almost all languages with conversbs are SOV
  - SOV languages tend to have conversbs

- Converb clauses usually occur before independent clauses
Converbs cross-linguistically

• Only three cases of prefixal converses in the sample
  • Coptic, Tagalog, Obolo (all marginal examples of converses)


pag-datíng namin doón, in-iwan namin
GER-arrive we there TNS-abandon we
‘when we arrived there, we abandoned…’

• Overt subject and other properties make this atypical
Converbs cross-linguistically

- While clause-chaining and adverbial cases are traditionally considered core functions, converbs are primarily used in complex predicates in some languages Urarina (isolate, Peru: Aikhenvald 2011:21):

  katɛa rela-a amuemue-kuru-a-lu  
  man teach-“SVC” wander-PL-3-REM
  ‘They wandered around to teach people.’

- This has led to calling these forms “serial verbs”
  - for why this is a problem, cf. Ross et al. 2015
Problematic cases

- Some Ethiopian languages have apparent converses but with inflected verb stems (Amha & Dimmendaal 2006)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Main Verb</th>
<th>Converb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1SG</td>
<td>des-é ‘I study/shall study’</td>
<td>des-ata ‘I having studied’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2SG</td>
<td>des-té ‘you study/shall’</td>
<td>des-tata ‘you having studied’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3MSG</td>
<td>des-é ‘he studies/shall study’</td>
<td>des-amá ‘he having studied’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3FSG</td>
<td>des-té ‘she studies/shall study’</td>
<td>des-tata ‘she having studied’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1PL</td>
<td>des-né ‘we study/shall study’</td>
<td>des-nana ‘we having studied’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2PL</td>
<td>des-tánà ‘you study/shall study’</td>
<td>des-tókámá ‘you having studied’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3PL</td>
<td>des-ánà ‘they study/shall study’</td>
<td>des-kámá ‘they having studied’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hadiyya (Cushitic)

- Although “converb” may be the most appropriate label for these forms, they differ in not being reduced to uninflected forms as in typical converses
Problematic cases

• 4 languages in the survey have what seem like periphrastic converbs, with a separate word (such as ‘with’) rather than an affix marking the form

• Ainu *wa* (<‘and’) has calqued many functions of Japanese *-te* converbs (Ross 2016:226):

```
ku-ku    wa    okere
1SG-drink and? finish
‘I finished drinking.’ (Perfective reading.)
```
Problematic cases

- Narrative/Consecutive/Sequential “tenses”
  - Usually prefixal, widespread in Bantu
  - Similar to converbs?

Swahili narrative *ka* (Mohammed 2001:160)

Wa-li-ondoka wa-ka-ona moto mbele
3PL-PST-leave 3PL-NAR-see fire ahead
‘They left and saw a fire ahead.’
Adverbial functions of converses

• While general converses in clause-chaining may not appear adverbial, when sequential and simultaneous clauses are contrasted, adverbial interpretations are highlighted:

• Yimas and Quechua are examples of this type.

• SEQ: “After Ving, …”
• SIM: “While Ving, …”
Adverbial functions of converbs

• Djabugay (Australia: Patz 1991) has no general converb

• But it has (only) a purposive converb:
  ngawu gulu  minya  giba-l-ala  wayi-lum
  I      this     fish      scale-PRES-now cook-PURP
  ‘I scale this fish now in order to cook (it).’
Adverbial functions of conversbs

• Uradhi (Crowley 1983:378-380) has different subordinate forms built with case markers:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Subordinate adverbial meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Absolutive</td>
<td>Simultaneous temporal clause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ablative</td>
<td>Result clause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genitive</td>
<td>Purpose/use of object clause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dative</td>
<td>Purposive clause</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• These are nominalizations, but they appear to function as conversbs; similar patterns found in other languages, with or without nominalizing morphology
Conclusions

• New terminology suggestion:
  • Use *converb*, *infinitive*, *participle*, and *gerund* for the *functions* that verb forms are used in
  • Regarding the form, call “converbs” *dependent verbs* or more precisely *verbs inflected for dependency*

• Within the functions, we should also distinguish between the different types of usage rather than inconsistently using the single label “converbs”
  • Co-subordinate form in clause-chaining
  • Adverbial subordinate verb
  • Modifying verb in a complex predicate
Conclusions

• Converbs are heterogenous or a very broad category
  • Substantial variation in the languages of the world

• Although adverbial usage is one of several functions, making this the central property of converbs is about as problematic as the grab bag category of “adverbs” itself

• General converbs often indicate temporal subordination
  • Sometimes non-adverbial usage, almost coordination
  • Semantically specific converbs may be used for specific types of adverbial subordinate clauses


Bibliography


Thank you!  Questions?