

The rise and fall of Serial Verb Constructions: Preamble

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Abstract

This is a brief introduction to the special issue of *Stellenbosch Papers in Linguistics Plus*. We present the concept of serial verb constructions (SVCs) conventionally understood as monoclausal sequences of verbs without any overt marker of coordination, subordination, or syntactic dependency. We then focus on the mechanisms at work in the evolution of serial verb constructions, and the investigations of their origin and demise. We introduce the prototype approach to the category of SVCs as the basis of the study of verb serialization throughout the volume and discuss the research strategies applicable to the development of serial verbs in individual languages. The concluding section offers an overview of the volume.

Keywords: Serial verb constructions; diachrony; prototype; dynamization of typology

1. Setting the scene

The diachrony of Serial Verb Constructions (SVCs) – and thus the shape and the properties of the developmental paths linking the origin of these types of grammatical structures to their demise or to their evolution and expansion – is one of the research areas within the scholarship of verbal serialization that is in urgent need of a broad range of systematic and empirical studies.

Indeed, in her comprehensive 2018 monograph, Alexandra Aikhenvald states that “determining the origins of serial verbs is a strenuous task [... since for] no language family in the world do we have enough historical evidence to confidently trace the roots and the development of [these types of] constructions” (Aikhenvald 2021:196). This is particularly true of many African, American, Asian, and Oceanic languages which, on the one hand, tend to abound in serializing patterns, but on the other hand, usually lack written records that would allow us to trace the developmental pathways of SVCs. However, even for languages whose historical evolution is well documented in writing, sometimes going back in time for several

centuries and even millennia – as is true of many Indo-European and Semitic languages – no systematic diachronic studies on SVCs have been carried out thus far.¹

Serial verb constructions, or serial verbs, are conventionally understood as sequences of verbs without any overt marker of coordination, subordination, or syntactic dependency of any sort. Serial verbs are monoclausal constructions describing what is conceptualized as a single event. They share prosodic properties with monoverbal constructions. A serial verb has one tense, aspect, mood, modality, and evidentiality value — that is, one component cannot refer to past and another to present. The components of a serial verb cannot be negated or questioned separately from the whole construction. Each component must be able to occur on its own (a brief survey and a bibliography of serial verb constructions is in Aikhenvald 2018). We return to their further properties and their classification into asymmetrical, symmetrical, and event argument types in Section 2.

Despite the abovementioned dearth of direct diachronic evidence and a similar scarcity of studies dedicated specifically to the evolution of serializing patterns, a number of developmental generalizations have been posited, mostly through comparative methods and synchronic typological research. The first class of these tendencies concerns the **origin** of SVCs and their gradual development towards fully fledged serializing structures (Aikhenvald 2006; 2018; 2021):

- (a) SVCs result either from (i) clause fusion, (ii) verbal modification, or (iii) concurrent grammaticalization.
- (b) While the first two developmental scenarios (i.e., clause fusion and verbal modification) account for the development of both symmetrical and asymmetrical SVCs (see section 2 below), the third scenario (i.e., concurrent grammaticalization) is limited to the emergence of asymmetrical SVCs.
- (c) Asymmetrical SVCs that express direction/orientation, aspect, extent, and change of state develop faster than modal, valency-increasing, and argument-adding SVCs, with SVCs used for comparative, valency-decreasing, and other purposes developing last.
- (d) The emergence of two-component SVCs precedes the development of more elaborated structures involving three or a larger number of verbs.
- (e) Symmetrical SVCs evolve only once asymmetrical SVCs have been developed. In other words, no language has symmetrical SVCs unless it also has asymmetrical ones.
- (f) The emergence of SVCs compensates for the reductive processes affecting inflectional morphology, thus being correlated with the expansion of analytical strategies.

¹ This scarcity of diachronic research on SVCs in the Indo-European and Semitic families may stem from the fact that verbal serialization has generally been associated with the languages of Africa, the Americas, Southeast Asia, and Oceania. In contrast, serial or similar constructions found in Indo-European and Semitic languages have traditionally been classified as different grammatical categories (e.g., hendiadys, auxiliary constructions, Koppelung, pseudo-coordination, coordination, and several others). Only recently, mostly due to the adoption of a prototype-driven approach to verbal serialization, which is a more flexible and gradient and essentialist definition (see section 2 below), these same structures started to be analyzed as subtypes of SVCs.

Evidence related to the development of SVCs after reaching the stage of a fully-fledged SVC, including their **demise** or dissolution into other grammatical categories, is slightly more abundant although the generalizations proposed thus far also rely heavily on comparative and typological research rather than direct diachronic data. The following tendencies have been postulated (Aikhenvald 2006; 2018; 2021):

- (a) The endpoint of the development of asymmetrical SVCs is different from that of symmetrical SVCs: asymmetrical SVCs undergo grammaticalization, while symmetrical SVCs undergo lexicalization.
- (b) Functionally, minor verbs in asymmetrical SVCs tend to evolve into markers of tense, aspect, and modality, including evidentiality, as well as expressions of directional, locative, comparative, and superlative domains.
- (c) During that evolution, minor verbs in asymmetrical SVCs are decategorized: they evolve into auxiliaries, adpositions, particles, conjunctions, complementizers, and a range of bound morphemes, eventually losing their verbal status entirely.
- (d) Symmetrical SVCs develop into lexical units. The two (or more) verbs merge into a single verb, ultimately contributing to the expansion of the verbal lexicon of a language.

Importantly, both during the development towards an SVC and the development from an SVC towards other grammatical categories, the changes, including those specified above, are gradual. This graduality gives, in turn, rise to fuzzy cases characterized by categorial ambiguity and/or forms that allow the association with far more than one grammatical category. Furthermore, although the development of SVCs may be language-specific and constitute a language-internal feature, it may also be genetically motivated (i.e., typical of a family of related languages) and/or due to language contact and areal diffusion.

The present issue of *Stellenbosch Papers in Linguistics PLUS* is the first collection of articles dedicated specifically to the **evolution of SVCs** and their dynamics, in particular the rise and fall of these types of constructions. The exact and narrow aim of this volume is to test the above-mentioned generalizations on a large and phylogenetically, typologically, and geographically diversified language sample. In that manner, we aspire to provide a new body of evidence that could shed more light on how SVCs are evolutionarily and conceptually related to other categories, both those from which they derive and those towards which they evolve.

2. Serial Verb Constructions: the prototype approach

The category of SVCs constitutes an extremely complex phenomenon that encompasses a wide range of diverse constructions. In our view, a prototype approach to linguistic categorization provides the most suitable model that allows one to both preserve the diversity of SVCs attested across the languages of the world and ensure the conceptual unity of the SVC category and its status as an autonomous grammatical taxon.

In accordance with a prototype approach to linguistic categorization (see Evans and Green 2006; Janda 2015), the **prototype** of an SVC is defined cumulatively as a set of features. The inclusion of a feature into the prototype is motivated by at least one of the two reasons. On the one hand, some prototypical features are typologically pervasive, i.e., commonly attested in SVCs found across the languages of the world. On the other hand, some prototypical features are cognitively salient and distinguish SVCs from other grammatical categories most

efficiently. Arguably, all the features included in the prototype tend to converge diachronically. That is, the prototype acts as an evolutionary attractor: SVCs develop towards a state in which all the prototypical properties are instantiated.

The following features have been considered as prototypical and jointly define the prototype of an SVC (Aikhenvald 2006; 2011; 2018; 2021; Dixon 2006):

- (a) A prototypical SVC makes use of (at least) two verbs.
- (b) Each component of a prototypical SVC can be used on their own outside an SVC pattern; that the verbal components may function as full verbs (i.e., semantically robust, referential content lexemes) and predicates of independent clauses.
- (c) The components of prototypical SVCs are not connected through clause combining markers. This thus excludes the presence of coordinators, subordinators, complementizers, or any other markers of syntactic dependency.
- (d) A prototypical SVC exhibits a single value for tense, aspect, and mood/modality, as well as evidentiality, polarity, and illocutionary force.
- (e) The components of prototypical SVCs are marked by the same (or non-conflicting) tense-aspect-mood-modality-evidentiality markers.
- (f) A prototypical SVC exhibits a unitary argument structure. Crucially, the verbal components share their subject referent. Separate subject arguments are thus disallowed.
- (g) In a prototypical SVC, operators of time, place, and manner/instrument/means and similar operate jointly over the verbal components. Conversely, the scope of these operators is not limited to one verb only.
- (h) In a prototypical SVC, subordinating markers and nominalisers are shared by all the verbal components. This means that the use of participial, gerund, and infinitival forms is not limited to one verb only and has scope over the whole construction.
- (i) In a prototypical SVC, the verbal components are not separated prosodically by means of contouring, comma intonation, pause, or any type of bi-phrasal/clausal phrasing.
- (j) The above properties imply that a prototypical SVC attest to mono-eventhood (i.e., it expresses a single event) as well as mono-clausality and mono-predicativity (i.e., it belongs to a single clause in which it forms a single predicate).²

Some properties enumerated above attest to the constructional cohesiveness of an SVC prototype (see (c)-(i)), while a few others reflect the individuality of its formative components and thus somewhat lesser constructional cohesiveness than is the case of, for instance, monoverbal predicates and synthetic tenses, aspect, and moods, modalities, and evidentiality forms (see (a)-(b)).

The prototype is a critical element in the category: it constitutes its conceptual nucleus and a point in relation to which the categorial status of all the other members is measured. Members that instantiate the prototype fully, complying with all or nearly all prototypical features are viewed as **canonical**. In contrast, members that instantiate the prototype minimally, complying with only a few prototypical features are **non-canonical**. Between these two extremes, there is

² For a discussion of the several violations of all the prototypical features introduced in this section, consult Aikhenvald (2006; 2018; 2021).

a cloud of **semi-canonical** members that instantiate the prototype partially, complying with several prototypical features, although neither all nor extremely few. Overall, the prototype structures the SVC category and provides it with a topological model (i.e., spatial visualization). That is, by correlating the extent of compliance of each member with its position relative to the prototype – the more canonical the closer it is to the prototype and, inversely, the more non-canonical the more remote from it, it is – the category adopts the form of a radial network (on radial networks see Evans and Green 2006; Janda 2015).

The canonical, semi-canonical, and non-canonical profiles exhibited by the respective members of an SVC category can be interpreted in dynamic terms as attesting to different evolutionary stages available to SVCs. In general, the more non-canonical an SVC is the more evolutionarily distant it is from the prototype. This distance itself may correspond to and stem from two phenomena. Some cases of lesser canonicity emerge because of an incomplete advancement along the path travelled by SVCs and those constructions' insufficient cohesiveness. As these SVCs appear in stages that precede the stage of the prototype, they are referred to as **pre-canonical**. However, lesser canonicity may also correspond to and stem from an excessive advancement along the path travelled by SVCs and those constructions' excessive cohesiveness. These SVCs appear in stages that follow the stage of the prototype and are therefore referred to as **post-canonical**. The least canonical members, whether of a pre-canonical or post-canonical character, are related to other grammatical taxa; namely, those that are diachronically prior (i.e., from which insufficiently cohesive non-canonical SVCs have derived) and posterior (i.e., towards which excessively cohesive non-canonical SVCs are subsequently developing (Andrason 2019; Andrason & Koo 2020; see also Andrason 2016; Georgakopoulos & Polis 2018).

Among the various types of SVCs, two main classes are distinguished: symmetrical SVCs and asymmetrical SVCs. In an **asymmetrical** type, the verbal components used are semantically uneven. One verb, referred to as a 'major' verb, specifies the type of action or activity that is expressed by the entire construction. This verb constitutes the variable element in the construction and draws from a non-restricted (open) class. The other verb modifies the event expressed by the 'major' verb in terms of aspect, mood/modality, direction/orientation, valency-increasing terms, etc. This verb, referred to as a 'minor' verb, draws from a semantically restricted (closed) class and constitutes the constant element in the construction. In contrast, in a **symmetrical** type, both verbs contribute relatively equally to the constructional behavior of an SVC in the way that "none of them determines the semantic or syntactic properties of the construction as a whole" (Aikhenvald 2006:22). The verbs used in symmetrical SVCs do not draw from semantically and grammatically restricted classes and typically denote a sequence of sub-actions, cause-effect, or manner in which the action is performed. As mentioned in Section 1, both types tend to follow different evolutionary scenarios. Asymmetrical SVCs undergo grammaticalization, whereby the minor verb acquires and/or increases its grammatical function. In contrast, symmetrical SVCs undergo lexicalization, whereby the verbs used develop towards a single lexeme or idiom (Aikhenvald 2006; 2018; 2021).

3. Research strategies

There are two main strategies with which one can study the evolution of SVCs and propose or verify developmental generalizations pertaining to these types of constructions. One strategy is purely diachronic, while the other draws, principally, on the examination of synchrony.

The first, **diachronic**, strategy involves the study of SVCs at different historical periods within the same language. This type of research is the scarcest in SVC scholarship because, as we explained in the introductory section, most languages have not been documented in written texts throughout their history. However, diachronic research is probably the most valuable: it provides direct empirical evidence that reveals how SVCs have changed over more or less extensive time, enabling us to eventually trace the entire grammatical life of these constructions from their origin to death. This strategy is therefore the best technique to test the evolutionary generalizations that have been proposed in any other manner (see the next paragraph), perhaps the only one that can ultimately corroborate, falsify, or nuance them.

The other strategy – or rather cluster of strategies – draws on the method that may be referred to as **dynamization of synchrony** (cf. Jakobson 1962:650-652, Croft 2003). With this strategy, a synchronic state exhibited by an SVC in a specific language at a specific point in time or a collection of such synchronic states exhibited in several languages, are interpreted diachronically and arranged into a sequence. This sequence, in turn, reveals and/or reflects an evolutionary path that these constructions have followed. As mentioned above, the more non-canonical the profile of an SVC is, the more remote from the stage occupied by the prototype and thus any canonical instantiation. If this non-compliance is explained in terms of an insufficiently cohesive SVC profile, the progression towards the SVC prototype is incomplete and that SVC occupies a stage that must precede the stage of the prototype. If non-compliance stems from excessive cohesiveness, that SVC has advanced beyond the stage of the SVC prototype and thus occupies one of the stages that follow the stage of the prototype.

This dynamization of synchrony itself involves three related, yet slightly distinct strategies:

- (a) Dynamization of states exhibited by closely related languages that have been spoken at different periods of time. Such varieties may belong to a linguistic branch or larger family. This strategy may, in some way, involve a diachronic perspective – at least from the family’s perspective – as the varieties compared can document (a) evolutionary trend(s) shared by the members of a certain phylogenetic group across centuries and even millennia.
- (b) Dynamization of synchronic states exhibited by contemporaneous languages and thus temporarily concurrent. Such varieties may be closely related genetically (as in the type explained above), very remotely related, or entirely unrelated.
- (c) Dynamization of a synchronic state exhibited by a single language. In this approach, the state(s) exhibited by an SVC in a specific variety at a specific time is (are) depicted as a semantic map, which in turn can be interpreted diachronically, i.e., matching a certain fragment of the evolutionary path along which this SVC travels (Andrason 2016).

4. Structure of this volume

The organization of the present volume reflects the various strategies enabling one to study the evolution of SVCs, which we introduced in the previous section.

We begin our volume with three articles that provide direct diachronic evidence (see Part 1). Each of these studies demonstrates the development of SVCs in a specific language across a determined period of time. Unsurprisingly, all these languages belong to the Indo-European family – whose history is, as explained previously, extensively documented in written records – specifically, its Balto-Slavic branch. Alexander Andrason, Małgorzata Gębka-Wolak and Andrzej Moroz analyze the history of some SVCs in Polish, Daniel Weiss conducts a similar study on Russian, and Nicole Nau on Latgalian. These three contributions concentrate on constructions which involve the verb ‘take’ in the respective languages and express unexpected and sudden action.³ The authors consider both language-internal and language-external motivations for the creation and expansion of these constructions.

The remaining part of the volume encompasses articles that exploit dynamization of synchrony as their main research strategy. The first group of these works dynamizes the synchrony of related languages that have been spoken at different historical epochs (see Part 2). As the full extent of the time period covered by these languages ascends to one thousand years, this type of dynamization also has a diachronic dimension. The languages studied in this way belong to the North-West branch of the Semitic family – another linguistic family with extensive written records. Alexander Andrason examines the development of verbal serialization in Canaano-Akkadian, Ugaritic, Biblical Hebrew, and Biblical Aramaic. Christian Locatell examines the state of SVCs in Old Aramaic.

The second group of articles making use of dynamization of synchrony exploits purely synchronic states of languages that are attested currently (see Part 3). Daniel Ross and Joel Lovestrand draw their evolutionary generalizations from a genetically, typologically, and geographically diversified sample of 325 languages. Two further articles formulate developmental proposals given the states exhibited by SVCs in closely related languages. Anne-Maria Fehn and Admire Phiri analyze several varieties from Northeastern Kalahari Khoe: Ts’ixa, Danisi, Gloro, Shua, Deti, Tjwao, TcireTcire, and Glabak’e. Lee Pratchett studies Jul’hoan and !Xun from the Ju language complex of the Kx’a family.

The third group of papers focuses on the dynamization of the synchronic states exhibited by SVCs in a single language, and the development of newly emergent serial verbs (see Part 4). Aikhenvald examines SVCs in an Arawak variety, Tariana, a North Arawak language, while Ronald Schaefer and Francis Egbokhare offer an in-depth analysis of Emai, an Edoid language.

At the end of this volume, we and the other authors jointly discuss our main findings and their implications for SVC scholarship. We set out the main points of agreements as well as certain issues where agreement among us is more difficult to reach, thus suggesting possible lines of future research.

³ Similar double verb constructions with the first component ‘take’ have been attested in Portuguese and Spanish (see the discussion Aikhenvald 2021:125, 140, and Coseriu 1966), and also some Finno-Ugric and Turkic languages (Pukkinen 1966; Csató 2001).

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