

1 Introduction

The goal of this presentation is to point to overlooked descriptive work that crucially informs a long-standing debate about how to best explain word order patterns in serial verb constructions.

Serial verb constructions (SVCs), in contrast with prototypical subordinate or coordinate clauses, have the following properties:

- More than one verb
- No linking morpheme
- One TAM and polarity value
- Shared argument(s)
- One event
- Single intonation contour

In an instrumental SVC, what appears to be the grammatical object of one verb is semantically the instrument of the event associated with the other verb. The verb introducing the instrument is usually glossed ‘take’.

Gungbe (Niger-Congo)

- (1) Sétù zé kpò ló xò Kòjò
Setu take stick DET hit Kojo
Setu hit Kojo with the stick. (Aboh 2009:16-17)

Yoruba (Niger-Congo)

- (2) mo fi àdà gé igi nà
I took machete cut tree the
I cut the tree with a machete. (Stahlke 1970:61)

Krio (Sierra Leone creole)

- (3) I tek kɔtlas kil di snek
3SG take cutlass kill DEF snake
He killed the snake with a cutlass. (Nyampong 2015:30)

A verb glossed ‘use’ also commonly introduces the instrument in an instrumental SVC.

Òbòlò (Niger-Congo)

- (4) èmì ñ-sà ògè í-fieě kánám
I 1SG-use knife 3SG-cut meat
I cut the meat with a knife. (Durie 1997:335)

Nupe (Niger-Congo)

- (5) yígbèci lá èbi tun etsu
thief used knife stabbed chief
A thief used a knife to stab the chief. (George 1975:316)

Thai

- (6) sùk cháy phráa khòon tòmáym
Sook use machete cut tree
Sook chopped down the tree with a machete. (Filbeck 1975:120)

There is at least one language where a verb glossed ‘go’ introduces an instrument in an SVC. The same verb can also introduce other types of arguments in SVCs, such as comitative, goal and addressee.

Loniu (Malyo-Polynesian)

- (7) eypwi kile mumum
IRR.2SG-beat IRR.3SG-go poles
Beat it with poles. (Hamel 1993:118; 1994:132)

2 Verb order & iconicity

It has been observed that, in instrumental SVCs which use the verb ‘take’ to introduce the instrument, the ‘take’ verb always precedes the main verb (Muysken 1988; Sebba 1987:144-145).¹

This is true regardless of whether the language is right-headed (VO) or left-headed (OV).

Sranan (Surinamese creole)

- (8) no teki baskita tyari watra
no take basket carry water
Don’t carry water with a basket! (Muysken 1988)

Ijo (Niger-Congo)

- (9) áràú zu ye ákì buru t̀eri-mí
3SG basket take yam cover-PST
She covered the yam with a basket. (Williamson 1965:53)

Muysken (1988) states that the verb order pattern is “forced in SVCs by some extra-syntactic factor like temporal iconicity, semantic principles, or morphological patterning.”

Tai (1985:50), on SVCs in Chinese, proposes the “principle of temporal sequence” which states that “the relative word order between two syntactic units is determined by the temporal order of the states which they represent in the conceptual world.”

Li (1993:500): “Significantly, this linear order reflects the real-world temporal relation between the two subevents represented by these verb phrases: one must take hold of the instrument before doing anything with it.”

Li (1993:480, 502) appeals to a “Temporal Iconicity Condition” which is “a universal condition requiring iconic representation of the temporal relations between two subevents,” and requires that “the constituents involved must be verbal” in order to be constrained by temporal iconicity.

Durie (1997:330): “What is especially significant is the invariance of serial verb sequencing in SVO and SOV languages: in contrast to serialization, complementation varies consistently across these languages types, the complement-taking verb typically preceding its complement in SVO languages and following it in SOV languages. In the light of the typological robustness of serial verb sequencing patterns, it seems implausible that serialization sequencing constraints can receive a general explanation through syntactic accounts alone. One promising line of research seems to be that verb sequencing is often ‘iconic’ in its ordering...”

Others have made similar remarks (e.g., Aikhenvald and Dixon 2006; Bodomo 1997; Lord 1993; Nishiyama 1998)

An apparent exception: Example 10 is a typical instrumental SVC with ‘take’. Example 11 appears to be the same two verb phrases in the opposite order.²

Tetun Dili (Malayo-Polynesian creole)

¹ I have not been able to access a copy of Muysken (1988). Citations from Muysken (1988) are taken from Carstens (2002). Good (2003:399) runs into the same difficulty.

² The word *lori* in example 11 is glossed ‘take’ in the source.

- (10) abó lori tudik ko'a paun
grandparent take knife cut bread
Grandfather cut the bread with the knife.
- (11) abó ko'a paun lori tudik
grandparent cut bread with knife
Grandfather cut the bread with the knife. (Hajek 2006:244)

However, Hajek (2006:244) states that when serial verbs like *lori* appear after the main verb, “they are clearly prepositional: they follow post-verbal TAM markers, always appear in the same position as an oblique PP, and cannot omit or front objects.”

3 Simultaneity & fixed order

Baker (1989:536): “[M]any examples show a degree of fixedness that cannot be accounted for by [temporal iconicity] alone...”. Discussing example 12, he states that “the singing action and the pleasing/benefiting action happens simultaneously... Thus, a functional approach might expect variability in word order in these cases. In fact, the order of ‘sing’ and ‘give’ is fixed in Ijo—and in the same way as it is in Yoruba.”

Ijo (Niger-Congo)

- (12) dúma tun-nì a-pírì
song sing-?? her-give
‘sing a song for her’ (Williamson 1965:35)

Tai (1985) believes that when the subevents of a multiverb construction are truly simultaneous, the verb order should also be interchangeable. The inference drawn from this is that if the verb orders are fixed, the the events are necessarily *not* conceptualized as being simultaneous.

Tai (1985:52): “...it seems clear that in our conceptual world, one has to ride his bike first before he has left a place by riding on a bike. Therefore, it is doubtful that sentences like [example 13] really express simultaneous actions.”

Mandarin Chinese

- (13) Zhāngsān qí jiǎotàchē zǒu-le
John ride bicycle leave-PFV
John left riding his bike.
- (14) *Zhāngsān zǒu-le qí jiǎotàchē
John leave-PFV ride bicycle
for: John left riding his bike. (Tai 1985:52)

Schiller (1989:416): “Here Tai’s explanation is not exactly rejected by Baker, who seems to object because it is possible to construct a semantic analysis in which the actions would not be temporally sequenced... I think that Baker is grasping at straws here. The fact that the VP’s appear in the order that they do makes perfect sense, and Tai’s word-order independent principles of temporal ordering can, indeed, account for these cases.”

Instrumental SVCs with ‘use’: In some languages ‘use’ is in the first position in an instrumental SVC (example 4, 5 and 6). In others it is in the second position, but the order is fixed in any given language. Examples of ‘use’ in the second position occur in Malayo-Polynesian languages.

Taba (Malayo-Polynesian)

- (15) n=pun bobay n=pake sandal
3SG=kill mosquito 3SG=use thong
He killed the mosquito with a thong. (Bowden 2001:299-300)

Kupang Malay (Malay-based creole)

- (16) Dong bekin mati tikus pake batu
3PL make.CAUS die mouse use stone
They killed the mouse with a stone. (Jacob and Grimes 2011:342)

Balinese (Malayo-Polynesian)

- (17) Nyoman namplak Ketut ngganggo lima
Nyoman AV.hit Ketut AV.use hand
Nyoman hit Ketut with his (own) hand. (Wayan Arka, p.c.)

The position of Tai (1985) and Schiller (1989) is that ‘use’ cannot be simultaneous with the other verb in these instrumental SVCs since the verb order is fixed. They must suppose that in some languages ‘use’ is conceptualized as occurring before the other verb, while in other languages ‘use’ is conceptualized as occurring after the other verb.

Good (2003:437): “...such data is probably more indicative of the general fact that serial verb phrases are prone to a type of grammaticalization which renders temporal iconicity irrelevant.”

Good (2003:444): Temporal iconicity “...has a role in their historical development and, therefore, does explain many aspects of their order diachronically, if not synchronically.”

Verb order patterns in instrumental SVCs reflect the influence of temporal iconicity on the diachronic process of grammaticalization. If two verb phrases are related to (sub)events occurring in a sequential order, the order of verb phrases in an SVC becomes fixed in the temporal order.

If the verb phrases are related to simultaneous (sub)events, they can become fixed in either order.

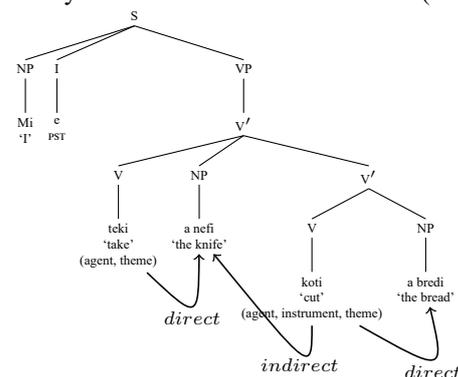
4 Thematic roles

Baker (1989, 1991) and Carstens (2002) both point out that Temporal Iconicity is not a sufficient synchronic explanation of verb order patterns. They offer alternative accounts which crucially depend on the verb which introduces the instrument preceding the main verb.

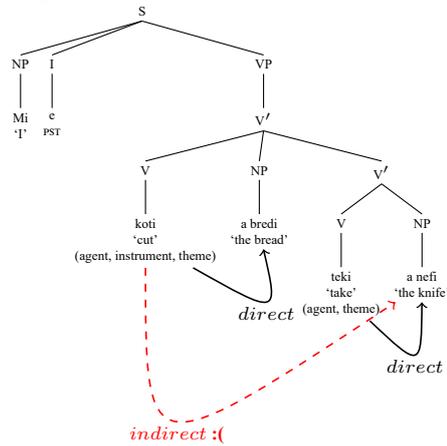
Baker’s (1989) analysis makes three claims about SVCs in order to account for verb order patterns like the one in instrumental ‘take’ SVCs.

- The first verb in SVC is structurally-higher than the second in a “double-headed” structure.
- Internal arguments (including patient and instrument) can be assigned “directly” to a sister node of the verb, or “indirectly” to a sister of one of the verb’s projections.
- Arguments are assigned in the order of a thematic hierarchy: agent > instrument > patient/theme > goal/location.

Analysis of Sranan instrumental SVC (Baker 1989):



Ungrammatical verb order:



Carstens (2002) uses the verb order patterns in SVCs to argue for the “antisymmetry theory” (Kayne 1994).

- All languages have left-headed binary structure.
- Verb order patterns are restricted by an “event structure”.
- Thematic hierarchy: nontheme > theme.

The predication is that, in an instrumental SVC, a verb that assigns both a patient/theme role and an instrument role must follow (and be structurally lower than) the other verb.

The proposals of both Baker (1989) and Carstens (2002) predict that in an instrumental SVC, the verb that introduces the instrument must always precede the verb that “assigns” both a patient and instrument role.

This prediction is shown to be untrue by the data of instrumental SVCs from Malayo-Polynesian languages (examples 15, 16 and 17).

Are they really verbs?: Bowden (2001) has a detailed discussion of the verb ‘use’ in Taba. It can be used on its own:

Taba (Malayo-Polynesian)

- (18) pernah n=**pake** la-we do ada e
 ever 3SG=use sea-ESS REAL with FOC
 Have you ever used it in Australia? (Bowden 2001:328, 448)

However, *pake* “is a fairly recent borrowing from North Moluccan Malay” and “is undergoing a grammaticalization process from serial verb to preposition.”

Taba (Malayo-Polynesian)

- (19) n=**pun** bobay (n=**pake** sandal
 3SG=kill mosquito (3SG=)use/with thong
 He killed the mosquito with a thong.
- (20) (*n=**pake** sandal, n=**pun** bobay
 (3SG=)with thong 3SG=kill mosquito
 It was with a thong that he killed the mosquito. (Bowden 2001:308)

Example 19 **with** the proclitic is unambiguously an SVC.

Example 19 **without** the proclitic is ambiguously either an SVC with an unmarked second verb, or a single-verb construction with *pake* as a preposition.

In example 20, where *pake* and its complement are in a clause-initial position, *pake* is unambiguously a preposition.

In Balinese, verbs are marked with “voice” prefixes that distinguish them from prepositions. The Balinese instrumental SVC in example 17 is marked as ‘active voice’.

5 Conclusion

This presentation enriches the discussion about the role of temporal iconicity in SVCs with interesting data from instrumental SVCs in Malayo-Polynesian languages. These data are interesting because the verb that introduces the instrument (‘use’) follows the main verb.

These data support the view of Good (2003)—that temporal iconicity is a factor in the grammaticalization of instrumental SVCs, but not a synchronic constraint (as Baker (1989) points out).

The same data refute the proposals of Baker (1989) and Carstens (2002) which crucially depend on the verb introducing the instrument argument preceding the verb that “assigns” an instrument role to it.

Further research: Why has ‘use’ grammaticalized into the second position of instrumental SVCs in these Malayo-Polynesian languages?

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Thank you!