

An Afro-Asiatic perspective on the definition of Serial Verb Constructions

Several constructions, in a range of Afro-Asiatic languages, present a classification problem based on the traditional definition of Serial Verb Constructions (SVCs), in part due to the non-concatenative morphology of these languages. SVCs are traditionally defined (cf. Aikhenvald 2006, Haspelmath 2016) as a monoclausal series of verbs which have shared features for Tense-Aspect-Modality and polarity, and are not connected by overt linking elements. Therefore, we can immediately exclude instances of the overt-linker type found in (1) (or converbal complex predicates of Ethiopian Semitic and Cushitic), despite these constructions being functionally similar to SVCs and sometimes called SVCs based on looser definitions:

- (1) qaʕdat wa-katbat (Palestinian Arabic: Gamliel & Mar'i 2015:54–55)
sit.PERF.1SG and-write.PERF.1SG
'I was writing'

Still, there are other cases that are not canonical SVCs but hard to exclude by traditional criteria, requiring us to re-examine the limits of our definition to delimit a coherent phenomenon.

Case 1: In a number of modern colloquial varieties of Arabic there are verb pairs without overt linkers. But it is difficult to determine whether they count as SVCs by definition. One source for such constructions is omitted *wa* 'and' from (1) resulting in IMPF-IMPF or PERF-PERF combinations. Another is verb-complement constructions with differing tense/aspect-marking: if we consider the inflection contranstive in (2), it cannot be an SVC. The variation in this network of related constructions has not yet been fully documented across Arabic dialects.

- (2) ʔaʕad ji-ħki (Jordanian Arabic: Ouali & Al Bukhari 2016:174)
sit.PERF.3MSG 3M-talk.IMPF.3MSG
'He kept talking.'

Case 2: Ait Seghrouchen Berber (Morocco) features *aorist chaining* (Bentolila 1981:151–171; Belkadi 2013:144–146), which is SVC-like except that it is formed with (and limited to) a particular verbal inflection (compare to Arabic above). Some would disqualify such restricted constructions as SVCs (Aikhenvald 2006:45). See also Pullum (1990) on the English “quasi-SVC” *go get* which cannot be inflected: **He go(es) get(s)*.

Case 3: Egyptian/Coptic has a remarkably long history of constructions that appear to fit the SVC template, sometimes in auxiliary-like usage, where two similarly inflected verbs express various functional relationships (Reintges 1995; Grossman 2009). Double-inflection forms recur over time, as if Coptic wants to be serializing, despite limited usage and anomalous semantic types; perhaps these are more like South Asian *Agreeing Verb Constructions* (Hock & Ross 2016) with the form of SVCs but not (necessarily) the same structure.

In conclusion, data from Afro-Asiatic languages can contribute to our general understanding of SVCs because these languages test the limits of the definition in ways that other languages do not. Continued documentation especially of colloquial varieties and dialectal variation is needed. These constructions suggest that the traditional definition of SVCs relies too heavily on *form* over function and structure: it would be productive to establish a wider category including not only the examples from the case studies above but also the overtly-linked multi-verb constructions, while then establishing a typology of subtypes including traditional SVCs.

References

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