Serial Verbs in Malagasy?
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Our knowledge of serial verb constructions (SVCs) is now quite extensive (see e.g., Aikhenvald (2006) and Lefebvre (1991)). To integrate SVCs into syntactic theory we build on Larson (1991) and Li (1991), generalizing as follows: A language will be said to serialize over XPs if it has productive instances of at least one of the following schemata: S1 = [XP XP XP] or S2 = [XP X XP] (order irrelevant). For Larson (1991), SVCs serialize over VP, and for Li (1991) over VP (e.g., Sranan) or AgrP (e.g., Miskito). Here we examine SVCs of the S1 type in Malagasy (VOS; W. Austronesian) and argue that Malagasy serializes over TP, thereby enriching the typology of SVCs crosslinguistically.

SVCs are found in many West African, Amazonian, Southeast Asian, and Oceanic languages. SVCs involve two or more adjacent Vs/VPs that are not linked by an overt coordinator or subordinator. The Vs/VPs jointly express a single event or state, semantically they have the same tense/mood (usually just marked once per SVC), and they share at least one argument (Hamel, 1993). S1, [XP XP XP], yields expressions interpreted as XPs in coordination or as one or both XPs modifying the other. The following sentences in Malagasy exemplify S1 (with serialized XPs bracketed):

(1) a. [mihinana] [mitsangana] Rabe  b. [nangina] [tsy niteny]  izy
   PRES.AT.eat PRES.AT.stand Rabe   PAST.AT.quiet  not PAST.AT.speak 3.NOM
   ‘Rabe eats (while) standing up.’
   ‘He was quiet (and) didn’t speak.’

The sentences in (1) are taken to be SVCs on the grounds that no subordinator may intervene between the Vs, and, while inserting a coordinator would be licit, there are restrictions on (1a,b) such as tense and voice-matching that are not restrictions on coordinative structures in Malagasy (Keenan, 2000).

These serializations differ from better known SVCs in that: [i] all the Vs are overtly marked for the same tense; [ii] all Vs that mark voice are marked for the same voice, Actor Topic (AT); [iii] the Vs always share the same subject, but only the subject; [iv] the Vs may take independent complements, as in (2); [v] the Vs may be (near) synonyms and are often reversible, as in (3a,b); [vi] each V retains its own meaning and could grammatically stand alone as the only V; [vii] the whole serialization or a single XP in the serialization may be contained within predicate-framing particles, e.g., the concessive construction na dia…aza (‘even…though’) or Neg…NPI tsy…intsony (‘not…any longer’), as in (4) (particles bolded); and [viii] each VP may independently take adverbs and negation, as in (1b) and (5).

(2) [niandrandra ny lanitra] [niangavy famonjena] aho
   PAST.AT.look-up-at DET sky PAST.AT.ask-for help 1.NOM
   ‘I looked up at the sky (and) asked for help.’

(3) a. samy [nitomany] [nigogogogo] indray izy ireo
   all  PAST.AT.cry PAST.AT.sob  again 3.NOM DEM.PL
   ‘They all cried (and) sobbed again.’
   b. samy [nigogogogo] [nitomany] indray izy
   all  PAST.AT.sob PAST.AT.cry  again 3.NOM
   ‘They all sobbed (and) cried again.’

(4) ... na dia [efa lasa] [tsy hita intsony] aza izy ireo
   even already-gone NEG seen any-longer though 3.NOM DEM.PL
   ‘...even though they were already gone (and) not seen any longer.’

(5) Ny sasany moa [nihanahana] [nijery fotsiny]
   DET some EMPH PAST.AT.do-nothing PAST.AT.watch only
   ‘Some however did nothing, only watched.’
Both ‘even…though’ and ‘not…any longer’ frame the TP of a clause, excluding only the external argument (Pearson 2005). Thus (4) accomplishes three things: it indicates that each individual XP in serialization is a constituent, that the whole serial construction together is a constituent, and that XP is TP.

The structure of SVCs is highly debated; within modern syntactic frameworks, attention has mostly been given to the S2 type of SVC, $[\text{XP} \ X \ \text{XP}]$, in which it seems that one XP is the complement of the head X of the other XP (Aboh 2009). In the S1 SVC, one XP (usually VP) is taken to be an adjunct to the other (Larson 1991). Our proposed structure adopts this latter view of SVCs in order to explain the interpretation of the second V, which is an that of an adverbial or coordinate to the first V(P).

Our analysis is guided by two further analytical observations: first it would be impossible to serialize just VP in Malagasy, since all regular verbs cannot appear bare and must be inflected for voice and tense; thus, the minimal XP for serialization must be TP, as only TP includes all the necessary inflectional morphology to create a well-formed verb. Second, all subjects are topicalized in Malagasy (Pearson, 2005), so the subject will be outside both of the TPs being serialized; as such, a single DP subject in an A’ position would naturally be shared across the TPs. The following (largely simplified) structure results:

(6) Structure of serialized TPs in Malagasy

The Agent of the matrix TP (TP1) raises to an A’ topic position; TP2 is an adjunct to TP1 and contains a null pro, which gets its reference from the closest c-commanding DP (the Subject/Topic in (6)). This structure captures the fact that all phenomena that can occur in a TP (e.g., negation) can occur in the scope of one or both TPs in serialization. Further, this structure derives the AT constraint on SVCs: if pro in TP2 were in any position but the highest thematic position in VP, then there would be illicit TP-internal coreference between pro and the next highest argument, instead of the desired coreference with the Subject/Topic; since TP2 must be in AT, then so must TP1 to avoid conflicting subject theta roles.

Under our analysis, the differences between Malagasy and classical SVC languages lie in the high point of serialization in Malagasy, at TP, while other SVC languages serialize lower, at AgrP or VP. If AgrP and VP serializations are considered SVCs, TP serialization may be considered a type of SVC, too.

References