

## The rise and fall of Serial Verb Constructions: Finale


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## Abstract

This article concludes the special issue of *Stellenbosch Papers in Linguistics Plus* dedicated to the diachrony of Serial Verb Constructions. The authors of the ten contributions included in the volume discuss the most important results of their studies and suggest the possible lines for future research.

**Keywords:** Serial verb constructions; pseudo-coordination; juncture; diachrony; dynamization of typology

## 1. End of a journey

The special issue of *Stellenbosch Papers in Linguistics Plus* focused on the evolution of serial verb constructions (SVCs). By using diachronic and/or dynamically interpreted synchronic data from a large and diversified language sample, we tested several evolutionary generalizations that had previously been formulated in scholarship (Aikhenvald 2006; 2011; 2021; see Andrason & Aikhenvald t.v.).<sup>1</sup> We believe that the volume has reached its objective and provided a new body of evidence, direct and indirect, that demonstrates how

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<sup>1</sup> The abbreviation ‘t.v.’ stands for ‘this volume’.

SVCs emerge, how they develop, and how they ultimately disperse into other grammatical categories.

## **2. Results**

Each of the ten contributions included in this volume offered important insights into the evolution of SVCs in the language(s) or the language family that it examined. In this section, we present those results of our studies that expand beyond specific languages or families and are relevant for the evolutionary typology of SVCs. All such results pertain to five main areas: motivations for the development of SVCs, the variation of SVCs, their sources and endpoints, as well as methodology with which the development of SVCs can be researched.

### Motivation

- In many instances, the formation and subsequent development of SVCs constitute, exclusively or principally, language-internal and/or family-internal phenomena. This means that verbal serialization may be a phylogenetic trait that characterizes a given branch of related languages (Andrason t.v.; Andrason, Gębka-Wolak & Moroz t.v.; Fehn & Phiri t.v.).
- However, language contact between languages which are less closely related, in a distant genetic relationship, or not demonstrably related at all, may also be the main cause of the creation of SVCs. This transfer invariably involves pattern borrowing (Aikhenvald t.v.; Weiss t.v.). Accordingly, serializing patterns – although of different degrees of advancement on the path of grammaticalization – are typical of a determined geographic area rather than language family (Aikhenvald t.v.; Andrason, Gębka-Wolak & Moroz t.v.; Fehn & Phiri t.v.; Pratchett t.v.; Weiss t.v.)
- In several, perhaps even in most instances, the motivation for the development of SVCs is complex. That is, it may be attributed to internal and external factors and thus constitute a genetic and areal feature (Aikhenvald t.v.; Andrason, Gębka-Wolak & Moroz; Fehn & Phiri t.v.).
- In addition to idiosyncratic language-internal development on the one hand and contact-induced change on the other, language-independent inferential processes also play a role in motivating the development of SVCs. This is seen, for example, in the set of repeatedly occurring semantic and syntactic inputs and outputs of SVCs (summarized below). These common trajectories point to common cognitive motivations which are not language specific (Andrason t.v.; Locatell t.v.).

### Variation

- Languages tend to exhibit a spectrum of multi-verb construction types. In particular, if a language has an SVC in its repertoire – or a number of them – it often has other types of structures that, from a constructional perspective, are less cohesive in form and thus less canonical in comparison to the SVC prototype. These other multi-verb constructions are juncture-verb and pseudo-coordinating constructions (Andrason t.v.; Andrason, Gębka-Wolak & Moroz t.v.; Fehn & Phiri t.v.; Locatell t.v.; Pratchett t.v.; Nau t.v.).

- At least in the languages studied in this volume, this variation (juncture-verb construction, pseudo-coordination, and SVC) seems to suggest that all such construction types are related diachronically forming a chain from less cohesive to more cohesive (Andrason t.v.; Andrason, Gębka-Wolak & Moroz t.v.; Fehn & Phiri t.v.; Locatell t.v.; Pratchett t.v.; Nau t.v.).
- The grammaticalization process may involve the gradual lifting of restrictions not related to the degree of cohesion, such as negatability or aspectual pairedness (Andrason t.v.; Andrason, Gębka-Wolak & Moroz t.v.; Wiess t.v.).

### Sources

- The data presented in this volume indicates that, in several languages, SVCs – and their less cohesive predecessors – emerge from the fusion of two clauses, syndetic or asyndetic (Andrason t.v.; Andrason, Gębka-Wolak & Moroz t.v.; Locatell t.v.; Weiss t.v.).
- In cases of clause-fusion origin, in languages with overt coordinators, the most common predecessor of SVCs is syndetic pseudo-coordination, which results from earlier conjunctive coordination (Andrason t.v.; Andrason, Gębka-Wolak & Moroz t.v.; see also Fehn & Phiri t.v.; Pratchett t.v.; Weiss t.v.). This means that, in these types of languages, the pseudo-coordinator itself derives from a genuine coordinator (Andrason t.v.; Andrason, Gębka-Wolak & Moroz t.v.; Weiss t.v.).
- Similarly, juncture verb constructions may originally derive from syndetic coordinating and pseudo-coordinating patterns and result from an increase in cohesiveness. In such a case, the juncture morpheme would originate in a pseudo-coordinator and ultimately a genuine coordinator (Fehn & Phiri t.v.; Pratchett t.v.).
- The above implies that, in languages where there are overt coordinators, pseudo-coordinating patterns develop and grammaticalize before the development and grammaticalization of canonical SVC patterns (Andrason t.v.; Andrason, Gębka-Wolak & Moroz t.v.). (In languages without overt coordinators, or where overt coordinators are optional, SVCs tend to grammaticalize directly, i.e., without the prior grammaticalization of syndetic (pseudo-)coordination constructions; see Ross 2021.)
- The evolution of a particular model may, however, freeze at this stage with pseudo-coordination remaining much more frequent and less restricted than SVC (Weiss t.v.).
- It is also possible that some juncture verb constructions derive not from a chain of independent verbs but involve a morpheme with a nominalizing function. What now seems to be a quasi-SVC may originally have been a dependent nominal structure (Pratchett t.v.; see also Fehn & Phiri t.v. and Ross & Lovstrand t.v.).
- It is also possible that, instead of having a single origin, some SVCs derive from multiple sources. For instance, the evolution from a syndetic type of conjoining coordination through pseudo-coordination to a canonical SVC (during which the coordinator is reduced to pseudo-coordinator and eventually eliminated) may cooccur

with the more direct evolution originating in an asyndetic type of conjoining coordination (in which the coordinator has always been absent). Apparently, in the languages studied in this volume which all contain overt coordinators, the former scenario constitutes a principal and stronger drift while the latter scenario plays a secondary role in the development and grammaticalization of SVCs. (However, since, statistically, SVCs are more likely to develop in languages without overt coordinators, or where overt coordinators are optional, asyndetic pseudo-coordination and asyndetic coordination are more common sources of SVCs crosslinguistically than syndetic pseudo-coordination and coordination; see Ross 2021). Overall, the evolution of verbal serialization may be a complex and messy phenomenon (Andrason t.v.; Andrason, Gębka-Wolak & Moroz t.v.; Pratchett t.v.; Weiss t.v.).

- Analogously, juncture verb constructions and the juncture itself can have a complex underlying nature and derive simultaneously from a number of sources, e.g., verbal and nominal, as well as coordinators and pseudo-coordinators (Fehn & Phiri t.v.; Pratchett t.v.).
- Although discussed sparsely in this volume (Andrason, Gębka-Wolak & Moroz t.v.; see also Andrason 2019), we think that analogy may play an important role in the expansion of verbal serialization in a language. There seems to be some evidence for a type of “attraction” to producing more SVCs once they are already established in a language. The first serializing pattern may develop slowly, but then after SVCs are an established part of the grammar, others may converge on this rapidly and frequently. In other words, the SVC(s) found in a language might contribute to a positive feedback loop to produce even more serializing constructions.

### Endpoints

- Once grammaticalized into canonical SVCs, serializing patterns can further increase their formal cohesiveness. This means that, in case of asymmetrical SVCs, the chain of verbs may develop into an agglutinative and next fully synthetic morphological structure. Accordingly, the minor verb loses its verbal status and becomes a clitic and subsequently an affix (Andrason t.v.; Schaefer & Egbokhare t.v.; see however Ross & Lovestrund t.v.).
- The minor verb may also lose its canonical verbal properties by developing into a particle (Andrason t.v.).
- However, prior motion SVCs seem to be relatively stable diachronically and tend not to agglutinate and morphologize. This means that a direct diachronic link between prior motion SVCs and prior motion morphology cannot be assumed as a typical grammaticalization pathway (Ross & Lovestrund t.v.). (Since motion SVCs are one of the most pervasive types of SVCs, one can wonder how common agglutination and morphologization are for all SVCs in general.)
- It appears that the agglutination and morphologization of asymmetrical serializing patterns stems from a suffixing bias and thus constitutes an obstacle to the emergence of prefixation (Ross & Lovestrund t.v.). (However, other factors may also play a role in preventing SVCs from agglutinating and morphologizing.)

## Methodology

- Although the best manner to study the development of SVCs is direct diachronic evidence, one must be cautious as such data are often fragmentary and limited to particular corpora, genres, and text types. This may in turn distort the real picture of the evolution of SVCs (Andrason t.v.; Andrason, Gębka-Wolak & Moroz t.v.; Nau t.v.). That is, although the documentation of a language can sometimes span centuries, it may not be possible to show grammaticalization paths of SVCs and related multi-verb structures, as these are register specific (Nau t.v.).
- The above means that synchronic variation – typically extractable from (nearly) fully representative corpora – is not always compatible with the results of diachronic investigations (Nau t.v.).
- All of this draws attention to the importance of registers and their differences in the study of SVCs (Nau t.v.).
- Large-scale synchronic typological data sets provide important insights into typical developmental pathways for SVCs, especially considering their correlations with other typological features. Given the limited written record for most languages with SVCs around the world, the relevance and contribution of this approach to the study of the diachrony of SVCs should not be underestimated. It successfully supplements cases where the evolution of SVCs cannot be traced directly (Ross & Lovestrand t.v.).

### 3. Towards the future

Our volume was an attempt to advance the knowledge of the diachrony of SVCs. Of course, we have not responded to – nor indeed is it feasible in a single volume to exhaust – all the important issues related to the rise and fall of serializing patterns. Below we identify the most urgent areas that still need to be researched:

- Robust quantitative data on the sources, variations, and outputs of SVCs within and across language phyla to determine which paths are relatively more common (and therefore ostensibly easier to access conceptually and to traverse) and which paths are relatively less common (and therefore ostensibly more difficult to access conceptually and to traverse).
- More research dedicated to studying differences in the development of SVCs in diverse corpora and registers within a single language and across languages.
- Further exploration into the cognitive mechanisms which facilitate the fine-grained step-by-step processes in the emergence and development of SVCs.
- Determining the reasons of the diachronic diversity of SVCs across the languages of the world.
- Comparing the diachrony of SVCs with the diachrony of other types of multi-verb constructions and, possibly, identifying trends that are specific to SVCs.

- Studying “contact-without-change” situations. That is, the analysis of languages that do not show SVCs but are in contact with serializing languages, might help us understand if there are any syntactic and/or semantic factors that constrain the development of SVCs.

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