

Letter to the editor of *Language and Linguistics*

Serial verb constructions: a critical assessment of Haspelmath's interpretation

by **Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald** (Alexandra.aikhenvald@jcu.edu.au) and **R. M. W. Dixon**

(Robert.Dixon@jcu.edu.au)

In many languages of the world, a sequence of several verbs act together as one unit. They form one predicate, and contain no overt marker of coordination, subordination, or syntactic dependency of any other sort. These are conventionally referred to as serial verb constructions, or SVCs. In a recent paper entitled 'The serial verb construction: comparative concept and cross-linguistic generalizations', Haspelmath (2016) offers a new definition of serial verb constructions. We have argued elsewhere (Aikhenvald 2018a, b) that his new definition is problematic for a variety of reasons. The aim of this letter is to point out errors and incorrect quotes from the sources.

The **first** issue concerns the notion of SVC and where it comes from.

The phenomenon of more than one verb in a row without any mark of syntactic link corresponding to a single verb in English or German was recognised in many a classic work. It was clearly identified by Christaller (1875: 73) for Akan, a Kwa language, and then described for Ewe, from the same family, by Westermann (1930: 126). It was also recognised by Dempwolff (1939), in his grammar of Jabêm, an Austronesian language.

It was not until 1929 that the term 'serial verb' was coined, by Balmer and Grant in their grammar of Fante Akan (1929: 115-28). In their own words,

'there is...one usage which is a distinctive feature of Fante verbs, viz. the use of double or twofold verbs, as, *gye...dzi*, to believe. This is due partly (a) to the tendency of the language to use vivid figurative expressions and partly (b) to the habit of

analysing an action into its component parts... These verbs may be termed serial verbs' (pp. 115, 117).

Haspelmath (2016: 292) appears to be unaware of the full history of the term 'serial verb' and the notion behind it. He incorrectly suggests that the term 'serial verb construction' was coined by Stewart (1963) (see George 1975 and Aikhenvald 2006: 58-9, on the history of the term). Haspelmath also gives the impression that Stahlke (1970) was focussed just on Yoruba, when in actual fact this paper also covered Yatye (or Yace), an Edomoid language of Central Nigeria. Haspelmath (2016: 292) appears to believe that, after Stewart (1963), Stahlke (1970) was the next one to use the term and work with the concept. That this was not the case can be seen, for instance, from the many references on the studies of serial verbs in Kwa languages in George (1973: 15ff; 1975: 1).

The **second** issue in Haspelmath (2016) concerns the languages for which SVCs have been identified.

Serial verbs are a feature of many languages, with different typological profiles. They are prominent in European-based Creole languages, and in isolating languages of West Africa and of Southeast Asia. They have now been recognised in numerous languages of Oceania and New Guinea (especially those of the Oceanic subgroup of the large Austronesian family), and of the Americas (including the Amazonian Lowlands). They have been described for at least a dozen Australian languages, a number of varieties of colloquial Arabic, Syriac Aramaic, Dravidian languages of India, numerous Tibeto-Burman languages, a few languages of northeast Europe, and a number of extinct Indo-European languages (including Hittite and Classical Armenian).

The coverage of discussions of SVCs by Haspelmath (2016: 292-3) is far from complete. No mention is made of serial verb constructions in Chadic and Semitic languages

(see, for instance, Frajzyngier 1993, Hellwig 2006, Hussein 1990, Versteegh 1984, and Yates 2014 and references there); nor of SVCs in classical Indo-European languages (see, for instance, Hock 2014, Luraghi 1993 and Yates 2014), in Dravidian (see Steever 1988, 1993), nor in Russian, in Estonian, or in other languages of north-eastern Europe (see Weiss 1993, 2012 and Tragel 2003).

Haspelmath (2016: 292) believes that serial verbs in Australian languages were first recognized in Nordlinger (2014) and Meakins (2010) (who deals with a mixed Kriol-Gurinja language). In actual fact, serial verbs in Australian languages were described a long time before those (e.g. Green 1987 on Burarra, Green 1995 on Gurr-Goni; Reid 2002, 2003 on Ngan.gityemerri and Ford 1998 (published in 2011) on Emmi; Dixon (2006; 2011) on Dyirbal; a cross-linguistic study of serial verbs in Dyirbal and other Australian languages is in Dixon 2015: 149-86).

Thirdly, of ten generalizations proposed by Haspelmath (2016), six are flawed due to misquotes and misinterpretation of sources, or lack of knowledge thereof. Generalizations 1, 3, 4, and 8 do correspond to the established properties of SVCs. Generalizations 2, 5, 6, 7, 9 and 10 are incorrect.

Generalization 2 states 'In all SVCs, the verbs have the same mood value'. This is based on Haspelmath's (2016: 308) idea that 'mood is sometimes broadened to include modality and evidentiality' (erroneously quoting Aikhenvald 2006a: §2.4). It is well known that modality, mood, and evidentiality are completely different categories (see Matthews's 2014 dictionary for clarification).

Generalization 5 claims that 'If an SVC expresses a cause-effect relationship, or a sequential event, the order of the two verbs is tense-iconic, that is, the cause verb precedes the effect verb, and the verb that expresses the earlier event precedes the verb that expresses the later event'.

In actual fact, this does not have to be the case. Notable exceptions have been described for Dyirbal by Dixon (2011, 2015) and for Wambaya by Nordlinger (2014) (see also Aikhenvald 2006b: 188, ex 22, for an anti-iconically ordered causative SVC in Tariana). This appears to be a feature of languages with so called free, or pragmatically determined, constituent order. Haspelmath's (2016: 309) reference to Aikhenvald (2006a: 16, 21) here is misleading, as her statements refer to a tendency, not a general rule ('the order (in cause effect SVCs) **tends** to replicate the order of occurrence of subevents': Aikhenvald 2006a: 16; 'the order of components in SVCs **may** match the temporal order of actions they denote': Aikhenvald 2006a: 21).

Generalization 6 claims: 'If there is just a single person, tense, mood or negation marker, it occurs in a peripheral position, that is, preceding the first verb or following the last verb'.

This implies that single marking of categories has to always occur on the first or the last component. This is not always the case (for instance, examples from Lakota, a Siouan language, can be found in de Reuse 2006: 309).

Generalization 7 claims: 'In all SVCs, all the verbs share at least one argument'.

This is incorrect. No arguments are shared between the components of resultative SVCs (Aikhenvald 2006a: 19-20, with examples from Mwotlap and Jabêm), simultaneous experiencer SVCs (Gurr-goni: Aikhenvald 2006a: 17, Green 1995: 283), and event-argument SVCs (Aikhenvald 2006a: 18-19; called 'ambient' by Foley and Olson 1985, and 'adverbial', by Chang 2010).

Generalization 9 claims: 'In different subject SVCs, the second verb is always intransitive'.

This generalization, is not upheld by the facts of languages. Here, Haspelmath mentions Aikhenvald (2006a: 16), who says: 'the most frequently quoted cases of switch-function

cause effect SVCs involve a transitive verb followed by an intransitive'. Haspelmath misinterprets 'most' as 'always'. In actual fact, both verbs are transitive in many examples of cause-effect SVCs (where the subject of the second verb the same as the object of the first one, e.g. Eastern Kayah Li (Solnit 2006: 151, ex (18)).

Generalization 10 claims: 'An SVC cannot have two different agents, that is, when a non-agent is shared, then the agent must be shared as well'.

This does not stand up. If the components of an SVC do not share agents, they may or may not share other arguments (no matter what their semantic role is). There are numerous examples where only 'non-agent' arguments (such as objects) are shared (see, for instance, Hajek 2006: 242, on Tetun Dili), in addition to serial verbs with no shared arguments (see our comment on Generalization 7 above). In addition, Haspelmath is inconsistent in using the term 'subject' for his Generalization 9 and agent for his Generalization 10.

According to Haspelmath (2016: 311), 'all of these generalizations are readily falsifiable, and I have found isolated exceptions only for Generalizations 6 and 7'. If a generalization has an exception, it is best described as universal tendency rather than a universal law. A more serious problem is that six of ten of them are incorrect — based on limited information, misquoted sources, or both.

In addition, Haspelmath's (2016) contains numerous errors in quoting from sources. To mention just a few examples: missing tone symbols (as in (1b), from Cantonese), wrong symbols (as in (16a,b, from Haruai), and incomplete or wrong gloss (as in 1d, from Tariana, and (13a), from Yimas).

We urge linguistic scholars to exercise extreme care in perusing Haspelmath's (2016) discussion and statements concerning SVCs.

References

- Aikhenvald, Alexandra Y. 2006a. Serial verb constructions in typological perspective. *Serial verb constructions: a cross-linguistic typology*, ed. by Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald and R. M. W. Dixon, 1-68. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Aikhenvald, Alexandra Y. 2006b. Serial verb constructions in Tariana. *Serial verb constructions: a cross-linguistic typology*, ed. by Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald and R. M. W. Dixon, 178-201. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Aikhenvald, Alexandra Y. 2018a. Serial verb constructions. Oxford Bibliographies Online. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Aikhenvald, Alexandra Y. 2018b. *Serial verbs*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (to be published in October 2018).
- Balmer, W. T. and F. C. F. Grant. 1929. *A grammar of the Fante-Akan language*. London: Atlantis Press.
- Chang, Henry Y. 2010. 'On the syntax of Formosan adverbial verb constructions', pp. 183-221 of *Austronesian and theoretical linguistics*, edited by Raphael Mercado, Eric Potsdam, and Lisa Travis. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Christaller, J. G. 1875. *A grammar of the Asante and Fante languages called Tshi [Chwee, Twi]: based on the Akuapem dialect with reference to the other Akan and Fante dialects*. Basel: Basel Evangelical Missionary Society.
- Dempwolff, Otto. 1939. *Grammatik der Jabêm-Sprache auf Neuguinea*. Abhandlungen aus dem Gebiet der Auslandskunde, 50. Hamburg: Friederichsen, De Gruyter.

- Dixon, R. M. W. 2006. 'Serial verb constructions: conspectus and coda', pp. 338-50 of *Serial verb constructions: a cross-linguistic typology*, ed. by Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald and R. M. W. Dixon. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dixon, R. M. W. 2011. 'Serial Verb Constructions in Dyirbal'. *Anthropological Linguistics* 53: 185-214.
- Dixon, R. M. W. 2015. *Edible gender, mother-in-law style and other grammatical wonders. Studies in Dyirbal, Yidiñ, & Warrgamay*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Foley, William A. and Mike Olson. 1985. Clausehood and verb serialisation. *Grammar Inside and Outside the Clause*, ed. J. Nichols and A. C. Woodbury, 17-60. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ford, Lysbeth J. 1998. 'A description of the Emmi language of the Northern Territory of Australia'. PhD thesis, Linguistics Department, Australian National University.
- Ford, Lysbeth J. 2011. *A description of the Emmi language of the Northern Territory of Australia*. Munich: Lincom Europa.
- Frajzyngier, Zygmunt. 1993. *A grammar of Mupun*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag.
- George, Isaac. 1973. A grammar of Kwa-type verb serialization: the nature and significance in current generative theory. PhD dissertation. University of California.
- George, Isaac. 1975. Typology of verb serialization. *Journal of West African Languages* 1: 79-97.
- Green, Rebecca. 1987. 'A sketch grammar of Burarra.' BA Honours sub-thesis. Canberra, Australian National University.
- Green, Rebecca. 1995. *A Grammar of Gurr-goni*. PhD Dissertation. Canberra, Australian National University.

- Hajek, John. 2006. 'Serial verbs in Tetun Dili', pp. 239-53 of *Serial verb constructions: a cross-linguistic typology*, ed. by Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald and R. M. W. Dixon. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Haspelmath, Martin. 2016. The serial verb construction: comparative concept and cross-linguistic generalizations. *Language and Linguistics* 17: 291-319.
- Hellwig, Birgit. 2006. Serial verb constructions in Goemai. In *Serial verb constructions: a cross-linguistic typology*. Edited by Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald and R. M. W. Dixon, 88-107. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hock, Hans Henrich. 2014. Come and get it: The Indo-European background of the Vedic *éta...stávaṃa* construction. In *Proceedings of the 24th Annual UCLA Indo-European Conference*. Edited by Stephanie W. Jamison, H. Craig Melchert and Brent Vine, 47-66. Bremen: Hempen.
- Holm, John. 2000. *Introduction to Pidgins and Creoles*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hussein, Lutfi. 1990. Serial Verbs in Colloquial Arabic. *When Verbs Collide: Papers from the (1990) Ohio State Mini-Conference on Serial verb constructions*. ed. Brian D. Joseph and A. M. Zwicky, 340-53. The Ohio State University. Working Papers in Linguistics, 39.
- Luraghi, Silvia. 1993. Verb serialization and word order: evidence from Hittite. *Historical linguistics 1989. Papers from the 9th International Conference on Historical Linguistics, Rutgers University, August 1989*, ed. Henk Aertsen and Robert J. Jeffers, 267-81. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Matthews, P. H. 2014. *The concise Oxford dictionary of linguistics*. Third edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Matthews, Stephen. 2006. On serial verb constructions in Cantonese. *Serial verb constructions: a cross-linguistic typology*, ed. by Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald and R. M. W. Dixon, 69-87. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Meakins, Felicity. 2010. The development of asymmetrical serial verb constructions in an Australian mixed language. *Linguistic Typology* 14: 1-38.
- Nordlinger, Rachel. 2014. Serial verbs in Wambaya. *Language description informed by theory*, ed. by Rob Pensalfini, Myfany Turpin and Giana Guillemin, 263-282. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Reid, Nicholas. 2002. Sit right down the back: Serialized posture verbs in Ngan.gityemerri and other Northern Australian languages. *The linguistics of sitting, standing and lying*, ed. by John Newman, 239-68. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Reid, Nicholas. 2003. Phrasal verb to synthetic verb: recorded morphosyntactic change in Ngan.gityemerri. *The Non-Pama-Nyungan languages of northern Australia: Comparative studies of the continents most linguistically complex region*, ed. by N. Evans, 95-123. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics.
- de Reuse, Willem. 2006. 'Serial verbs in Lakota (Siouan)', pp. 301-16 of *Serial verb constructions: a cross-linguistic typology*, ed. by Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald and R. M. W. Dixon. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Solnit, David B. 2006. Verb serialization in Eastern Kayah Li. *Serial verb constructions: a cross-linguistic typology*, ed. by Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald and R. M. W. Dixon, 144-59. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stahlke, Herbert. 1970. Serial verbs. *Studies in African Linguistics* 1: 60-99.
- Steever, Sanford. B. 1988. *The serial verb construction formation in the Dravidian languages*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

- Steever, Sanford B. 1993. *Analysis to synthesis. The development of complex verb morphology in the Dravidian languages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stewart, J. M. 1963. Some restrictions on objects in Twi. *Journal of African Languages* 2: 145-149.
- Tragel, Ilona. 2003. Eesti keele seriaalkonstruktionist (On serial verb constructions in Estonian). *Keel ja Kirjandus* 12: 919-34.
- Versteegh, Kees. 1984. *Pidginization and creolization: the case of Arabic*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Weiss, Daniel. 1993. Double verbs in Modern Russian (Dvojnye glagoly v sovremennom russkom jazyke). *Kategorija skazuemogo v slavjanskih jazykah. Modal'nost' i aktualizacija*. (The category of predicate in Slavonic languages. Modality and actualization). *Slavistische Beiträge* 305, ed. by P. Render, 67-97. München: Otto Sagner.
- Weiss, Daniel. 2012. Verb serialization in northeast Europe: the case of Russian and its Finno-Ugric neighbours. In *Grammatical replication and borrowability in language contact*, ed. by Björn Wiemer, Bernhard Wälchli, and Björn Hansen, 611-46. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Westermann, D. 1930. *A study of the Ewe language*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Yates, Anthony D. 2014. 'On the PIE 'Quasi-Serial Verb' construction: origin and development', pp. 237-55 of *Proceedings of the 24th Annual UCLA Indo-European Conference*. Edited by Stephanie W. Jamison, H. Craig Melchert and Brent Vine, 237-55. Bremen: Hempen.