

TYPOLOGY OF VERB SERIALIZATION

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1. Introduction

The familiar surface structure phenomenon known as verb serialization found in West African languages has attracted the attention of many Africanists working, especially although not exclusively, on the Kwa languages.¹ The construction is so prominent that it is recognized as an important factor that distinguishes the Kwa languages from the other language groups within the Niger-Congo family. Commenting on its significance in Kwa, Stewart (1971: 181) observes that "Perhaps the most interesting of the grammatical phenomena from the general typological point of view is what might be called serialization". It must, however, be born in mind that serialization also occurs in some other language groups such as Gur and Benue-Congo.

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1. Other names by which the construction is known include serial (verbal) construction, serial verbs, verbal combinations, verbs in series, etc. I will use these interchangeably

Many grammatical descriptions of serial constructions have appeared in the literature during the last one hundred years or so. But in many instances these descriptions appear to be inadequate. This is partly because of the tendency to concentrate on one particular problem or another and partly because of the intricacies of the construction. The early writers on the subject, for example, were mainly concerned with the pedagogical implications of the construction; among them were Christaller (1875), Westermann (1930) and Ward (1952). And when we examine current descriptions of serial verbs we find that attention is almost exclusively focused on the syntactic sources and derivation of the phenomenon. Awobuluyi (1967, 1973), for instance, proposes a derivation of serial verbs in Yoruba from coordinate sentence sources, while Bamgboṣe (1973, 1974) favours their derivation from two sources: linking (coordinate) and modifying. Boadi (1968) claims that serial verbs in Twi emanate from both coordinating and embedding sources, and Williams (1971) argues that Freetown Krio serial constructions derive from embedding structures only.

As to the appearance of serial verb construction, various writers have provided us with a characterization of its syntactic (surface) structure. It is given as:

- (i) A row of verbs one after the other ...
(in which) the verbs stand next to each

other without being connected (Westermann 1930: 126).

- (ii) Strings of verbs and verb phrases run together to form what appears to be a single expanded verb phrase (Bendix 1972).

Accepting the surface structure definition as given in (i and ii) above, I would like to sketch very briefly what appears to be an overall picture of the phenomenon by examining the verb (phrase) to verb (phrase) relationship in verb serialization with a view to showing that there are different types of serialization. The criteria employed are grossly semantic, but the syntactic correlates are obvious. Examples are drawn from Yoruba.

2. Types of Verb Serialization

To facilitate discussion, I present directly below concrete examples of serial verbs, showing the extensive use of the construction to account for an enormously wide range of semantic notions. (The verbs are underlined.)

1. Comparative:

- (a) Okùn nàà gùn tó²
rope the long enough
'The rope is long enough'

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2. \acute{V} , \grave{V} , and V are respectively high, low and mid tones.

(b) Ilorin tóbi jù Ọfà (lọ)
Ilorin big surpass Ọfa
'Ilorin is bigger than Ọfa'

(c) Ibàdàn tóbi jù gbogbo wọn (lọ)
Ibadan big surpass all them
'Ibadan is the biggest of all'

2. Instrumental:

Àjàó fi ọbẹ gé iṣu
Ajao used knife cut yam
'Ajao used a knife to cut the yam'

3. Manner:

Àjàó fi ọgbón gé iṣu
Ajao used cleverness cut yam
'Ajao cut the yam cleverly'

4. Causative:

Àjàó { mú (kí) } iyà je ọrẹ rẹ
 { fi }
Ajao ? suffering ? friend his
'Ajao caused his friend to suffer'

5. Accompaniment:

Àjàó bá ọrẹ rẹ jeun
Ajao with friend his ate
'Ajao ate with his friend'

6. Locative:

Àjàó jókó lé àga
'Ajao sat on the chair'

7. Directional:

Ajàó rìn lò (sí) ilé
Ajao walked go (to) home
'Ajao walked home'

8. Dative:

Ajàó mú ìwé fún mí
Ajao took book give me
'Ajao gave me the book'

9. Benefactive:

Ajàó sisé fún ọba
Ajao worked give chief
'Ajao worked for the chief'

10. Concomitant:

Ajàó gbé àpótí wá
Ajao took box come
'Ajao brought the box'

11. Purpose:

Ajàó wá. gbé àpótí
Ajao came take box
'Ajao came to take the box'

12. Sequential:

Ajàó rà èpà je
Ajao bought peanuts eat
'Ajao bought peanuts and ate them'

13. Resultative:

Àjàó jeun yó

Ajao ate full

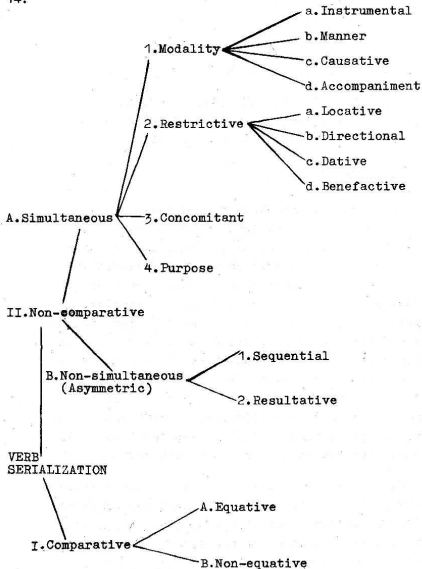
'Ajao ate and he is full'

The examples of (1) through (13) are schematically presented in the configuration (14) below and the discussion that follows is based on it.

I. Comparative

It is not my intention to undertake a study of comparative constructions here, but since they are serial constructions by the surface structure definition, a few remarks on their peculiarities are pertinent. A fundamental distinction that exists between comparative and non-comparative serialization can be traced to the fact that various types of verbs - action, state, etc, -- feature in comparatives whereas in non-comparatives, verbs of action occur more frequently. As a matter of fact it is usual to find at least one verb of action in non-comparative serialization. Furthermore, the elements tó 'enough' and jù 'surpass' feature in comparatives but not in non-comparatives.

Basically, there are two types of comparative constructions in Yoruba: equative and non-equative. The former is concerned with assertions which evaluate a given object as to whether it measures up to (but does not exceed) a particular standard,



state, etc. The general verb used in equative constructions in Yoruba is tó 'to be enough/reach'. Thus in the example of (1a) we have an assertion which stipulates that the length of a given rope measures up to an expectation that the speaker has in mind; a comparison is therefore made.

Equative sentences like (1a) can be continued as in

15. (a) Okùn nǎǎ gùn tó (gégé)bi mo ti fẹ
 rope the long enough as I Asp want
 'The rope is as long as I want'

(b) Okùn nǎǎ gùn tó <<(gégé)bi>> okùn Ajàǎ
 < { (ti) ʒe } gùn >

'The rope is as long as Ajao's rope'

It is not entirely clear to me what the deep structure of equative sentences would look like, nor do I make claims about their derivation. It seems obvious to me, however, that sentences like Obè nǎǎ dùn tó 'The stew is delicious', which appeared in the discussions about modifying serial constructions (Bangboṣe 1973, 1974 and Awobuluyi 1973) are instances of equative sentences.

Turning now to non-equative comparisons like the sentences in (1b, c) we find that they involve comparisons where the quality, size, ability, etc.

of the relationship that obtains between the verb (phrases) in series. In this case, even though two verb phrases appear in a serial construction, only one action is specifiable in terms of time reference. The VP with a time reference is the main, while the other modifies the main. The subtypes we find here are Modality, Restrictive and Concomitant.

II.A.1. Modality

In modality serialization the first V(P) in the series modifies the second V(P) along the lines of mode employed in performing certain activities expressed in V(P)₂. It is common to find verbs like fi 'use', bá 'with', etc. occurring in the first V(P). Such verbs appear to function as case markings of some sort, and they may not occur in minimal sentences. At times, however, main verbs like saré 'run' occur in the position, in which case they acquire serial meaning, generally based on the context. Subsumed under modality serialization we have

2. Instrumental:

Àjàó fi òbẹ́ gẹ́ iṣu
'Ajao used a knife to cut the yam'

3. Manner:

Àjàó fi ogbón gẹ́ iṣu
'Ajao cut the yam cleverly'

4. Causative:

Àjàó (mú (kí)) iyà jẹ ọrẹ rẹ
(fi)

'Ajao caused his friend to suffer'

5. Accompaniment: Àjàó bá ọrẹ rẹ jẹun³

'Ajao ate with his friend'

It should be noted that because of the general nature of the verb fi, it takes a concrete object in (2) but abstract objects in (3, 4). In (4) mú 'take' acquires the meaning of causative. This is because of the context in which it occurs. In a similar fashion sáré in the sentence of (18) below is understood as 'quickly' because of its context in relation to V(P)₂.

18. Wọn sáré jẹun⁴

'They ate quickly'

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3. Serializing languages which include Tense, Aspect and Modal markers in their serial constructions may have additional nodes under Modality.
4. Bamgboṣe's discussions (1973, 1974) include the example Olú sáré wá ilé, which is ambiguous between 'Olu ran home' (his linking type) and 'Olu came home quickly' (his modifying type). Unlike (18) the modifying interpretation of this sentence based on sáré cannot be deduced from the context. My guess is that it is inferred from other sources of information outside of the structure.

II.A.2 Restrictive

Moving now to restrictive serialization, we find that the second V(P) in series modifies the first in such serialization. The modification is along the lines of such notions as location, direction, etc.

As in the case of Modality, we find in $V(P)_2$ verbs whose function verges on that of grammatical formatives, and when real lexical verbs occur there, their meanings are generally inferred from the contexts. Examples of restrictive serialization include the following:

6. Locative:

Àjàó jókǒ lé àga
'Ajao sat on the chair'

7. Directional:

Àjàó rín lẹ̀ (sí) ọjà
'Ajao walked to the market'

8. Dative:

Àjàó mú iwé fún mí
'Ajao gave me the book'

9. Benefactive:

Àjàó ṣiṣẹ́ fún ọba
'Ajao worked for the chief'

The verb lé 'to be on' in (6) is an example of a general type of verb, whereas lo 'go' in (7) and fún 'give' in (8, 9) derive their prepositional meanings from the contexts. The sentence in (9) has a paraphrase with a structure containing bá, which is Àjàó bá oba sisé. This is, however, ambiguous between 'Ajáo worked for the chief' and 'Ajao worked with the chief'.

Westermann must have observed similar cases of verbs being used as prepositions in Ewe when he remarked that

... many verbs when they stand next to others play the part of English prepositions, adverbs or conjunctions (1930: 129).

More recently, Lord (1973) discussed the fact that many verbs used in series in West African languages are in a stage of transition.

II.A.3. Concomitant

In concomitant serialization the question of one V(P) modifying another is inapplicable; rather the two verbs are jointly used to express a concept. It may be possible for the concept to be expressed in another language by a single, but semantically composite, verb. Thus, the sequence gbé ... wá in

10. Ajáo gbé àpótí wá
'Ajao brought the box'

is matched by 'bring' in English, or kàwó in Hausa.

Concomitant serialization then is to be viewed as an instance of lexical parsimony. Briefly, this means that a subset of surface lexical items are found in the lexical stock of a given language. These lexical items may be used as independent items, in which case they are basic, but not necessarily semantically prime, items. Additionally, two or more basic items can be used in combination to express another concept whose meaning is equivalent to the total meaning of the basic items involved. The result is that a few items are used to function in multiple ways. What is sketched above is what we have in concomitant serialization in terms of the verbs involved.⁵ The 'splitting verbs' in Yoruba can be subsumed under concomitant serialization.⁶

II.A.4. Purpose

In purpose serialization $V(P)_2$ expresses the purpose of $V(P)_1$. In a sense this is a kind of modification, but $V(P)_2$ does not necessarily assert that the purpose is achieved. Thus in :

11. Ajàó wá gbé àpótí (Purpose interpretation)
'Ajao came to take the box'

It is not stated that Ajao actually took the box,

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5. See my forthcoming paper 'Verb Serialization and Lexical Decomposition'.
6. See Awobuluyi (1971).

and even if he did, there must have been a time lag between his coming and his action of taking the box.⁷

Purpose serial verbs have paraphrases containing láti. The example in (19) below is a paraphrase of (11).

19. Ajàó wá láti gbé àpótí

Very often, serial verbs like (11) are ambiguous between purpose and sequential interpretations. Thus one interpretation of (11) may be

20. Ajàó wá ó sì gbé àpótí
Ajao came he then took the box
'Ajao came and then took the box'

II.B. Asymmetric

In asymmetric serialization an action expressed by $V(P)_1$ precedes that of $V(P)_2$. There is therefore some time lag between the action.

This is the type of serialization akin to coordinate structures. We must, however, distinguish between symmetric and asymmetric coordinate constructions. Structures like (21) below are symmetric, while those of (22) are asymmetric.

7. In George (1975, 1976) Purpose Serialization is subsumed under Restrictive.

21. (a) Ajàó ñkọrin ó sì ñjó
 Ajao singing he and dancing
 'Ajao is singing and dancing'
- (b) Ajàó ñjó ó sì ñkọrin
 Ajao dancing and singing
 'Ajao is dancing and singing'
22. (a) Ajàó rà ẹ̀pà ó sì jẹ ẹ
 Ajao bought peanuts he then ate them
 'Ajao bought peanuts and ate them'.
- * (b) Ajàó jẹ ẹ̀pà ó sì rà á
 *Ajao ate peanuts and he bought them
- * (c) Ajàó jẹ ẹ̀pà rà
- (d) Ajàó rà ẹ̀pà jẹ = (12)

The order of the V(P)s in (21) can be reversed; that of (22) cannot. Sentences like (22 a) have serial counterparts like (22 d); those like (21a) do not. In discussing the derivations of serial constructions in relation to coordinate sentences, we must bear in mind that it is asymmetric coordination that is relevant. Under asymmetric serialization we have sequential and resultative.

II. B. 1, 2. Sequential and Resultative

In sequential serialization the relationship of the V(P)s is that of $V(P)_1$ and then $V(P)_2$.

In resultatives it is that of $V(P)_1$ and then $V(P)_2$ results from $V(P)_1$. Thus in

12. Àjàó rà èpà jẹ
'Ajao bought peanuts and ate them'

We simply have an enumeration of actions: one after the other.

But in

13. Àjàó jẹun yó
'Ajao ate and he is full',

in addition to their sequential relationship, the second verb is a result of the action of the first. Both sequentials and resultatives have paraphrases with structures containing si, but in addition to that, resultatives have paraphrases with sentences containing títí ... fi 'until ... become'.⁸ The sentence in (23) below is a paraphrase of (13):

23. Àjàó jẹun títí ó fi yó
Ajao ate until he became full
'Ajao ate until he was full'

With the títí ... fi interpretation the continuity of the action of $V(P)_1$ up to the stage of $V(P)_2$ is brought into focus. The intricate relationship between serializable si sentences and their títí ...

8. It must not be assumed that all títí ... fi sentences have serial counterparts.

fi counterparts is not investigated here. I have merely indicated their place in the overall picture of serial constructions.⁹

It should be noted that different types of serial constructions can combine in enormously complicated ways to form a single sentence. The sentence in (24) below, for example, contains Instrumental, Dative and Purpose types.

24. Olú fi òbẹ́ gẹ́ ẹ́ran fún wa jẹ́
'Olu used the knife to cut the meat
for us to eat'.

3. Implications

It is important to note that asymmetric serial constructions have paraphrases with sentences containing connectives. Simultaneous constructions do not have. This observation correlates very neatly with the kind of relationships that exist between two V(P)s in the two broad divisions of the phenomenon. I believe this must have serious implications for the sources of the types. As I have argued elsewhere, the simultaneous ones are likely to derive from embedding structures and the non-simultaneous ones from structures which may look like some kind of coordination.¹⁰

9. Bamgboṣe (1973, 1974) argues against the introduction of adverbial clauses with títí... fi into the derivation of serial verbs. Awobuluyi, on the other hand, favours their inclusion.

10. See George (1975).

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