

# Serial Verb Constructions

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*A Cross-Linguistic Typology*

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## Serial Verb Constructions in Mwotlap

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Mwotlap is an Austronesian language of the Oceanic branch, spoken by about 1,800 speakers on Motalava, a small island of the Banks group, north of Vanuatu (François 2001, 2003). Contrary to many languages from the same area—for example, Paamese (Crowley 1987), Ambae (Hyslop 2001), Araki (François 2002)—Mwotlap has almost no traces of serialization between verb phrases (of the type *I'll PUSH you you'll FALL*).<sup>1</sup> The only productive case of verb serialization is of a different pattern, with two or more verbs chained together within a single verb phrase (of the type *I'll PUSH FALL you*). A typical example of this serializing construction can be heard in a famous love song:<sup>2</sup>

- (1) [lak            tēy    yoyoñ    ēwē]    no  
 AOR:dance hold be.quiet be.fine me  
 'Just dance with me calmly'

Simple though it may be, a sentence like (1) raises a number of issues. What are the relations, both syntactic and semantic, between the four verbs? How do they combine their lexical semantics, their tense–aspect–mood values, their argument structures? How do such constructions compare with other serializing patterns cross-linguistically?

After situating Mwotlap SVCs in their syntactic context (§1), we will describe their structural properties (§2), paying special attention to the sharing of arguments (§3). We will then propose a functional classification of these serial verbs (§4), and end our reflection with a note on multiverb serialization (§5).

<sup>1</sup> To be precise, Mwotlap does possess a type of pauseless parataxis that is reminiscent of the so-called 'core-layer serialization', such as *Give me some water I drink it* (François 2003: 188). However, it appears that this construction is limited to a specific TAM context (the second verb must be inflected as aorist) and to a single semantic value (the expression of purpose). Consequently, this structure is probably better described as a case of paratactic subordination involving two distinct clauses, rather than a standard case of verb serialization.

<sup>2</sup> The spelling conventions adopted for Mwotlap include the following: *e* = [ɛ]; *ē* = [ɪ]; *o* = [ɔ]; *ō* = [u]; *g* = [ɣ]; *b* = [mb]; *d* = [ʔd]; *q* = [kpʷ]; *m* = [ŋmʷ]; *n* = [ŋ].

## 1. Clause structure and verb serialization

### 1.1. A PRELIMINARY NOTE ON WORD CLASSES

The inventory of word classes in Mwotlap makes it possible to distinguish between verbs and adjectives. For example, verbs cannot modify a noun directly, whereas adjectives can: compare *nēt̄mey gom*<sub>[ADJ]</sub> ('a sick child') and \**nēt̄mey teñ*<sub>[vb]</sub> (\*'a cry child'). And yet, adjectives and verbs behave exactly the same way outside noun phrases. For example, both categories require TAM markers in order to form a valid predicate phrase, without any copula:

- (2) (a) inti-k      me-*teñ*  
           child-1sg PER-cry  
           'My son is crying'  
       (b) inti-k      mo-*gom*  
           child-1sg PER-sick  
           'My son is sick'

Since the study of serial structures is not concerned with noun phrases, it will be legitimate, for our present purposes, to consider adjectives as forming a subclass of (intransitive, stative) verbs.

### 1.2. THE STRUCTURE OF THE CLAUSE

The standard order of constituents in Mwotlap is SV for intransitive and AVO for transitive clauses, which is typical of a nominative-accusative system. In the absence of any sort of case-marking, the syntactic function of the core arguments is indicated by their syntactic position. Verbs are either strictly intransitive or strictly transitive, a few being ambivalent (mainly of the S=A type). Mwotlap does not allow for double-object constructions.

Although TAM markers often consist of just a prefix, some of them are discontinuous, combining a prefix and a postclitic, like the Potential *te-... vēh* or the negator *et-... te*. This morphological property makes them a convenient tool to test the boundaries of the verb phrase, as they clearly show which constituents belong inside vs. outside the VP. For instance, in (3) below, the position of *vēh* allows us to distinguish between two distributional word classes, which in English would correspond to the single category of 'adverbs' (*again* and *tomorrow*):

- (3) kōmyō [TE-gen *lok se vēh*] na-madap      *talōw*      le-mtap  
       2du      POT<sub>1</sub>-eat back again POT<sub>2</sub> ART-pineapple tomorrow in-morning  
       'You'll be able to eat pineapple once again tomorrow morning'

Reserving the term 'adverb' for those peripheral complements which always appear outside the VP (e.g. *talōw* 'tomorrow'), we propose the term 'adjunct' (Crowley 1982: 162) to designate those modifiers which belong inside the VP, and

appear immediately after its head (e.g. *lok* ‘back’ and *se* ‘again’); we’ll come back to this notion below.

We now have enough information to state the canonical structure of the sentence in Mwotlap:

{ *subject* [<sub>TAM<sub>1</sub></sub> -*HEAD adjuncts* <sub>TAM<sub>2</sub></sub>]<sub>VP</sub> *object adverb/oblique* }

Note that the object phrase is always external to the VP, unless we are dealing with an incorporated object (see §2.1).

### 1.3. THE NATURE OF ADJUNCTS AND THE LIMITS OF SVCS

Rather than a lexical category, the term ‘adjunct’ designates a syntactic position in the clause—that is, any word that appears within a predicate phrase, immediately following its head. Crucially, this position of VP-internal modifier can be lexified by more than one word class. First, Mwotlap possesses a category of ‘pure adjuncts’, which cannot appear anywhere else in the sentence other than that position. These were illustrated in (3), with *lok* and *se*.

But in some cases, the adjunct slot can also be filled by a noun:

- (4) Tigsas kē et-wot          *vu*    te,    kē mo-wot    *et*  
 Jesus 3sg NEG<sub>1</sub>-be.born spirit NEG<sub>2</sub> 3sg PER-be.born person  
 ‘Jesus was not born a spirit, he was born a man’

It is also common to find an adjective in the same position:

- (5) Imam ma-hag *qaqa*    ēwē l-ēm  
 Dad PER-sit stupid just in-house  
 ‘Dad is just staying idle/idly at home’

And in many cases, the adjunct position is filled by a verb:

- (6) nitog    hohole    *galgal!*  
 PROHIB talk:REDUP lie:REDUP  
 ‘Stop lying!’

Following the discussion in §1.1, the description of serial verb constructions will be focused on sentences such as (5) as well as (6).

It is also worth mentioning cases in which the adjunct slot is filled by a word that was formerly a verb, but has now become a pure adjunct:

- (7) nok [tig          *day*]    bulsal mino  
 1sg AOR:stand (*expect*) friend my  
 ‘I’m (standing) waiting for my friend’

In a former stage of the language, when *day* could still behave as a verb in its own right, a sentence like (7) would have had to be described as a serial verb construction (‘stand wait’), just like (6). But although it has retained certain features typical of verbs—such as a transitive argument structure—the lexeme

*day* is now restricted to this modifying position, as though it had become a sort of applicative clitic. As it no longer satisfies the definition of a verb—that is, compatibility with the position of head in a verb phrase—it is methodologically necessary to exclude such cases from our synchronic study of serial verbs. We will, however, come back to this issue in the conclusion.

## 2. Structural properties of Mwotlap SVCs

A serial verb construction can consist of two or more elements; the longest string attested is four verbs. We will start by examining the rules for ‘simple’ serial verbs ( $V_1 + V_2$ ), and will return to multiverb serialization in §5.

The formal properties of Mwotlap SVCs can be stated according to the typological criteria and terminology set out in the first chapter of this book. These are given in Table 1, and will be addressed separately in the following discussion.

### 2.1. CONTIGUITY

The two verbs forming an SVC must be strictly contiguous, that is, no element can intervene between them, whether this is an object or an oblique phrase. Even ‘pure adjuncts’, which are allowed in the VP, are not normally inserted between two serialized verbs. The only apparent exception to this rule is when the object of  $V_1$  is incorporated. In this case, the object  $O_1$  is suffixed to  $V_1$ , and therefore surfaces between the two verbs, as in:

- (8) nok [suwyeg-*qen* tēy] nu-sus  
 1sg AOR:cast-net hold ART-shoes  
 ‘I go net-fishing with my shoes on’

This construction—which is very rare anyway—is easily explained if one realizes that the first element in the SVC is not the transitive verb *suwyeg* ‘cast’, but an intransitive, compound verb of the form *suwyeg-qen* /cast-net/ ‘to net-fish’, with an incorporated object. A sentence like (8) is therefore no exception to the rule of strict contiguity between  $V_1$  and  $V_2$ .

TABLE 1. Main structural properties of Mwotlap SVCs

<i>Contiguity</i> $V_1/V_2$ ?	Strict contiguity
<i>Wordhood</i> $V_1/V_2$ ?	One prosodic word, two phonological words
<i>Symmetry</i> $V_1/V_2$ ?	Asymmetrical serial verbs (major + minor)
<i>Tense-aspect-mood, negation</i>	Identical + single-marking
<i>Pluractionality (reduplication)</i>	Non-identical + independent marking
<i>Argument sharing constraints</i>	Fusion rules (2 structures merging into 1)

## 2.2. ONE OR TWO WORDS?

The two parts of an SVC are so close to each other that it is sometimes tempting to analyse the string  $V_1 + V_2$  as an instance of verb compounding. This brings up the issue of wordhood in SVCs: are we dealing with one or two words?

At first sight, several arguments may advocate a one-word analysis. Indeed,  $V_1$  and  $V_2$  are not only strictly contiguous, but they also form a single prosodic unit: for example, *yow veteg* /jump leave/ will have only its final syllable stressed [jɔwβε'tɛɣ] and no intonation break, like a single word. Semantically, the whole string  $V_1 + V_2$  often ends up being endowed with certain semantic features that can be assigned to neither of its components, as though it now formed a single unit: thus, *yow veteg* /jump leave<sub>TR</sub>/ means 'escape from (someone, something)', without implying any real 'jumping' event; *dēm veteg* /think leave<sub>TR</sub>/ is the usual way to translate 'give up (something), forgive (someone)'. Yet, this is not sufficient evidence to conclude that we are dealing with a single word, as it is common for lexical units to consist of several words.

Another piece of evidence will ultimately prove that SVCs form distinct phonological words. Indeed, the phonotactic rules of Mwoṭlap make it possible to strictly identify the boundaries of the word. The only syllable pattern allowed in this language (François 2000) has the form *cvc* (with optional consonants), so that the phonotactic template of any word is #*cvc*|*cvc*...|*cvc*#. Consequently, clusters of two consonants are only allowed across syllable boundaries within a word, and never word-initially. There are two possible outcomes when a lexical root of the form  $C_1C_2V$ - has to be integrated in a sentence:

- if the root is in the position to begin a new syllable (typically after a word boundary), then the sequence # $C_1C_2V$ - undergoes a vowel epenthesis, whereby a clone of  $V$  is inserted between the two consonants: for example /*VTEG*/ 'leave' → *nēk so veteg* 'you should leave it';
- conversely, if the same root is preceded by a vowel-final prefix, then the prefix + lexeme string forms a single word. The syllable boundary occurs between  $C_1$  and  $C_2$ , with no need for epenthesis: e.g. /*VTEG*/ → *nēk te-pteg* 'you will leave it'.

In this pair of examples, the behaviour of the root /*VTEG*/ with regard to vowel epenthesis makes it clear when we are dealing with a single phonological word (form *te-pteg*: hence *te-* 'Future' is a prefix) or with two distinct words (form *so veteg*: hence *so* 'Prospective' is not a prefix). We can now apply the same phonological test to our serial verbs—provided the first verb ends in a vowel, and the second verb has an underlying *CCV*- root. If we consider the combination of  $V_1$  /*HŌ*/ 'paddle, travel in canoe' with  $V_2$  /*VTEG*/, the surface form we observe ('paddle away') is *hō veteg*, not \**hō-pteg*:  $V_1$  and  $V_2$  are thus separated by a word boundary, and cannot be said to form a single, compound word. As a conclusion, serial verbs in Mwoṭlap always remain distinct phonological words, whatever their degree of semantic or prosodic cohesion.

Finally, from the morphological point of view, examples (11a–b) below will show that root reduplication affects independently each element in a serial construction. This is also a strong argument in favour of the conclusion that Mwotlap SVCs fundamentally consist of separate words.

### 2.3. SHARING VERBAL CATEGORIES

If the serial verbs of Mwotlap were to be compared with other languages, they would probably stand at one end of the typological spectrum, that labelled ‘prototypical serial verbs’ in Chapter 1, and characterized by the highest degree of cohesion between its elements. Indeed, SVCs essentially behave the same as a single lexeme, with regard to almost all the semantic categories that may affect a verb phrase. Thus, all tense–aspect–mood markers are obligatorily shared by  $V_1$  and  $V_2$ , and they are marked only once:

- (9) *kēy* [to-yoñteg vēglal *vēh*] na-lñe  
 3pl POT<sub>1</sub>-hear know POT<sub>2</sub> ART-voice:2sg  
 ‘They might recognize your voice’

In (9), the Potential marker *te-vēh* appears once, and is shared by the two verbs; to use the terms of Chapter 1, Mwotlap SVCs are characterized by ‘single marking’ of TAM.

The same observation is true for negative markers, which in this language belong to the TAM paradigm rather than combine with it. Elements of an SVC cannot be negated separately, even if, semantically speaking, only one verb (here  $V_2$  *maymay*) falls under the scope of the negation:

- (10) *kōyō may leg, ba* [et-leg maymay *qete*]  
 3du COMPL married but NEG<sub>1</sub>-married strong NEG<sub>2</sub>:COMPL  
 ‘They’re already married, but not fully married yet’

There seems to be only one semantic category that is assigned independently to each member of an SVC: this is pluractionality, which is morphologically coded by root reduplication (François 2004b). In the next example, one may contrast different combinations, according to whether  $V_1$  refers to one ‘stoning’ event (*yim*) or to several (*yimyim*); and whether  $V_2$  refers to one death (*mat*) or to several (*matmat*):

- (11) (a) no [mi-yim matmat] ne-men  
 1sg PER-stone die:REDUP ART-bird(s)  
 ‘I stoned the birds (once) and killed them’  
 (b) kem [mi-yimyim mat] ne-men  
 1exc:pl PER-stone:REDUP die ART-bird(s)  
 ‘We stoned the bird(s) and killed it/them outright’

Finally, another important issue deals with the sharing of argument structures in serial verbs; this will be the topic of §3.

2.4. SYNTACTIC ASYMMETRIES OF  $V_1/V_2$ 

The properties of Mwoṭlap SVCs reviewed thus far tend to suggest we are dealing with two verbs  $V_1$  and  $V_2$  placed on the same syntactic level, so that it might be tempting to talk about a non-hierarchicalized, multiheaded structure. In fact, several arguments show that  $V_1$  and  $V_2$  have a distinct status, and that their combination remains asymmetrical.

First of all,  $V_1$  and  $V_2$  do not have the same inventory. If all verbs are attested in the  $V_1$  slot, it is not true they can all function as  $V_{\pm 2}$ : such common verbs as *van* ‘go’, *vap* ‘say’, *yoñteg* ‘feel’, or *dēm* ‘think’ are attested only as  $V_1$ , and never as  $V_2$ . In other words, the inventory of verbs that can be serialized, however numerous, appears to constitute a (semi) closed list; the choice of  $V_2$  is clearly not as free as it seems at first.

Among other elements that betray an asymmetry between  $V_1$  and  $V_2$ , a handful of verbs show morphological differences according to their position. The verb ‘know’ has the form *ēglal* when used alone or as a first verb in a series, but becomes *vēglal* in the position of  $V_2$ , as in (9). The verb *sok* is reduplicated as *soksok* when used alone or as  $V_1$ , but as *sosok* when  $V_2$ ; similarly, *tēy* ‘hold’ reduplicates as *tētētēy* if  $V_1$ , but *tētēy* if  $V_2$ , and so on. These ‘SVC specific forms’ are seen only in this adjunct position.

The difference between  $V_1$  and  $V_2$  is even more striking if we begin to consider semantics. Quite often, a verb lexeme will keep its proper meaning when it is used as  $V_1$ , but will receive a more abstract or figurative interpretation when used as a verb modifier. To take just a couple of examples, *tēy* normally means ‘hold in one’s hands’ when in head position, but has a broader comitative meaning (‘be or act *with* someone/something’) when it acts as a verb modifier, as in (1) and (8). Similarly, *v(e)teg* as  $V_1$  means ‘lay (something) down, take leave of (someone)’; but as  $V_2$ , its more abstract meaning ‘away from (something/someone)’ allows for figurative uses such as ‘leave, forget, forgive, surpass’ (see §2.2).

All these arguments tend to confirm that the SVCs of Mwoṭlap, despite apparently forming a balanced string of two verbs  $V_1 + V_2$ , illustrate in fact what the typological chapter of this book called ‘asymmetrical serial verbs’, whereby a ‘minor verb’ from a closed class (adjunct  $V_2$ ) is being serialized to a ‘major verb’ from an open class (head  $V_1$ ).

### 3. Sharing arguments in Mwoṭlap SVCs

#### 3.1. BASIC PRINCIPLES

In §2.3, we saw that the SVCs of Mwoṭlap are characterized by a strong internal cohesion, so that they necessarily share the same value in tense–aspect–mood or in polarity. The issue of argument-sharing is much more complex, and deserves to be examined in detail. It will appear that Mwoṭlap challenges certain typological statements in this regard.





- (13) Tali                    [mi-tit                    teñeñ]                    Kevin  
 T.                    PER-punch                    cry:REDUP                    K.  
 ‘Tali made Kevin cry by punching him’

$$\rightarrow \{x - V_1 - y + y - V_2 = x - [VP] - y\}$$

But Mwoṭlap shows certain configurations that are typologically even more original than (13). One of these is a variant of what is known as ‘cumulative subject’ (see example (34) in the introductory chapter): if one subject semantically includes the other (in the same way as *we* includes *I*), then the subject of the whole SVC will correspond to the more inclusive of these two subjects. This case is best exemplified by sentences meaning ‘accompany (someone)’, where ‘(x+y)-go + x-take-y’ becomes ‘(x+y) -[accompany]-y’:

- (14) dō                    [so                    tatal                    tēy]                    no                    le-tno                    plēn?  
 iinc:du                    PROSP                    walk                    hold                    1sg                    LOC-place                    plane  
 ‘Will you accompany me to the airport?’  
 (lit. Shall *the two of us* walk-and-take me to the airport?)

$$\rightarrow \{(x + y) - V_1 + x - V_2 - y = (x + y) - [VP] - y\}$$

Interestingly, this original construction has made its way into the Bislama pidgin spoken on Motalava: the equivalent of (14) would be *YUMITU karem MI i go long eapot?* The people of the neighbouring islands, whose Bislama would be slightly different here (*YU karem MI i go...*), are sometimes amused by this strange dual subject, directly calqued from Mwoṭlap.

The second configuration we would like to mention here is perhaps even more significant, because it contradicts the claim often made (e.g. Durie 1997: 291) that the elements of an SVC must share at least one argument. In Mwoṭlap, it is not unusual to serialize two verbs having no participant in common at all. This happens typically when  $V_1$  refers to a single-participant action, and  $V_2$  refers to its effect upon another participant. The output of this combination is a transitive macro-verb—as is made clear by (15) and the corresponding formula:

- (15) ige                    susu                    [ma-gayka                    matyak]                    no  
 pl                    small:REDUP                    PER-shout                    be.awake                    1sg  
 ‘I was woken up by the kids shouting’

$$\rightarrow \{x - V_1 + y - V_2 = x - [VP] - y\}$$

Note that in this type of sentence, both verbs are intransitive, as they individually refer to single-participant events:  $\{x - V_1\}$  the kids were shouting in the backyard,  $\{y - V_2\}$  I awoke. Yet the serialization of these two intransitive verbs eventually forms a transitive macro-verb  $\{x - [VP] - y\}$ , as though the action now described were that of an agent (‘the kids’) upon a patient (‘me’).

Among other attested combinations, we can mention the following. Note that these examples, whatever the ambiguities of translation, all combine intransitive verbs.

- (16) ne-leñ [mi-yip hal-yak] na-kat  
 ART-wind PER-blow fly-away ART-cards  
 ‘The wind blew the cards away’
- (17) nēk [so en mōkheg] nē-kle!  
 2sg PROSP lie.down take.rest ART-back:2sg  
 ‘You should lie down (so that) your back can rest!’
- (18) nēk [mi-tig mēlēmlēg] na-lo den kemem  
 2sg PER-stand black ART-sun from 1exc:pl  
 ‘Standing as you are, you’re hiding the sun from us’  
 (lit. You’re *standing dark* the sun from us)

Incidentally, all the examples (15)–(18) form a subcase of what will later be defined as ‘causative serialization’ (§4.2; see Table 4). Its difference with mainstream causatives is the intransitive nature of  $V_1$ , semantically referring to a single-participant event.

### 3.3. OBJECT SHARING PRINCIPLES

Similar remarks can be made on the issue of object sharing. Of course, serialized verbs can share their object, as we saw in (9); but it can also happen that each verb possesses its own underlying object. Because Mwotlap does not allow for ditransitive constructions, only one of these two objects can be retained for the whole SVC, and this may result in syntactic conflicts.

The principle is that the last argument introduced by  $V_2$  ( $z$ ) overrules the object of  $V_1$  ( $y$ ); the latter disappears from the argument structure of the SVC, and can only be retrieved from the context. In (19), the object of  $V_1$  *tow* (*n-eh* ‘song’) is only mentioned in the topic clause:

- (19) nēk so tow n-eh en,  
 2sg PROSP compose ART-song ANAPH  
 nēk [tow tatag] na-myōs nōnōm  
 2sg AOR:compose follow ART-desire your  
 ‘(if) you compose a song, you just compose following your fancy’

There is no place for the argument ‘song’ in the resulting serial structure; the only object retained is the patient of  $V_2$  (‘follow your fancy’):

you COMPOSE *song* + you FOLLOW *fancy* = you COMPOSE—FOLLOW *fancy*  
 that is: { $x-V_1-y + x-V_2-z = x-[VP]-z$ }

An even rarer example of this sort of alchemy is provided by the next sentence:

- (20) ige mēy a kēy so lep n-eh en,  
 (pl) REL SUBORD 3pl PROSP take ART-song ANAPH  
 nok [se lep] kēy  
 1sg AOR:sing take 3pl  
 ‘Those who want to learn the song, I get them to *learn* it by *singing* it’

The pattern here is as follows:

I SING *song* + they LEARN *song* = I SING—LEARN them  
 that is: {x-V<sub>1</sub>-y + z-V<sub>2</sub>-y = x-[VP]-z}

What is perhaps most striking in all these cases of argument restructuring is their perfect regularity (see Table 2). And, in fact, the tighter the syntactic constraints are, the more efficiently they allow the speaker to forge new combinations, and the hearer to interpret them.

#### 4. A functional classification of Mwotlap SVCs

The previous sections were essentially dedicated to the formal and structural properties of Mwotlap serial verbs; we will now undertake a brief semantic typology of these constructions. Interestingly, this functional classification will turn out to be strongly linked to the formal one, as the three major functional categories of serial verbs we recognize depend on whether the subject of V<sub>2</sub> is the same as V<sub>1</sub> ('concurrent' serialization), whether it is another participant ('causative' serialization), or a whole proposition ('event-argument' serialization).

##### 4.1. CONCURRENT SERIALIZATION

Despite the empirical diversity of serial constructions in Mwotlap, it is possible to identify a first major functional type: this is when V<sub>1</sub> and V<sub>2</sub> refer to two simultaneous facets of a single event, performed by the same subject. This semantic value, which we identify as 'concurrent serialization', encompasses a variety of argument structures, with the only proviso that the subject must be the same for V<sub>1</sub> and for V<sub>2</sub> (x). The relevant patterns are listed in Table 3.

An illustration of this functional type would be the following:

- (21) kōyō [ma-tatal kaka] le-mtehal  
 3du PER-walk chat LOC-road  
 'They were discussing while walking along the road'

See also (6) *hohole galgal* /talk lie/; (9) *yoñteg vēglal* /hear know/; (12) *hag dēyē* /sit expect/; (19) *tow tatag* /compose follow/. Whatever their formal and semantic diversity, all these sentences share one essential property: they show the same participant performing two actions (V<sub>1</sub> and V<sub>2</sub>) at once. Quite originally, the

TABLE 3. The five formal subtypes of 'concurrent' serialization

	E-V <sub>2</sub>	x-V <sub>2</sub>	y-V <sub>2</sub>	x-V <sub>2</sub> -y	z-V <sub>2</sub>	x-V <sub>2</sub> -z	z-V <sub>2</sub> -y	y-V <sub>2</sub> -z
x-V <sub>1</sub>	—	x-[VP]	—	x-[VP]-y	/			*
x-V <sub>1</sub> -y	—	x-[VP]-y	—	x-[VP]-y	—	x-[VP]-z	—	*

same-subject serial verbs of Mwotlap always refer to concurrent, complementary facets of a single event, never to successive actions.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, nothing prevents the ‘concurrent’ type from being divided into some secondary functional subtypes, depending on the lexical nature of  $V_1$  and/or of  $V_2$ . For example, the combination of any motion verb ( $V_1$ ) with the adjunct *tēy* ‘hold’ ( $V_2$ ) translates the notion of ‘carry, bring’:

- (22) Bōybōy [mē-hēw tēy] me na-mtig  
 B. PER-descend hold hither ART-coconut  
 ‘Boyboy has brought the coconuts down’

More generally,  $V_1 + tēy$  receives a comitative reading, as in (1) *lak tēy* /dance hold/ ‘dance with (someone)’, or in (8) *suwyeg-qen tēy* /cast-net hold/ ‘go net-fishing with (my shoes on)’. Another kind of comitative—still a case of ‘concurrent’ serialization—can be formed with  $V_2$ , *b(i)yiñ* ‘help, join’:

- (23) dō [so lak biyiñ] kēy?  
 iinc:du PROSP dance join 3pl  
 ‘Shall we dance with them?’

This broad category of ‘concurrent serial verbs’— $V_1$  and  $V_2$  being two facets of a single predication, with the same subject—also covers more abstract configurations, such as the comparative. This consists of the combination of a stative  $V_1$  plus a verb we have already discussed (§§2.2 and 2.4), *v(e)teg* ‘put down, leave<sub>TR</sub>, get away from, surpass’:

- (24) kē [nē-mnay veteg] nēk  
 3sg STAT-clever leave 2sg  
 ‘He’s cleverer *than* you’ (lit. he’s clever he leaves you behind)

It may seem surprising to group in a single functional category such diverse semantic values as simultaneous action (21), comitative (1, 23), and comparative (24). However, it must be clear that our present objective is not to classify Mwotlap serial verbs according to their translation equivalents in English. Rather, it is to illustrate how a single linguistic device—namely, the mere sequence of two verbs  $x - V_1 \dots + x - V_2$ —can be powerful enough to consistently encode a wide range of semantic relations, which in other languages would have been formally broken down into many distinct structures (adverbs, prepositions, gerunds or converbs, subordinate clauses, etc.).

<sup>5</sup> The only apparent exception to this statement would be the frequent combination of the verb *van* ‘go’ with a second verb (e.g. *van wēl nu-suk* ‘go buy some sugar’), which indeed has a sequential interpretation. In fact, this sequence of two verbs is not a standard case of SVC: first, because the verb following *van* belongs to the inventory of heads ( $V_1$ ) rather than of adjuncts ( $V_2$ ); second, this structure allows the sequence V–V to be separated by a directional, which is strictly forbidden to genuine serial structures.



The first case was illustrated by (1) *lak yoyoñ* /dance quiet/ ‘dance calmly’; (5) *hag qaqa* /sit stupid/ ‘stay idly’; or (10) *leg maymay* /married strong/ ‘be fully married’. The second case involves a transitive  $V_1$ :

- (25) na-bago [mi-n̄it maymay] na-m̄alñal en  
 ART-shark PER-bite strong ART-girl ANAPH  
 ‘The shark bit viciously (*lit.* bit strong) the girl’  
 $\rightarrow \{x-V_1-y + E-V_2 = x-[VP]-y\}$

In this sentence, the subject of *maymay* (‘be strong’) is not the shark, let alone its victim; what is meant to be ‘strong’ is event  $V_1$  itself, that is, ‘the shark’s biting the girl’. Formally speaking, one will notice that this sort of serialization always leaves the argument structure of the head intact.

This construction explains why the lexicon of Mwotlap almost lacks manner adverbs (like Eng. *strongly*, *gently*): this role is played by adjectives in the adjunct position, in the structure we call ‘event-argument serialization’.

## 5. Multiverb serialization

All the rules we have seen, whether formal or functional, have been illustrated by serial verbs with only two members. The last issue we would like to address concerns multiverb serialization. How can the speaker calculate, say, the argument structure of an SVC with four elements? This problem is easily solved if one remembers that any macro-verb resulting from serialization behaves exactly like a simple verb; it then becomes possible to describe any string of verbs starting from the head ( $V_1$ ), moving rightwards, and recursively applying the rules defined for any pair of verbs:

$$\{(V_1-V_2)-V_3\}-V_4\}$$

We will illustrate this principle with two examples.

- (26) kēy [laṁ̄ mat veteg] hōw nō-lōmgep en  
 3pl AOR:beat die leave down ART-boy ANAPH  
 ‘They got rid of the boy by beating him to death’

The first combination is a CAUSATIVE SVC, *laṁ̄ mat* /beat die/ ‘beat to death, kill’:

$$\{they\text{-beat-boy} + boy\text{-dead} = they\text{-}(kill)\text{-boy}\}$$

This macro-verb is then incorporated into a CONCURRENT SVC, *laṁ̄-mat veteg* / (kill) leave<sub>TR</sub> / ‘get rid of (someone) by killing him’, which forms a transitive ‘super-macroverb’:

$$\{they\text{-}(kill)\text{-boy} + they\text{-leave-boy} = they\text{-}(get.rid.of)\text{-boy}\}$$

Finally, we can now fully analyse the complex example in the first page of this chapter:

- (1) [lak        tēy yoyoñ ēwē] no  
 AOR:dance hold be.quiet be.fine me  
 ‘Just dance with me calmly’

This string of four verbs must be analysed step by step. The intransitive verb  $V_1$  ‘dance’ and the transitive  $V_2$  ‘hold’ together form a case of CONCURRENT SVC; the result is a transitive verb with a comitative reading:

$$\{you\text{-dance} + you\text{-hold-}me = you\text{-}(\text{dance.with})\text{-}me\}$$

In a second stage, this macro-verb is embedded in two successive EVENT-ARGUMENT SVCs, which leave its argument structure intact:

$$\{you\text{-}(\text{dance.with})\text{-}me + it\text{-is.quiet} = you\text{-}(\text{dance.calmly.with})\text{-}me\}$$

$$\{you\text{-}(\text{dance.calmly.with})\text{-}me + it\text{-is.fine} = you - (\text{just.dance.calmly.with})\text{-}me\}$$

The pronoun *no* in (1) is both the object of  $V_2$  ‘hold’ and the object of the whole serial verb construction, which ultimately behaves as a single verb.

The general tendency, as illustrated in this example, is for event-argument SVCs to occur towards the end of the VP—that is, they form the final steps in the chronology of multiverb serialization. The two other types of SVCs are typically met at the beginning of a serial string, with both orders attested equally: either Causative embedded in Concurrent (26), or the reverse.

## 6. Conclusion

Verb serialization is perhaps one of the domains of Mwotlap grammar which are the most productive and subject to historical change. Certain unattested combinations may one day come to light, while other sequences will eventually disappear; some verbs acquire novel properties according to their position as a head or an ‘adjunct’; some lexemes even progressively change their categorial status and specialize in the function of modifier, either grammaticalizing as a valency-increasing applicative, or simply becoming some sort of adverb, a new building block for phraseological innovation. But paradoxically, although this evolution derives intricately from the formal and functional properties of verb serialization, methodological concerns make it difficult to integrate them into the description of ‘serial verbs’ strictly speaking (§1.3).

Language typology tends to focus more on ‘universal’ word classes such as verbs, at the risk of leaving certain language-specific categories undescribed, like the one we called ‘adjuncts’ in Mwotlap. And yet, studying this rich class of verb modifiers, many of which originally come from verbs in former SVC patterns,



would logically constitute the next step in the description of Mwotlap verb serialization.

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