Serial verb constructions in Burmese

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0. Sketch of Burmese grammar

0.1. Sociolinguistic situation
- language from the central valley (Irrawadi), and from the dominating ethnic
- language with 40 millions of speakers (25-30 millions of native speakers)
- written language from the 12th century
- influenced by Pali (religious language) (95%) Buddhist people
- difference between written and spoken languages (different grammatical morphemes)

"Une distinction existe entre la langue parlée — ou langue vernaculaire — et la langue écrite (ou langue littéraire). En fait, tout document écrit doit l’être en langue dite « littéraire » : discours officiels, écrits administratifs, romans, mais aussi journaux, inscriptions, panneaux de signalisation etc... Quelques exceptions à cette règle : les bandes dessinées, les interviews, les dialogues des textes littéraires et certains romans, sont écrits en langue vernaculaire."

1.2. Burmese Language in brief

1.2.1. Phonology
- Tones (3/4 tons)

(1) ə /sa/ ton bref, haut (voix craquée ?) (T1) to begin
əə /sa/ ton bas et long (T2) letter
əə /sa/ ton descendant (et long) (T3) eat
əə /sa/ syllable atonal + glottal stop (T4) be hot

- Two types of syllables in this language :
  • reduced syllables (atonal) (in bi-syllabic compounds)
  • full syllables carrying a tone

(2) əə /zə -'ga/ parole
əə /θə -'mi/ fille

1.2.2. Morphology
- monosyllabic language
- Polysyllables borrowed from : pali, món, anglais

(3) a. əə /rə -'ga/ illness < from Pali ‘rogā’
əə /seî -'ku/ paper < from Mon ‘cakkho’

b. əə /mwe -'ye'KhwaN + 'ye'KhwâN/ (kind of bag with plastic scales)
1.2.3. Syntax

- SOV (final verb)

(4)  The couple of Lumberjack, (they are) still young.

[439x706]ßæ - khoq - ñæ'liN - ñæ'ma - ñæ'ya - Ka' - [æ-ywæ - Ca' - Pa - `õæ - Tæ] sv
lumberjack  couple  S.top  be young  PLUR  PV.POL  PV.cont.  PVF.R

Wood-cut-NMLZ

- Postpositions, and 'modifier-head' order (for subordinating clauses, demonstrative, genitive... ).

(5)  Don’t eat mangos (which are) too ripe.

[283x706]mwe - `qêye`KhwaN  ?ê? - we  Tæ
snake-skin (of animal)  bag  buy  PVF:R

(She) bought a ‘snake-skin’ bag un sac. (plastic bag ‘scale-d’)
Do you understand in what I was swearing?
(litt. Do you understand the insults that I (from the class of the mother persons) I was saying, don’t you ?!

=> concept of ‘coolness of a language’ (Bisang 1995:143sq) with reference to the use of ‘empty/no pronouns’ and indeterminateness of the verbs with regard to TAM and valency
=> relevant for Burmese

1.2.4.2 Prototypical VP

- Verbal phrase is made with at least one verbal lexical item (invariable) and one final verbal particle (PVF).

\[(\text{AUX}) \quad \text{V} \quad (\text{AUX/ PV}) \quad \text{PVF} \quad \text{SV}\]

(11) a. ... လွင်မှု ムャ `ya ချိုး Pho` တွားkoN တံခါးku Ko
...couple wood cut SUB:purp hill.mound one-CLF upon DIR.

\[\text{arrive} \quad \text{come PV:spt. PV:plur. PVF}\]

[Once,] a couple [of lumberjacks very poor] arrived on the hill to cut some wood.

b. လွင်မှု [\(\text{arrive} \quad \text{PVF}\)]
(They) arrived / have arrived.

=> the PVF is the only obligatory grammatical morpheme; the others verbal morphemes are optional.

1. Aim and origin of the study of serial verb constructions

- Recent works on Burmese language:
  Allott (1965)
  Okell (1969)
  Bernot (1980)
  Wheatley (1982)
  Bernot & al (2001)
  Allot & Okell (2001)

(1) Disagreement on verbal morphemes
(2) Sequence of verbs with identical surface form but with different under-laying structures
One day, a young man, who was really poor and moreover who seemed really idiot [arrived at the wealthy man’s place...]

U Phyu Sin moved out to live in a far-off place.

U Phyu Sin, who was hidden, heard the words said by [the blacksmiths].

- The notion of Serial Verbs Constructions (SVC) : See Déchaine (1993),

2. Serial Verbs Constructions (SVC) : theoretical reminder

2.1 Definition

Bisang (1995 : 138) : « Verb serialization is the unmarked juxtaposition of two or more verbs or verb phrases (with or without subject and/or object) each of which would also be able to form a sentence on its own. »

Déchaine (1993 : 799) : « A serial verb construction is a succession of verbs and their complements (if any) in a single clause with one subject and one tense or aspect value. »

Comrie (1995 : 25) : « Many languages have a phenomenon whereby a sentence may contain a chain of verbs, sometimes separated by other elements, such that of the verbs in the chain either only one shows the full range of tense-aspect-mood oppositions or all the verbs are required to have the same values for (some) tense-aspect-mood oppositions. »

Durie (1997 : 290) : « The archetypal serial verb construction consists of a sequence of two or more verbs which in various (rather than strong) senses, together act like a single verb. »

Aikhenvald & Dixon (2006) : « A serial verb construction is a sequence of verbs which act together as a single predicate, without any overt marker of coordination, subordination or syntactic dependency of any sort. »

- Difference between clause chain (15a) and SVC (15b)

(15) a. ... պրոֆնման թե և թե’ եր որ ը Պի ը ...  plate inside water to put hand wash SUBtps
... after having poured water in the plate and having washed his hands...
2. Main Features

- unique event
- tense, aspect, modality and polarity information shared
- at least one argument shared, and one subject only
- None of the verbs of the CVS can be the syntactic argument of another verb of the SVC.
- Intonation of a single phrase.
- Strong tendency of SVC to move towards grammaticalization or lexicalization.

=> can possess only some of these features → not a uniform phenomenon
=> two main types of SVC : Symmetrical SVC
                        Asymmetrical SVC (See Aikhenvald and Dixon, 2006)

2.3. Symmetrical SVC

The main features of a symmetrical svc are :
- open class for the verbs
- iconicity
- unitary event (See Durie 1997: 321)
  • cognitive explanation
  • Socio-cultural explanation

(16) khoN yu `θwa Pa Ø
stool take go PV:POL (PVF:IMP)
Take the stool away [far from me].

(17) ‘sha-ne’ to’ `sa Pa Ø
salt - with touch eat PV:POL (PVF:IMP)
Soak-(it) in salt (and) eat-(it).

2.4. Asymmetric SVC

- limited class
- semantic change
- not necessarily iconic (see Durie, 1997 : 337)

Sub-categorization of asymmetrical SVC using semantic criteria

DeLancey (1991 : 3) :“The Tibeto-Burman languages manifest a considerable range of grammaticalized verb constructions. Thus the individual and comparative study of such constructions in various Tibeto-Burman languages provides insight into diachronic processes of serialization, auxiliarization and morphologization of originally independent lexical verbs.”

- asymmetrical SVC sub-categories :
  • directional SVC (see Givón (1991 : 83), Bisang (1996 : 149), Durie (1997 : 335)).
  • aspeetual, modal or temporal SVC (see Givón (1991 : 83), Bisang (1996 : 150)
  • comparative SVC
3. Criteria used to analyze Burmese verbal phrase

3.1. Irrelevancy of criteria generally used in studies on SVC

- “Agreement” (tense, person), case marking, syntactic dependence, position of the arguments are not relevant.

(18) သား မြန် စွား
    hiN  ch验证码  Tc
    soup  cook  PVF:R.
    {I, you, he} cook {cooked} {a, some} soup

3.2. Criteria relevant for analysis of Burmese SVC

- assimilation of initial consonants (phonological criterion)
- semantic change linked with new function of an item (semantic criteria)
- place of the negation (syntactic criteria)
- insertion of a connector between the verbs of the SVC (syntactic criteria)

3.2.1. Description of the first criterion (phonological criterion):

- Assimilation of initial consonants in context of vowel and nasal consonant (see Bernot, 1980: 19-41), (Vittrant, 2004: 94, 150), (Vittrant, 2006)

=> Limited criteria : cannot be applied in case of some groups of syllables.

(19) a. အောက် လက် တွေ့မှု
    'sha -n£' to' 'sa  Pa  Ø
    salt - with touch eat  PV:POL  (PVF:IMP)
    Soak-(it) in salt (and) eat-(it).

b. ... မှားကြောင်းသား
    ...ma 'siN 'Sa ta?' 'Phu
    ...NEG mince- eat AUX:capac.  PVF:NEG
    (I) cannot imagine...

c. လိုက်သော လိုက် ချင်သော စေ့ ချင်သော စေ့
    chiN£-ha 'koK£-koKai' 'sa lai?' Tc
    lion-TOP lamb-OBJ bite  eat AUX:term.  PVF:R.
    Le lion devourd the lamb.

3.2.2 Description of the second criterion : semantic change (or semantic bleaching)

Matisoff (1991 : 403): One of the verbs in each concatenation [SVC in our terminology] is the verb-head or «Vh». The others (the «juxtapositorily productive» or «versatile» verbs) stand in a semantically subordinate relationship to the head [...].

Durie (1997 : 323): «Related to lexicalization of particular verb combinations is the tendency for particular verbs to develop distinct meanings when used in serialization»
3.2.3. Description of the third criterion : inserting an item between the components of the SVC

The insertion of the temporal subordinating morpheme /'pyi/ between the two verbs of the SVC is correlated with a semantic change in (20) but not in (21).

(20) a. ការឃុំកើន អាក្រក់មនុស្ស៍ ការស្អាត់ខ្លួន ត្រូវ
je'Ton-Ka' tha ta-yo? 'mwe-'Sa 'Phu Tε
In the past  son one-CLF(hum) adopt, rise up PV:exper. PVF:R.
In the past, (he) has adopted a son.

b. ការឃុំកើន ស្អាត់ខ្លួន ត្រូវ
ce? 'mwe 'pyi 'sa Tε
chicken give birth, rise up SUB eat PVF:R.
(II) rises up some chicken and eat (them).
or (II) rises up chicken to eat [to earn his life].

(21) a. ការឃុំកើន ស្អាត់ខ្លួន ត្រូវ
yai? tha? lai? Pa
bite kill AUX:term. PV:POL
Bite-(him) and kill (him) up!

b. ការឃុំកើន ស្អាត់ខ្លួន ត្រូវ
yai? 'pyi tha? lai? Pa
bite SUB:tps kill AUX:term. PV:POL
Bite-(him) and kill (him) up!

- Insertion of a subordinating morpheme /'pyi/ => emphasis

(22) a. បែកប្រការបុរីដ៏ គឺ គឺ បែកប្រការបុរីដ៏ បែកប្រការបុរីដ៏ បែកប្រការបុរីដ៏
di 'thaye? 'O Ko 'shane' to 'sa Pa
DEM mango OBJ salt with touch eat PV:POL
'qe da ?eya?a po yi Tε
DEM:anaph. this taste VV:be more have PVF:R.
Soak this mango in the salt (and) eat it. It is more tasteful.

b. បែកប្រការបុរីដ៏ គឺ គឺ បែកប្រការបុរីដ៏ បែកប្រការបុរីដ៏ បែកប្រការបុរីដ៏
di 'thaye? 'O Ko 'sha ne' to 'pyi 'sa Pa
DEM mango OBJ salt with touch SUB eat PV:POL
da-'ma'-ma-ho?-yiN ?a'yaN chiN Tε
if not very be sour PVF:R.
Soak this mango in the salt (and/to) eat it. If not, it is very sour.

3.2.4. Description of the fourth criterion : place of the negation

Position of the negation marker in a SVC is known as an important criteria for Verbal Phrase analysis in South-East Asian languages. It is currently used to distinguish autonomous verbal morphemes from affixes.

See Matisoff (1991 : 393), Bjorverud (1998 : 86) for uses of this criterion in other SEA languages.

Matisoff (1991 : 393) : « This sort of development is highly typical of SEA languages in general. The pan-areal criteria for distinguishing full verbs from verb-particles are negatability [...]. »
4. About Burmese Serial Verb Constructions (SVC)

4.1. Similarities and differences

• SVC express a **single process**, 
  => monoclause of the SVC shown in Burmese by single negation marker, single assertive morpheme (PVF).

• **Open class vs. closed class.**
• **Iconicity > symmetrical SVC**
• **Semantic change > asymmetrical SVC.**

4.1.1. Properties of ‘true’ symmetrical SVC in Burmese

Core of features for all sub-types of symmetrical SVC:
- not a phonological unit 
- semantic transparency
- independence of the verbs (open class)

BUT
- different behaviors regarding syntactic criteria (insertion of a subordinator and negation marker)
- behavior of symmetrical SVC with synonymous verbs and ‘pre-verbs’¹ is similar to lexicalized SVC behavior regarding the syntactic criteria.

4.1.2. Properties of lexicalized (symmetrical) SVC in Burmese

- phonological unit 
- idiomatic meaning of the SVC
- No insertion possible (either subordinator or negation marker)

4.1.3. Properties of asymmetrical SVC in Burmese

The asymmetrical SVC do not have a lot in common.

¹ A ‘PRE-VERB’ is a verb that recurs in SVC, that appears as the first element of the SVC, and which function is to specify the process. See Allott & Okell (2001: 294), Bernot (1980 : 354 sq.), and Wheatley (1982 : 265), Vittrant (2004: 164-sq.), Vittrant (in press)
- the verbs of the SVC are not semantically independent
- subordinated verb as a modifier of the process expressed by V-head.
- limited class (syntactic or semantic) for of the subordinated verbs
- the semantic change is frequent but not systematic.
- Inconsistency of subordinating verb’s position in the SVC

4.2. No clear-cut categories or a continuum
- continuum instead of fixed, discrete inventories of categories
- 4 prototypical categories to mark out the continuum
  (1) lexicalized sequence of verbs (compound verbs)
  (2) SVC symmetrical
  (3) SVC asymmetrical
  (4) sequences of verbs containing one (or more) grammaticalized verb(s) (auxiliaries)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>&lt; tendency towards</th>
<th>tendency towards &gt;</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LEXICALIZATION</td>
<td>SYMMETRICAL SVC</td>
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<td>Lexical compounds</td>
<td>ASYMMETRICAL SVC</td>
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<td>GRAMMATICALIZATION</td>
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<td>Auxiliaries</td>
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**Figure (1) : Continuum of Serial Verbs Constructions (SVC)**

**Durie** (1997 : 291) : “There is a very strong diachronic tendency to lexicalization and grammaticalization of the meaning of serial complexes : this can involve treating the whole serial complex as a single lexical(ized) item, or ‘demotion’ of the meaning and grammatical status of one of the verbs to that of a modifier or case-marker.”


4.3. Conclusion :
- Notion of serial verb constructions was helpful for a more global approach of Burmese verbal phrase.
- No clear-cut categories but some tendencies. (See table 1)

References cited :


Vitrant Alice, 2004, La modalité et ses corrélats en birman, dans une perspective comparative, Thèse de Doctorat en Sciences du Langage, Université Paris 8 (Vincennes / Saint-Denis)


Dictionaries :


Abbreviations used

1(P) first person
2(P) second person
3(P) third person
acc accomplishments (aspect)
AdVER adverbializer
ass. assertion of speaker
Aux. auxiliary
Capac. capacity (modality)
CLF classifier
const. constative modality
SVC Serial Verb Construction
DEm. demonstrative
DEm:anaph. demonstrative anaphore
DEm:dist demonstrative (distant)
dir. directional
emph. emphasis
excl. exclamation
expér. Marker of experience already done
F.P. woman speaking
H.P. man speaking
IMP imperative
inac.cc. inaccompli - concomitant (progressive or TOP stative aspect)
IR. realis modality
itér. iterative (aspect)
LOC locative
NMZ nominalizer
per. perfect (result)
perm. permissive
PLUR plur.
PLUR pl. plural (nominal / verbal)
POL politeness
PP a sentence final particle
prosp. prospective (aspect)
PVF final verbal particle
PV verbal particle
R. Realis modality
REL.R relator marked for Realis modality
résult. resultative (aspect)
S. source of the action (« ablative » or « nominative »)
SG singular
SUB subordinator
SPT spacio-temporal
top topic
VV. versatile verb (preverbal aux.)
### Table (1): Continuum of Burmese SVC and their features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features</th>
<th>Lexicalized SVC</th>
<th>Symmetrical SVC</th>
<th>Asymmetrical SVC</th>
<th>Grammaticalized SVC</th>
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**Translations of the SVC (from left to right):**

/siN`Sa/  "to think" (to mince-to eat),
/swê-me/  "to hang on - to lust after",
/swê-ма/  "to hang on - to notice",
/to-`Sa/  "to soak - to eat",
/swê-ye/  "to hang on - write",
/po+/V/  "be more V",
/thä+V/  "re-do V",
/ne+/V/  "be V-ing" (inaccCc aspect),
/thä+V/  "to put-ASP: resultative",
/ta?+/V/  "to know-MOD: capacity",
/C+/V/  "(to look)-to experiment V",
/Se+/V  "(to send)-make s.o. do, let V".