



SERIAL VERB CONSTRUCTION IN ABUA

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ABSTRACT: *Serial verb construction (SVC) is a global phenomenon in the worlds' languages; pidgins and creoles are no exception. Linguists working in the Benue-Congo family of languages attest to the fact that SVC is common in this family of languages. Different approaches have been adopted to account for it; experts are of the view that its origin, existence and productivity relate to the functional load of the inflectional categories of verbs or prepositions in specific languages. This paper examines the existence of SVC in the Abua language, and if it does, we intend to correct certain misconceptions and misrepresentations in the account for SVC. By way of methodology, we elicited data from our respondents, analyzed the data and identify SVC in the Abua language. We found out that SVC involves two principal verbs sharing one predication and one argument. At the same time, these main verbs share value for tense, aspect and represent a single event. This distinctive syntactic and semantic characteristic of SVC fosters serious theoretical challenges. This study evinces that characterizing SVC and making generalizations about its typology is indeed a difficult call to make. The evidence from our data suggests a number of properties that SVC language must have. Based on these underlying semantic and syntactic properties of SVC, we assert that the Abua language has SVC.*

KEYWORDS: Serial Verb, Construction, Language, Pidgins Abua



INTRODUCTION

Abua oral narrative has it that the progenitor of the Abua people has four sons who are Otapha, also called the *okpana* (meaning the first son); he is followed by Emughan, Okpeden, and the last son whose name is lost presently due to his great attachment to the father, whose influence overshadowed him. Oral history has it that it was this last son who became the father of Eglom and Ogide, the traditional rulers of Abua. For the purposes of land security from marauders, hell-bent on intertribal wars for territorial expansion, the first son, Otapha was strategically deployed to defend the southeastern frontiers by securing the crossing and landing where Sombriro Sea meets the land of Abua. Otapha's assignment is to protect this sentry outpost.

Today, Abua has developed into a kingdom in Abua-Odual LGA in Rivers State, Nigeria. The place has a landmass of about 704 km² and a population of about 282, 988 as of the 2006 National population census. Abua comprises Otapha, Okpeden, Ogbo Abuan and Emugham. Abua is linguistically classified by Bendor-Samuel (2019, p. 119) as "Niger-Congo, Atlantic-Congo, Benue-Congo, Cross River and Central Delta". The languages are Abua-Odual, Ogbia, Kugbo, Abureni, Obulom, Ochichi, Ogbogolo, and Ogbronuagum. These languages are spoken in Rivers and Bayelsa States respectively.

The term serial verb construction (henceforth SVC) is known by various other nomenclature. Christallar (1875) calls it "combination of verbs", while Westermann (1930) calls it "verbs in series", Ansre (1966) names it "strings of verbs", Awobuluyi (1967) was not left out, and he referred to SVC as the "compressed sentence construction". Finally, serial verbs are attributed to Stahlke (1970). SVC occurs primarily on the surface level as a series of verbs cum verb phrases without an obvious connector between them. SVC is a multifaceted construction, which Stahlke (1970, p. 272) designates as an inexplicable surface structure construction.

Current literature evinces that Christallar (1875) is the first person to identify SVC in Twi, a Ghanaian language, a second person to also report it is Westermann (1930) in Ewe, a second Ghanaian language. From the evidence in these studies, it appears that SVC is preponderant in languages in the Economic Community of West African States sub-region, Southeast Asia, Amazonia, Oceania and New Guinea. Aikhenvald (2006, pp. 124-143) also reports that many pidgins and creole languages exhibit serial verbs construction. Dorvlo (2007, p. 338) posits that SVC is not confined to a specific geographical region or language group. SVC occurs cross-linguistically. It is a robust syntactic construction spread across one-third of the world's languages. Current literature has not attested to its existence in Europe, North, and Central Asia. Meanwhile, there are scanty pieces of evidence of its occurrence in North America and Australia.

EXISTING LITERATURE

There are a number of recent empirical works that studied SVC. These are Uwalaka (1982), Ndimele (1992), Kari (2003), and Ahaotu (2012). The study by Ndimele focuses on Nigerian Pidgin English (henceforth NPE) while that of Kari concentrates on Degema. We shall examine both studies in this review because they treat Nigerian languages, for which Abua is one. Ndimele evinces the "Kwaness" of NPE from the point of view of SVC. He postulates a number of diagnostic features for a serial verb language, which we shall adopt in our analysis later. We summarize them here.



1. A serial verb language has two or more verbs strung together with no obvious morpheme linking them;
2. The action, state, events and conditions expressed and/or indicated by the final verb phrase is as a result of its activities initiated in the initial verb phrase;
3. Verbs in serial verb construction share one subject and a number of aspectual and/or tense markers.

Ndimele (1996, p. 34) thinks that a systematic study of the grammar of NPE will show lots of resemblances with Nigerian indigenous languages on the level of phonology, syntax and even typology. He adduces that one specific area of grammatical correspondence between NPE and other indigenous Nigerian languages is the manifestation of SVC. His analysis evinces that NPE is a serial verb language, a feature that NPE inherited from Nigerian lingoes, not English. Some illustrative examples of the existence of SVC in NPE are as follows:

- a. Emeka brek dɔɔ enta haus
Emeka brek PTM door enter PTM house.
'Emeka broke the door and entered the house.'
- b. Eze teik oil rob for mai cloth.
Eze teik oil rob for mai cloth.
'Eze stained my shirt with oil.'

The above sentences are made up of several verbs placed beside one another but are not connected by any explicit conjunctive morpheme. Ndimele (1996, p. 127) is of the opinion that sentence (a) has two verbs brek dɔɔ "break door" and enta haus "enter house", which are placed side by side with no clear linking morpheme. The second sentence (b) equally has a number of verbs strung together, again with no obvious conjunction. He argues that the absence of conjunction is an obvious indicator that the constructions are perfect examples of serial verbs. He further evinced using negative sharing, auxiliary sharing and argument sharing in Nigerian Pidgin English how the phenomenon of sharing takes place in serial verbs. With reference to negative sharing, he asserts that a single negative particle "no" occurs in an SVC regardless of the number of verbs occurring in the construction.

On the other hand, Kari (2003, p. 4) studied the nature of serial verb constructions in Degema paying close attention to their types, derivation and the positional possibility of tense cum aspect polarity markers with reference to the verbs. Kari (p. 4) elucidates that in Degema serial verb constructions take at least a couple of verb phrases occurring conjunctively with a couple of subject clitics *i* – *tracing* the functional subject. He asserts that Degema has a concordial serial verb construction because each verb points back to the subject of the sentence through a concord indicator or a pronominal. In other words, the concordial subject threaded to the verbs makes Degema a concordial serial verb construction language. On these grounds, he further



differentiates concordial serial verb construction with one subject clitic from those with multiple subject clitics.

According to Kari (p. 4), SVC with one subject clitic occurs if the subject clitic in the SVC comes before the first verb. For instance (c) below exemplifies this kind of serial verb construction. It is worthy of note that Kari (p. 275) splits clitics away from their landing site, employing '=' as indicator, as observed in the example below. He contends further that high tone (HT) and down stepped high (DSH) only, are marked in the Degema serial verb constructions.

- c. Ibiso oyin ya-nu ubiyo
 Ibiso o=yín ya=no ubiyo (positive factitive)
 Ibiso 3SgSCL=came collected =ubiyo
 'Ibiso came and collected the book.'

He explains that in (c), there are two verbs yin "come" and ya-nu "collect" in a series governed by one subject clitic "o" that agrees with the second verb ya-nu "collect" and Ibiso (personal name) which functions as the subject of the sentence, and agrees in person and number. Ibiso the NP subject comes first before the initial verb "come". Kari (1996, p. 275) further claims that within the concordial kind of SVC possessing one subject clitic, tenses and aspectual markers cling to the ultimate verb in past tense constructions triggering positive factitive and perfective constructions as in (di) and (dii). These phenomena are not observed in similar negative constructions, as in (ei) and (eii). The data below further exemplifies and elucidates these phonological and morphological processes.

- d.
- i. Ikel-oso ovia-nu ubiyo oda kperynoi (Positive factitive)
 Ikeloso 3SgSCL=brought inform=PE him
 'Ike-oso has brought the book and informed him'.
- ii. Ikel-oso óvai-yi ma ubiyo óvai-yi ikpenio (perfect) (Negative factitive)
 Ikel-oso 3SgSCL.NEG=UAUX bring inform him
 'Ike-oso did not bring the book nor informed him'.
- e
- i. Ikel-oso o=ma voi=yé kotu ubiyo ovai-yi (Positive factitive)
 Ikel-oso 3SgSCL=come inform=PE him
 'Ikel-oso has brought the book and informed him'.



ii. Ikel-oso óó=ma yi kótú óóyi Perfect) (Negative factitive)

Ikel-oso 3SgSCL.NEG=UAUX come call him

‘Ikel-oso has not come and called him’.

From the analyses above, we are free to deduce that agreement within SVC having multiple subject clitics has a single subject and an agreement and/or concord subject clitic that comes before the verbs, whether in a verb first or second position in the series as illustrated in (f) below. Kari (2003, p. 274) elucidates that in (f), the factitive enclitic clings to the first verb or at times to the second verb in the series. In the data from Degema certain concordial SVC have several subject clitics if the factitive enclitic is optional post initial verb. The SVCs that behave in this way are in constructions where the first verb occurs after a pronominal object complement that does not start with a vowel.

f

Nene ɔvai=ēni ɔvai-yi kienói

Nene 3SGsCL=brought=FE elephant 3SgSCL=give=FE him

‘Nene brought an elephant for him’

Kari elucidates that in (f) above, the factitive enclitic attaches to the initial and non-initial verbs in the series. It is important to point out that Kari is of the opinion that there are some concordial SVCs with more than one subject clitic where the factitive enclitic is optionally present after the initial verb. Such SVCs are those that have initial verbs followed by a pronominal object complement that begins with a consonant (2003, p. 274).

Theoretical Framework

A number of works have been done by scholars on SVC, this has led to some understanding of this phenomenon. This section looks at the works done so far on SVC stating the various views of scholars on what they say on the structure and characteristics of SVC. A lot of studies exist on SVC within the Chomskyan tradition, while others are carried out without recourse to any theory at all. This study adopts a generative framework, therefore we review related theoretical frameworks.

Stewart was the first to study SVC within the transformational generative grammar framework. Stewart’s (1963, p. 2) analysis of the Twi language spoken by the Asante and Fante in Ghana focuses on accounting for the fact that there are missing subjects and objects when two transitive verbs occur in series as in example (1) below:

1. wɔn tase no fɛmm me.

They picked it lend (PAST) me.

They picked it and lent it to me.



Stewart (2003, p. 146) studied SVC and posits that there are compulsory transformations that combine constructions in (2a) with that in (2b) and deletes the subsequent subject leaving only one subject behind and two verbs in a series.

2a. Kofi de no

Kofi took it.

b. Asantewa femm sule.

Asantewa lend (PAST) Sule.

Asantewa lent it to Sule.

Looking at the above data, the result of merging both sentences is *Kofi took it but Asantewa lent it to me*, which finally results into *He took and lent it to me*. The transformational rules have obliterated aspects of the formation, like Asantewa, which is the subject of the sentence in (b). In agreement with this analysis, Stewart (2003, p. 147) is of the opinion that SVCs are arrived at from amalgamation of two sentences. In his conclusion, Stewart suggests that structures like (3b) are a follow-on from (3a):

a. Adaku faa ne apɔnkye no

Adaku took his goat that;

ɔ femm me ne apɔnkye nɔ

She gave me her goat that.

b. Adaku dee ne apɔnkye nɔ femm me.

Adaku took her goat that (she) gave me.

Stewart (2003, p. 148) avers that a transformational rule will substitute past tense fa ‘take’ with the progressive de ‘take’ to get *ada ku faa ne apɔnkye no*, whereas a second rule will delete the subjective and objective forms, licensing *femm me*. Both structures are then ready for amalgamation to get (3b).

Ansre (2019, p. 3) argues that Stewart (2003) fails to account for the vestigial presence of multiple verbs in a given clause in the language under investigation. Therefore, he proposes exceptions to Stewart’s argument based on data from Ewe and Twi. We summarise the caveats here (2019, p. 29):



1. Certain structures and/or elements that appear like verbs fail to exhibit verbal characteristics even when their positional possibilities permits or licenses it.
2. The reason is that these structures lack morphological properties of concord as it relates to tense, aspect and mood that normal verbs in these positions evince.
3. The word “verbid” rather than verb is suggested for these elements.
4. Stewart (2003, p. 2) asserts that multiple verbs in a structure are a result of the amalgamation of structures triggered by transformational rules.
5. The argument is that (4) above will be impossible if one of the verbs in the series is a verbid, and will fail to perform the functions of a principal verb in its conjunct.

We now turn to studies on SVC which are not based on Transformational Generative Framework but are rather predicated on Lexical-Functional Grammar. The empirical studies which fall into this category are Emenanjo (1978), Dechaine (1992), Bodomo (1998), and Bodomo, Lam and Yu (2003). We shall begin with Bodomo (1998) and Bodomo, Lam and Yu (2003). The definition of SVC proffered by Bodomo (1998, p.195) is “a construction in which two or more different verbs share identical arguments within a single clause”. The following illustrative examples are provided from Dagaare.

1. Sonia da ngme-φ la Ayuo loo-φ

Sonia past beat-perf. factitive. Ayuo cause+fall-perf.

Sonia knocked Ayuo down.

[Sonia knocks Ayuo, Bayuo falls Ayuo.]

Bodomo (1998, p. 198) sees serial verb constructions in the language he studied as a multifaceted construction. These multifarious constructions have multiple predicators that share a single subject in the same clausal pattern. He asserts that serial verbs ought to be seen as compounded predicates due to the fact that they act as a unit and a single event. To prove these, two tests are suggested for SVC in Dagaare – the negation and question tests.

Joan Bresnan is a linguist who works at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, while Ron Kaplan is a psychology specialist with the University of Harvard. Both experts became preoccupied with the problem of “psychological plausibility” and “computational tractability”. Both fellows sought to construct a model powerful enough to handle “linguistic learning ability and language processing”. Kaplan and Bresnan (1982) consequently design the Lexical-Functional Grammar (LFG) as a model of generative grammar, sub theory in the Chomskyan tradition. The overall architecture is to elucidate what the native speaker knows about his language. This grammar specifically models explicitly and distinctly the native speaker’s intuitive understanding of his language. A second phase of the model is the computational mechanism that acts like a language processor.



ii. Atunima stand –Pst-2sg come –Pst 2sg take –Pst book

Atunima stood up, came and took the book

Ànmáííř àbúáú ùghú òòghó Ìgáří

iii. Woman Abua go-pst buy garri

Abua women went to buy garri

Subject Marking

If serial verb construction occurs in a clause, the subject NP is “cross-referenced” on V₁ as seen below.

3i. Òdí àról kú àbélh

3SG- sit-Pst read-Pst

He sat and read.



Àkwámí améérírákùàsìghé àrú SÌngírí

ii. Akwani-Nom rise-pst-2sg bring –pst 2sg Scissors

Akwami stood up and brought scissors.

Àbídí Òghú Òtú ìbééréghí

iii. They run-pst leave-pst house prayer

They ran and left the church.

iv. Áwé Òlé ìbóóm ìkpókí Páphó

People-3sg eat-Pst alot money

People made a lot of money from it.



Tense and aspect marking

Abua language marks tense on the verb generally, each verb is marked for tense, if the verb shares the same tense. Nevertheless, tense is only overtly marked on the initial verb in a serial construction. Tenses and aspectual contrasts in Abua are morphologically marked as infixes, their markers are obligated by V₁ and V₂ and they are marked once or twice.

4i

Òyéàmágh yòdí

Oye 3sg amagh yodi

Oye called him.



Òyé rààmágh òbénhíyíáárí

ii

Oye -3sg amagh obenhi iyaari

Oye is telling you something

iii

Òyérààmghì nyòdí òbénhí

Oye 3sg calling him, tell something

Oye is calling him to tell him something

Negative verbs

Bamgbose (1974, p. 16) correctly observes that negation in an SVC correlates with the underlying sentences. In Abua, we observe that in SVC, verbs share a high tone, which evinces negativity. Abua HT is often indicated on the subjective form which occurs before the first verb in the serial construction. Furthermore, in Abua SVC, each verb can be morphologically marked for negation if the whole series is negation.

5i. Odè òdl kuá kóghí



He-3sG come-pst no go-PST

He has neither come nor gone



When light verbs are used the negative morphemes come in-between the pro-verbs.

- ii. Odi okpegheron onu odi okaph iyaari
He-3sG not opens mouth you talk nothing
He didn't open his mouth to say nothing.

- iii. Òrúán ra ònááughánám dùglúm
Oruau-3SG do not hear sound word
Oruau does not listen to advice

Questioning

Abua language involves wh-movements too, just as shown below:

- 6i. Àyán kù àróm yòdí mò àsighe oghuupho

- ii. Àníéán kú dí ná àbátánú omaghe



Who send-PST-3SG-you to bring -PST-runner?

Who sent you to bring the car?

Whom-2SG you stand rise-PST call

Whom did you rise to call?

Semantic types of SVCs in Abua

Following Durie (1997) and Kari (2003), we describe the various types of SVC in Abua, paying attention to its semantic import. They include the following.\

Benefactive SVC

The benefactive type of SVC evinces the idea that a person will benefit from the action of another. The verb give is used as the second verb in a benefactive SVC. The NP that occurs after "give" is the recipient of the NP or the situation characterized in "VP". (Durie 15)



ii. Ìgáy àghó ògúúgh Ìdhílá Ìmí

Igay buy-PST runner wheel carry go give –PST me
Igay bought a car and gave it to me.

iii. Òdé àmí àbúghá àpítáná úghó Èmí

My father- uproot-r-PST cassava give me
My father uprooted cassava and gave to me

Simultaneous SVC

In simultaneous SVC, the verbs' state, the idea/or actions of the serial verbs can occur at disparate times or concurrently. If the action occurs at disparate times, the verbs' sentence is serialized, if not, it is not serialized. In other words, the activities of the verb are borne by the same subject NP. The Abua illustrative examples below evince how concurrent constructions are signified.

2i Ùlámí ràbàh mén dí íráláy èdién

Ulami aux-v pre-eat food aux pre work
Ulami is eating and talking

ii. Ùlámí ràbàh kù íráláy èdién

Ulami talks while eating food

iii. Òdé rá mórí rá kérí

Ode is singing and dancing



Directional SVC

Directional SVC deals with verbs that are emotional and evince gesticulation, which come before the action of the verb. It specifies the pathway the action of the verb is going. The verbs of direction from a positional point of view are penultimate. In other words, the second verb evinces the pathway, whereas the first verb indicates the method of movement. The path of V₁ could be away from an object or away in the direction of the object. Examine the table below:

Linear order of directional verb in Abua SVC	Manner if motion verbs or verbs that entail motions	Regular form of path	Tracking previous path	Tracking an object sited in the external world	Tracking interaction between the path and the external world	Tracking speech act participants (deictic verbs)
Examples	rakili to run rakil elom to run faster rataleh to walk	raki oyen to go straight ratele kagiuronon to go round	mabula to come rabuuleh to retreat ratiguel to return	radighu to enter ramite to exit	rasing to ascend rasore to descend	oghi to go oruh to come

Linear order of directional manner of motion verbs or verbs that entail motions

3i. Òólá àsighe díyá phò àrúṣú rà àlò,ó dí

Oola take book bring himself

Oola brought the book by himself

Manner Verb

This deals with *how* the activities of the verbs are conceived or understood. The penultimate verb presents the how, whereas the ultimate verb evinces the activity. Consider the example below.



4i. MÌ rà zúmángáú kú kámágh Ìkúmórà àwé



1-SG bow –bow-PST to greet-our elders me

I bowed down to greet my elders.

ii. Pìnímá àkpúplíén àbééréphí

Pinima kneel-PST ground pray-OVS

Pinima knelt down to pray.

Purpose SVC

The verbs in this category signify or represent drive or reason (the why of something). The ultimate verb in the series specifies the reason, while the penultimate verb evinces the activity. Numerous examples of verbs belonging to this SVC cluster are presented in the example below.

5 i Òdí àbétánú àrééléh

He stood up and walked

5 ii Àbídí ùrù píníán

The girl took the food and ate.

5 iii Òyéníphó àsíghé èdúén phò àléh

They came for a wedding.

Comparative SVC

The verbs in this category specify which verb has more features or characteristics than the other, comparatively. Experts posit that the subjective noun phrase of the first verb shows more attributes (that is, they are dynamic) than the second verb-noun phrase, which are usually static or stative.



6i. Ìmákírú àsúúgh òg hòg ólòghí rá àpúh ùbékú



Imakiru is more intelligent and deceitful than a tortoise

ii. Èmmá àphóph kù àbílé ùpú ùmí

Emma is taller and darker in complexion than me.

iii. Èyaal áléh èdíéú kù àyúgh òyúgh àpú òdúámólóghí

Eyaal eats and talks much more than oduamologhi

Completive Verbs

Some examples of completive verbs are:

7i. Àkííkphóyé àghórú ósáá édíéú phò

Akiikhoye hurried to finish preparing the food.



ii. MÌ ùghórú òsí òlòghó òtú

I walked fast to get to the house.

iii. Èmúghípú àghíl ágí òtú Ìtúúghá

Emughipu ran fast to school

Resultative

Resultative “constructions” are those in which V₁ may cause the realization of the event depicted by V₂. However, there is little or no time lapse between the performances of the two events” (Kari 2003, p. 11) as seen in the example below.



Ènám àmí Ìméél èsuíná nyán ènúm

8 i

My meat fell into the fire and got burnt.

He played so rough that he got injured.

8 ii

Òdí àphégh èkééléúy èphégh kù ádíghímá Ìyàár



CONCLUSION

The evidence in this study evinces that SVCs are composed of sequences of verbs or verb phrases in various clausal types or cumulative clauses. The relationship existing between the elements are sometimes unmarked. The “verbs in SVC share one semantic argument” without employing the services of conjunctions or inflexions to indicate coordination or subordination. Our data evinces the disparate semantic notions which are articulated through SVC in Abua.

Also examined in the work are the syntactic structure and semantic kinds “of serial verb constructions in” Abua. We found out that Abua is a serializing language and has purposive, causative, and resultative SVCs. Having reviewed the principles and properties of SVCs in Abua in previous sections, we summarize their general characteristics in a few words. Abua type SVC contains double verbs (or more) without obvious coordination or subordination indicators. The two verbs form one predicate. The negation particle *na* does not have scope over the whole string. Two morphological negators are also possible in the Abua language. The verbs may or may not share the same subject. Abua language has “structures in which the shared object is expressed only once in the SVC”.

However, in some structures the object can be expressed twice, they may or may not “share the same markers of tense and aspect. All serialized verbs also occur alone in non-serial constructions” (Kari 7). The verbs do not involve any embedding structures and are monoclausal in that they share a single tense. The “actions expressed by the verbs are either simultaneous or consecutive” (7). V_2 is always a result or goal of V_1 , “Either the semantic subject of V_1 is the subject of V_2 , or the object of V_1 is the semantic subject of V_2 ”.

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