

Serial verb constructions package information, not events

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In this talk, I argue that discourse is more important for understanding serial verb constructions than single eventhood. The status of the relationship between eventhood and serial verb constructions is a long-standing debate in functional-cognitive linguistics. Serial verb constructions (SVCs) have been said to encode single events (Bisang 2009), multiple sub-events (Aikhenvald 2006, 2018), a macro-event (van Staden and Reesink 2008), or even multiple events (Pawley 1987). Based on an in-depth corpus study of three languages of Northeast India, I find that SVCs most commonly express events which have been previously introduced into discourse. This suggests the lack of clarity surrounding the relation between eventhood and verb serialisation results from an epiphenomenon of information packaging constraints and principles of communicative efficiency, rather than being a core property of the construction itself.

To determine the relation between information flow and serial verb constructions, I investigated a range of multi-verbal constructions including SVCs in naturalistic data from Kera'a (idum1241), Galo (galo1242) and Duhumbi (chug1252), three Trans-Himalayan languages of Arunachal Pradesh, India. Each construction received GRAID annotations for grammatical status (Haig and Schnell 2014) and annotations for activation status of lexical items and events (Reinöhl et al. in prep), as well as identifiers tracking single events throughout a text.

The combination of annotations on different levels allows a nuanced approach to determining which factors are important for interlocutors in choosing a certain construction. SVCs were only realised within single intonation units, suggesting that they follow the "one new idea" constraint proposed by Chafe (1994). This implies that the limit of what a SVC can express is one discourse-new event, or alternatively, as many not-new events as an interlocutor wishes to construe as a single unit, or 'episode'. This hypothesis is supported by a further qualitative investigation into the distribution of SVCs and converb constructions vis-à-vis events in the corpora, which found that new events were more commonly introduced into discourse with converbal strategies, while not-new events were more commonly resumed with a SVC. The tendency of interlocutors to opt for SVCs with not-new information suggests that informativity plays a large role in determining construction choice (cf. Levshina 2022), with higher levels of contextual predictability resulting in a lower need for explicit marking of relations between events. This study into the distribution of SVCs in naturalistic corpora points to a need for a discourse-based understanding of eventhood and construction choice, as well as to the crucial role that communicative principles play in structuring language.

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