Chapter 2

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2022-01-19

2.1 Introduction

What is a serial verb construction? This question, although deceptively simple in its appearance, continues to remain the centre of heated debate by linguists sixty years after the term was first popularised by Stewart (1963). From discussions about the typical syntactic characteristics of serial verb constructions (SVCs) to the possible cognitive output of such constructions, researchers have very different perspectives on what is essential about the SVC.

The struggle to define the SVC has led researchers to focus on finding commonalities which hold across a wide variety of languages. This leads to a contradiction whereby SVCs are analysed as a singular phenomenon cross-linguistically, despite the recognition of the heterogeneity of constructions included under this term. For example, Bisang (2009) questions whether SVCs form a cross-linguistically consistent grammatical phenomenon while suggesting that they all share the cognitive property of encoding a single event. Aikhenvald (2006) states that SVCs "do not constitute a single grammatical category" (2006, 2), yet are a monoclausal "grammatical technique" (ibid.). Both van Staden and Reesink (2008) and Pawley (2011) posit two separate construction types which come under the banner of "serial verb construction," dependent on whether they express one single event or multiple events. On the other hand, Foley (2010) posits that there are likely no universal defining properties for SVCs.

What is considered a typical feature of a serial verb construction similarly varies amongst different analysts. While typologists tend to agree that SVCs should be juxtapositions or sequences of verbs without overt marking (Foley and Olson 1985; Durie 1997), experts on specific languages include the possibility of construction-dedicated verbal marking in their language-specific definition of SVCs (Kilian-Hatz 2006; Foley 2010; Defina 2016). Problems of wordhood and grammaticalisation come to a head when confronted with the resulting constructions. Some linguists analyse

constructions as compounding or as SVCs based on whether the construction consists of one or two phonological words (Crowley 2002; François 2006, 227–28). Similarly, analysts disagree how to distinguish between auxiliary and serial verb constructions – or even whether such a distinction is necessary in the first place – depending on how 'grammaticalised' one of the verbal elements in the construction is (cf. discussion in Haspelmath 2016, 302–4).

Such a focus on finding unifying characteristics and classifying serial verb constructions precludes us from exploring all the possibilities found in languages worldwide. It encourages us to ignore patterns by discarding data points or consigning them to marginalia, rather than centring them in a holistic discussion of verb serialisation phenomena. It pushes us to impose more restrictive definitions to find meaning, rather than letting insights arise naturally from data. Without first mapping out the possible design space of language, can we truly know what is meaningful? We should aim to take an inductive approach to see what insights can be gleaned from data from a naturalistic context, rather than the deductive 'top-down' approach common in typology.

Deductive, or 'universal,' approaches to verb serialisation suffer from serious logical problems. These can be classified into three main areas: the exoticisation of serial verb constructions, conflation of analytical units, and definitional issues. Serial verb constructions are often treated as unique phenomena independent of the linguistic ecosystem in which they are used. This particularism leads to logical fallacies in attempts to define the phenomena, both through the conflation of analytical linguistic units with cognitive units of meaning, as well as the *a priori* definition of linguistic units using units from different subsystems.

The chapter is structured as follows. The introduction above provides a overview to some of the issues that I perceive in the current approach to verb serialisation in the literature. The justification for taking a new approach will be further explored in Section 2.2, which will delve into previous assumptions made in the analysis of serial verbal constructions. Finally, Section 2.3 will act as an interim summary of my argumentation, prior to Chapter 3, in which a different research paradigm is laid out.

2.2 Assumptions

2.2.1 SVC = Exotic

Serial verb constructions are typically portrayed as a grammatical phenomenon found exclusively outside of Europe, mostly found in languages of Africa, Asia, and Oceania. This non-European distribution often leads to an exoticisation of the construction type as something which must be

translated into or analysed with grammatical categories sourced from European languages. An example of how verb serialisation has traditionally been conceptualised as inherently different is the search for typological features which correlate with the presence of serial verb constructions in a given language. Languages are often categorised as either "serialising" or "non-serialising" without any empirical evidence justifying this binary split (see e.g., Aikhenvald 1999, 474; 2006, 3; cf. however Paul 2008). This generalised label erases any nuance about what subtypes of constructions may be present in a language, let alone any further details about how frequent the construction may be. The 'othering' of verb serialisation often leads to a completely separate treatment of the phenomenon independent of the grammatical ecosystem in which it occurs.

Serial verb constructions are not functionally unique, despite the challenges their form poses to linguistic theories. Bisang (1995) remarks that verb serialisation and converb constructions in both "broad" and "narrow" senses perform similar functions, including marking TAM, encoding resultatives and directionals, and introducing new arguments. This is further reflected in how some researchers have used the term 'serial verb constructions' to describe converb constructions in their linguistic analyses of particular languages (e.g. Goddard 1988).

Serial verb constructions are also distributionally linked to other multi-verbal expressions. Converb constructions often grammaticalise into "narrow" serial verb constructions, such as in Lhasa Tibetan (Trans-Himalayan; Tibet, China) and South American languages (DeLancey 1991; Bisang 1995; Aikhenvald 2011, 22). This tendency is mirrored in synchronic evidence showing an alternation between converb constructions and serial verb constructions in Kurtöp (Trans-Himalayan; Bhutan; G. Hyslop 2013) and Ladakhi (Trans-Himalayan; Ladakh, India/Tibet, China; Zeisler 2013), as well as correspondences between converb constructions and serial verb constructions in different dialects of Atayal (Austronesian; Taiwan; Shibatani 2009, 256). Pawley (1987) and van Staden and Reesink (2008) furthermore hypothesise that the presence of certain types of verb serialisation stems from the presence of clause chaining in a given language.

Even the subtypes of SVCs which raise issues for grammatical theory can be explained with reference to pre-existing ideas. For example, switch-subject SVCs posed large problems for generative theories of grammar (e.g. Baker 1989; Durie 1997), as the presence of two different subjects and/or objects in the same clause challenged basic underlying assumptions in Chomskyan grammatical theories. However, it is possible to interpret the 'switch' in subject through the lens of object control, whereby the first object 'controls' the second subject within the construction (cf. Paul 2008, 379–80).[1] Other subtypes such as same-subject SVCs can similarly be understood from the perspective of subject control. This links serial verb constructions to clause chains and other biclausal

[1] I do not make any overall claims here about whether switch-subject SVCs should be analysed as a monoclausal or a biclausal construction, as this is largely dependent on the theoretical framework an analyst works in.

constructions, from which it is frequently not possible to distinguish serial verb constructions in everyday usage (Lovestrand 2021, 121).

Taking a contextualised view of serial verbal constructions enables us to explore what is crucial for our definitions using a primarily bottom-up approach and situate this phenomenon within a reimagined design space of language. Hypotheses about how SVCs relate to other mono-verbal and multi-verbal constructions become empirically testable, as do comparisons between different constructions encoding the same function. Serial verb constructions become simply another tool in the linguistic toolbox, rather than something which singles a language out as 'exotic.'

2.2.2 One SVC = One Event

The phenomenon of verb serialisation poses certain dilemmas for the construction of meaning. Traditional approaches to eventhood rest upon the Aristotelian assumption that single verbs form the core of a predicate and that monoclausal predicates encode one single event. Analysts relying on this claim commonly take a translational or distributional perspective to serial verb constructions. This view is illustrated in the common adage that an SVC corresponds to or functions like a single verb in 'non-serialising' languages. The verbs within the construction are then taken to express subevents or different aspects of the complex event expressed by the SVC (e.g. Lord 1973, 269). This perspective is expressed, for example, in the following quote by Bowden (2001, 297) regarding SVCs in Taba (East Makian; Austronesian; Halmahera, Indonesia):

> *It has often been noted by people writing on verb serialisation that SVCs fulfill a function in serialising languages similar to that of individual verbs in languages without serialisation. SVCs thus describe what native speakers conceptualise as single events with the individual verbs referring to subcomponents of those events.* (Bowden 2001, 297)

The logic is clear: as SVCs correspond to single verbs (whether in another language or in the same language), they must similarly encode the same cognitive unit. Because there are multiple verbs within an SVC, the event which is expressed must thus be complex. However, this line of argumentation relies on the assumption that all predicates must express one event. This is patently false.

Not all things which pattern like verbs must express events. Verbs in combinations with other verbs frequently function as aspectual or modal auxiliaries and are commonly excluded from general consideration as event-encoding elements, despite still being classed as verbs and potentially

functioning elsewhere as a main verb (see Example 1). We find serial verb constructions in non-European languages with similar functions, i.e. where one verb modifies the TAM specification of the overall event, rather than contributing lexical information. However, as the verb can be found elsewhere as a main predicate, the resulting construction is classified as verb serialisation (e.g. in Khmer; Example 2). Regardless of one's preferred analysis, these constructions should receive a similar treatment as to whether they encode more than one event or not, and whether this event is simplex or complex.

(1) a. English (Indo-European; Australia; own knowledge)
I **will** go to the shops tomorrow.

b. English (Indo-European; Ireland; Eoin Colfer in OED)
Artemis studied the Polaroid. He **willed** his heart to maintain a calm beat.

(2) Khmer (Austroasiatic; Cambodia; Enfield 2003:199)

khŋom phcùːə(r) srae baːn
I plough paddy come_to_have

'I can plough the paddy field.' / 'I have ploughed the paddy field.'

At the other end of the spectrum, some linguists posit that a single SVC can involve multiple events, rather than one single complex event. This possibility was highlighted from the beginning of SVC research by Christaller (1875, 144) in his characterisation of "accidental combinations" in Akan as "two (or more) sentences [which] are thrown or *contracted* [sic.] into one." More famously, Pawley (1987) posed the question whether this type of "compressed" SVC expressing multiple events represents a different cognitive reality or a different way of carving up the experienced world. The idea of multiple events expressed in a single SVC is inherently linked to theorisation about how speakers of a given language choose to conceptualise and realise eventhood.

The range of hypotheses concerning the internal semantic complexity of SVCs suggests that it is impossible to simply assert that a SVC encodes a single event, however complex it may be. The question thus becomes: is there a difference for speakers if a SVC encodes a single event or multiple events? Single or multiple eventhood is not an inherent property of the verbs or the construction, but rather is inferred from how a speaker chooses to express – and interpret – a given set of actions.

An approach to serial verbal constructions built solely upon on the assumption of correspondence between the eventhood of monoverbal predicates and a multi-verbal construction is not empirically adequate. It does not take into account the myriad of possible interpretations of a given construction by speakers and often ignores the wide range and typological complexity of SVCs that we see cross-linguistically. To escape this, some choose to take a different approach to the original Aristotelian

thesis and assert that a proposition is a clausal property, rather than a verbal one. They make another assumption, namely that monoclausality entails single eventhood.

2.2.3 One Clause = One Event

One approach to the Aristotelian conceptualisation of eventhood is to equate it with a clause, rather than with a verb. This entails that a single clause expresses a single event. If SVCs are monoclausal, they must express a single event, and vice versa. The multiple verbal elements within the construction thus can express no more than a subevent within the larger event expressed by the clause. This position is furthered by works such as Aikhenvald (2006):

> *In summary: semantically, serial verb constructions may encode one event, or several subevents closely linked together, or even several subevents in sequence which may be conceptualized as connected to each other. In the latter case, it may appear hard to draw a tight semantic distinction between a monoclausal serial verb construction and a sequence of clauses.* (Aikhenvald 2006, 12)

Givón (1991, 140) points out that this results in the potential for definitional circularity, saying that, for example, "linguists are notoriously prone" to defining cognitive units using grammatical structures and vice versa. Unsurprisingly, cases in which analysts assume the parity of syntactic and cognitive units abound in the literature.

Evidence refuting the assumption between single verbs and single events supports Givón's statement here. If a clause is taken to encode no more than one event, then constructions which are defined as monoclausal on language-specific grounds and involve more than one distinct action in their semantics act as counter-evidence for the monoclausal event hypothesis.

Other researchers approach this issue from the opposite perspective, i.e. that single events are prototypically encoded as monoclausal constructions (e.g., Bisang 2009). While this thread of argumentation does not assume a one-to-one relationship between eventhood and monoclausality, it still takes the Aristotelian theory as its base. Researchers taking this position frequently rely on solely morphosyntactic evidence to support their position, despite the crucial role that the nature of eventhood plays in their hypotheses.

The reliance of analysts on solely morphosyntactic data to evidence cognitive units speaks to the circular logic trap that many fall into. Eventhood is asserted to be a property of a clause by the linguist. When any construction is morphosyntactically defined as monoclausal, the analyst thus takes it to represent a single cognitive event. The reason for analysing the semantic content of

the construction in this way, however, is motivated by the original analytic decision taken in the first place. Such arbitrary analyses cannot used as a foundation for theorisation about the nature of cognitive representation.

A secondary issue is the typological investigation of the monoclausal event hypothesis without ensuring the comparability of the units under discussion, i.e. that the status of clauses are also comparable across the languages investigated. Different researchers often use varying criteria for determining what is definitional for a given phenomenon (cf. Tallman 2020) and do not investigate whether these criteria match across the language sample. This is particularly relevant for the notion of clausehood, which still lacks a robust cross-linguistic definition (Haspelmath 2016; Creissels 2020). Analyses of eventhood which rely on clausehood and vice versa inherently lack rigour if research is conducted in this fashion.

One attempt at investigating the relation between syntactic units, clausehood, and cognitive units is the Macro-Event Property (MEP) criterion advanced by Bohnemeyer and colleagues. Bohnemeyer et al. (2007) argue for the use of a separate cognitive unit of analysis termed the "macro-event," which corresponds to segments of events bounded by locations in time. A construction has the macro-event property if all subevents encoded by the construction fall under the scope of the same temporal modifier, such as a time adverbial in English (e.g., "yesterday," "for 10 minutes") or a tense marker (e.g., past tense). While this is an improvement over approaches to defining eventhood based on syntactic unithood, the macro-event property still relies on a morphosyntactic diagnostic – temporal scope – for its establishment. It is, however, also important to recognise that macro-eventhood does not entail a one-to-one relation with a verb phrase or clause: "a typology of linguistic event segmentation based on verb phrases or clauses would at best be a typology of the semantics of verb phrases or clauses" (Bohnemeyer et al. 2007, 502). Despite the dependence of the MEP on syntactic units, Bohnemeyer and colleagues are able to illustrate differences in how speakers of different languages choose to segment events across clauses. This finding is independent of how clauses are defined on a language-specific basis, and thus manages to avoid the circular assumptions of previous work, despite the reliance on non-naturalistic data.

A simplistic approach to defining eventhood based primarily on syntactic units is, at best, misguided. Bohnemeyer et al. (2007) provide us with initial empirical evidence demonstrating that speakers of different languages vary in how much information they express within a single clause in the encoding of the same event. Approaches which do not treat eventhood as fundamentally independent from morphosyntactic units such as verbs and clauses disregard the inherent logical flaws made in their assumptions. We cannot and should not assume that a single clause is equal to a single event. Cognitive units require alternate methods of investigation.

2.2.4 One IU = One Event

The use of intonation units in verb serialisation research was pioneered by Givón (1991) to provide an independent unit of cognitive measurement. However, this approach, too, runs into problems. This thread of research assumes that the realisation of a SVC within a single intonation unit entails that a SVC encodes a single cognitive unit. Instead of assuming that syntax and eventhood are inherently linked, syntax and prosody are assumed to have an isomorphic relationship, as are prosody and cognition. The study additionally relies on an inadequate definition of intonation units, and makes the assertion that whatever is realised within a single intonation unit represents an instantaneous example of grammaticalisation or lexicalisation (see Pawley 2011, 24–38 for critique of this latter point). The implications of this study have widely affected how SVCs have been conceptualised over the past thirty years, despite its methodological inadequacies.

To begin with, the hypothesis that prosody and syntax have a one-to-one relation is not tenable. The theory of Prosodic Phonology (Selkirk 1986; Nespor and Vogel 2007) was developed precisely *because* of mismatches between syntactic units and prosodic units and continues to be the most popular theory in investigations of the prosody-syntax interface. Although there are still disputes about whether prosody makes direct or indirect reference to syntax (see Elfner 2018 for further discussion), there is no support for the claim that prosodic units must match syntactic units exactly. Theories linking the syntax of verb serialisation to prosody must take into account issues of speech production (cf. Levelt 1993) and cannot assume such isomorphism exists.

Givón's idea that intonation units each realise a single cognitive unit is intriguing but requires refinement. This is partly due to his choice to utilise pauses as the sole indicator of edges of intonation units. This decision shows a lack of understanding of the varied nature of pauses and intonation units, both of which were decently understood at the time of publication (e.g. Rochester 1973; Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974; Cutler and Ladd 1983; Ladd 1986). Givón lumps all pauses over 100msec into one group, which fails to take into account the systematic differences between planning pauses, hesitation pauses, and possible phonetic silences (e.g. closure during stops). It is additionally not clear whether these pauses were separated out later on as part of a post-hoc analysis (Givón 1991, 145). He furthermore shows a willingness to misunderstand the nature of filled pauses (e.g. English *um*, *uh*) in justifying his usage of overt conjunctions as representing "temporal gaps" (Givón 1991, 171). These methodological issues mean that any quantitative results should be taken with a large grain of salt, although overall tendencies may be valid.[2]

The choice of using pauses as the sole boundary cue of intonation units runs into empirical issues

[2]Peck and Becker (2021), for example, find that while pauses are not associated with clause boundaries, clause boundaries *are* associated with pauses, with longer pauses tending to occur at a main clause boundary. It would be interesting to review the raw data from Givón (1991) in this light and see if similar conclusions can be drawn.

regarding distribution. While a pause is a sufficient condition for the positing of an intonation unit, its presence at an intonation unit boundary is not necessary. The sole universal cue for an intonation unit boundary is pitch reset, despite how perceptually salient pausing is as a cue (Himmelmann et al. 2018). These two cues frequently co-occur, often simultaneously alongside other cues such as the lengthening of unit-final syllables and an increased speed of unit-initial syllables. Because intonation units do not need to be bounded by pauses, Givón's methodology does not capture intonation units, and instead tracks "breath groups." This results in the probable over-representation of units not preceded by a pause in Givón's findings, i.e. units which occur within a single intonation unit *pace* Givón. Any study claiming to investigate units realised within single intonation units should be cognisant of the fact that pausing does not adequately establish the distribution of intonation units and must take into consideration the role that other acoustic cues may provide.

Givón's theoretical conclusions are also problematic from the view of on-line language production. He claims that the realisation of a chunk of language within a single intonation unit represents an instant lexicalisation or grammaticalisation of the phrase and the event (Givón 1991, 178–79), which disregards both the possible internal semantic complexity of constructions as well as the difference between novel combinations (i.e. constructions made 'on the fly') and pre-fabricated constructions ('prefabs'). Additionally, his conclusion that SVCs must be lexicalised falls into a similar trap of circular logic, which he decried earlier in the work (Givón 1991, 140). This logic is captured perfectly in Pawley (2011):

> *SVCs (verb series) are chunks of fluent speech. Therefore they are stored as memorized packages. Therefore they are lexicalized. Therefore the verb series represent single events.* (Pawley 2011, 25)

Regardless of how one theorises that chunking and language processing works, Givón's approach in this work to on-line language production appears quite initial and required further refinement in its formulation.

The proposal that whatever is realised in a single intonation unit represents a single cognitive unit is attractive. However, the results of Givón (1991) have largely been incorporated into SVC research uncritically without interrogation of the underlying assumptions made in the methodology. Givón's ideas about instant lexicalisation and cognition have largely been discarded within work on verb serialisation, except when furthering the pre-existing position of a clause representing a single event. This clause-centric view persists in how intonation units have been incorporated in definitions of serial verb constructions.

2.2.5 One IU = One Clause

SVCs are commonly asserted to occur within a single intonation unit, following the assumption that single clauses occur within a single intonation unit. This claim also falls into a trap of circular logic: single clauses occur within single intonation units, therefore whatever occurs within a single intonation unit must be monoclausal (cf. also Pawley 2011, 24–25). Studies which use this assumption often also subscribe to the monoclausal event hypothesis (see Section 2.2.3).

There is a growing awareness that there are frequent mismatches between clauses and intonation units. The idea that clauses and intonation units correspond is prominent within Prosodic Phonology (Selkirk 1986; Nespor and Vogel 2007), for example, but this does not necessarily predict how language is normally produced. To account for this issue, SVCs are more commonly said to have the same intonational properties as monoverbal clauses, without further explanation of what this actually entails (e.g. Durie 1997, 291; Aikhenvald 2006, 7). Analysts assume a regular and consistent prosodic output, without any empirical investigation supporting this decision. This stance is particularly incongruous when faced with the amount of care taken with phonological issues at the other end of the spectrum, such as the varied and nuanced discussions of mismatches between phonological and grammatical words (e.g. Aikhenvald 2006, 37–38). As Unterladstetter (2019, 107) aptly says, "indeed, I do not think that it is an exaggeration to claim that we do not know of *any* [sic.] syntactic unit with a constant prosodic output."

Intonation units do not always contain monoclausal constructions. Detailed studies on different languages show that only approximately 50-60% of intonation units encode single clauses (Croft 1995, 2007; Tao 1996; Matsumoto 2000; Park 2002). Chafe (1994) links the information realised within a single intonation unit to information flow within a conversation, hypothesising that no more than "one new idea" can be realised at a time, regardless of what type of syntactic unit this may be. Pawley and Syder (1983) similarly hypothesise that speakers encode "one clause at a time" in an effort to communicate effectively, but that this is largely made up of memorised sequences (prefabs) and constructions. The realisation of SVCs within intonation units is intrinsically linked to how speakers choose to structure their discourse, rather than being linked to its grammatical status.

Do serial verb constructions always have to be realised within a single intonation unit? There is some initial impressionistic evidence suggesting that this is not the case. Foley & Olson (1985, 39) provide an example which is suggestive of a serial verb construction being realised across different phonological units, if not different intonation units, as does Hopperdietzel (2020, 134–39). Himmelmann suggests that this correlates with information packaging and how entrenched a given construction is within a language (Himmelmann 2013, 2022). It seems that there is nothing inher-

ently linking the grammatical realisation of a construction with how it is realised intonationally.

The assumption that intonation depends on grammatical structure is unfortunately widespread in work on serial verb constructions. As many linguists who work on SVCs come from a morphosyntactic background, this assumption may result from a lack of familiarity with work on intonation and its related theoretical issues (Crowley 2002). Many field linguists use differences in prosody to justify analysing certain constructions as verb serialisation or as clausal juxtaposition (e.g. C. Hyslop 2001, 275; Baird 2002, 290–92; Hellwig 2006, 91–93), while theoretical grammarians often use intonational information to support a given analysis without considering how the wider prosodic system correlates with syntactic units. For example, Foley & Olson (1985, 39) argue that a more complex intonation contour follows from a more complex underlying grammatical structure, while Hopperdietzel (2020, 134–39) goes further in explicitly using intonation contours to justify a biclausal analysis of certain SVCs. Without a more comprehensive accounting of how intonation patterns are distributed in a given language, these analyses effectively rely on cherry-picked data.

The relation between verb serialisation and intonation units is still unclear. Large swathes of the literature assume SVCs are realised within a single intonation unit or have an intonational realisation comparable to that of a monoverbal clause without providing empirical evidence for these claims. These claims rest upon original work by Givón hypothesising that the realisation of a SVC within a single intonation unit represents a single idea (Givón 1991), but researchers have not interrogated the assumptions made in this work and instead carry over and reinterpret the relation of prosody and eventhood through the lens of clausehood. The prosodic realisation of serial verb constructions is perhaps the biggest unknown to date in this field of research.

2.3 An Interim Conclusion

We still do not know what serial verb constructions are. Or perhaps, rather, we do know what they are – grammatical constructions defined on a language-specific basis – but we don't know what this means for how we conceptualise language. We have treated serial verb constructions as something separate, something 'other,' from what we expect from our usual objects of study and failed to integrate it into a wider view of the linguistic ecosystem. We try to understand the logic behind the use of these constructions by likening them to monoverbal and monoclausal constructions and asserting a common cognitive reason held by all three for their use. We look at how they are realised in speech without taking speech on its own terms; we theorise about their cognitive units without taking into account how we express cognitive units in the first place. Are we asking the right question by asking what a serial verb construction is?

Discourse about serial verb constructions often lies in the space between language-specific descriptions and typological studies. Unfortunately, it is typology which dominates the conversation and tends to not pay attention to reoccurring language-specific nuances in its dogged pursuit of a universal definition of verb serialisation. The following two quotes illustrate some of the stances taken within this position:

> *It should be noted that this definition is considerably narrower than definitions used by most other authors; I know of no other definition that is narrower than this. This means that a number of phenomena that have been called SVCs are excluded by the definition, but it also means that the definition is more practical than some of the other, broader definitions, and that the generalizations that are based on it are more readily testable.* (Haspelmath 2016, 296)

> *If the criterion of single event is to be taken seriously, constructions that serve discourse purposes are not SVCs even if there is no overt formal difference between genuine SVCs and narrative SVCs in a language.* (Bisang 2009, 802)

Typologists are well aware of the 'cookie-cutter' problem in the discipline, whereby data is discarded because it does not 'fit' well with the research question. However, with such a misunderstood phenomenon like verb serialisation, we do typology a disservice when we discard data in the search for the 'core' without establishing the playing field first. We cannot discern between outliers and counter-examples when all ill-fitting data is simply put to one side.

If we take serial verb constructions seriously as part of a wider linguistic ecosystem, we can make progress on existing typological questions concerning serialisation. The difference between "serialising" and "non-serialising" languages is often discussed as a potential factor of typological difference between languages but nothing conclusive has been found as of yet. More complex verb serialisation, however, has been hypothesised to only occur in languages with clause chaining and/or a switch-reference system (van Staden and Reesink 2008, 31; Pawley 2009, 139), rather than appearing in all "serialising" languages. With more nuance, perhaps we can make progress on whether there is a meaningful binary distinction between languages with and without verb serialisation, or whether serialisation represents one strategy within a linguistic toolbox open to all.

Another factor which we have frequently not taken into account in verb serialisation research is cultural context. Bruce (1988) is often cited for his crucial insight that Alamblak speakers only accept serial verb constructions which make sense from either a cultural meaning or pragmatic standpoint. Bisang (2009, 804–5) rightly notes that this is hard to quantify – is it hard to qualify, however? Very few studies have taken into account cultural context when discussing acceptable

verb serialisation (Enfield 2003 is a notable exception that comes to mind) and this point often flies under the radar of wider discussion. In the search for potential cognitive units, the idea that these might be culturally-dependent phenomena is not as central as it perhaps should be.

The last point that I would like to make is that it is not only cultural context that we strip away from verb serialisation; it is *discourse* context too. If we wish to examine cognitive units, we must first find them in their 'natural habitat,' i.e. interaction. Information flow and information packaging are two very important concepts here which have been lacking in the discussion of serial verb constructions (Chafe 1994; Himmelmann 2013, 2022). If we understand how we express ourselves in discourse, and why we choose to use serial verb constructions for this aim, then we can work backwards and find potential cognitive units. A top-down approach based on arbitrary definitions of eventhood (cf. Bisang 2009, 811) will not be able to help us progress in examining how we think. It is here that an understanding of the linguistic ecology in which SVCs 'live,' as well as an understanding of cultural context are crucial. Serial verb constructions are but one way for speakers to express themselves and we do not yet understand why they make this choice.

We have been asking the wrong questions about verb serialisation. The purported absence of serial verb constructions in European languages means that our traditional analytic tools have been found lacking when confronted with these 'exotic' constructions. We must question our long-held assumptions of the relations between verbs, events, and propositions in order to integrate serial verb constructions into a holistic theory of language, into an inclusive design space of language. We have been approaching these constructions using a mono-verbal perspective in the investigation of multi-verbal serialisation. Our underlying question to date has effectively been: *why not single verbs?* I aim to take a different approach: asking *why serial verb constructions*.

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