

On the strategic partnership of verbs serial verbs in Niger-Congo languages

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The present paper discusses the interaction of verbs with regard to verb serialisation. In concrete terms, the paper examines how verbs in a serial verb construction do assist, influence as well as complement each other in function. In this way, a verb can account for the implications or consequences of another verb within a sentence. Where a verb functions as a main verb and bears the principal lexical information, the subsequent verb can eventually assume an auxiliary status and may modify the semantic content of the former.

Example 1 helps to clarify this. The verb ẓ̀ ‘trample’ acquires its cause-effect meaning nuance via the verb that follows -ḥ̀ (underlyingly /ḅ̀ú/) ‘kill’.

Example 1: SVC-Compounding – Igbo (West-Benue-Congo) (Anyanwu ms.)

ó	[ẓ̀- <u>ḥ̀</u> -ṛ̀]	òfàrà
3sg	<u>trample-kill-PERF</u> <small>[PRET]</small>	grasshopper

‘S/he trampled killed grasshopper.’

[Lit.: ‘S/he trampled the grasshopper to death.’]

Furthermore, one of the most significant points raised here beside issues such as tones is the fact that some types of verb serialising can have a three-dimensional argument structure. This finding tends to contradict the assumption (see Dimmendaal 2001:384ff.; Nylander 1997.) that serialising languages do not have what Ameka 2006:126 refers to as “trivalent verbs”. Igbo and (according to Ameka) Ewe, for instance have several types. Compare the Igbo sentence in Example 2. This sentence has three arguments, namely the subject argument ‘she/he’, the object argument ‘meat’ and the instrument ‘knife’.

Example 2: SVC-Sequencing – Igbo (Anyanwu ms.)

ó	[<u>ḍ̀</u>]	ṇ̀mà	<u>bè-é</u>	á ṇ̀
3sg	<u>take.hold-PERF</u> <small>[PRET]</small>	knife	<u>cut-NARR</u>	meat

‘S/he took-held knife cut meat.’

[Lit.: ‘S/he cut the meat by means of/by using/with a knife.’] (take.hold-cut)

Abbreviations: *ḅ̀ / f̣̀ = orthographic gb / kp, respectively; ḍ̀ = orthographic j; SVC = serial verb construction; ms. = manuscript; sg = singular; PRET = Preterite; NARR = Narrative; PERF = Perfective Aspect.*