

# Some Relevant Terms in the Study of Vietnamese Serial Verb Constructions

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Received 15 December 2011

**Abstract.** Our previous article on multi-verb sentences [1] referred to such concepts as *serial verbs*, *serial verb constructions* (SVC) and *sequence of verbs*, which have been widely used in studies on various languages in the world. When applied to research into the Vietnamese language, however, these terms have caused certain confusion. This paper discusses some relevant concepts and terms in order to help clarify such confusion, avoid improper views and accurately distinguish true serial verb constructions from seemingly similar patterns when studying Vietnamese SVCs. After the analysis, Vietnamese equivalents to the afore-mentioned terms are suggested to ensure consistency and better reflect the true nature of our language.

## 1. Introduction

Serial verb constructions (SVCs) are a structure highly widespread in Creole languages, in the languages of West Africa, Southeast Asia, Amazonia, Oceania, and New Guinea [2], including our Vietnamese language. For several decades, SVCs have drawn attention from various researchers in the world as they reveal interesting features and functioning of language as well as distinctive properties between serializing and non-serializing languages. Nevertheless, despite the high prevalence of SVCs in our language, very few specific investigations into Vietnamese SVCs have been made to date. Those few were mostly conducted by non-native Vietnamese researchers, which are highly appreciated for

their pioneering endeavors and valuable contributions to the body of linguistic knowledge around the world.

Over time, however, in light of newly made discoveries and advances in linguistic inquiries, our retrospective review of such works has detected certain confusion in relation to Vietnamese parts of speech and inclusion of structures which may not qualify as SVCs proper while some other types of SVCs are disregarded. These require clarification so as to provide more justifiable treatment of Vietnamese SVCs, and more accurately distinguish true serial verb constructions from seemingly similar patterns when studying Vietnamese SVCs. Before engaging in such clarification, it is important for us to establish some necessary theoretical fundamentals of serial verbs and serial verb constructions (SVCs).

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## 2. Ceptualization of SVCs

In the introductory article to the volume *Serial Verb Constructions, a Cross-Linguistic Typology* [2], Aikhenvald provides truly comprehensive remarks based on the variety of research works on serial verb constructions in numerous languages in the world. Generally, SVCs are conceptualized as follows [2:1-3]:

“A serial verb construction (SVC) is a sequence of verbs which act together as a single predicate, without any overt marker of coordination, subordination, or syntactic dependency of any other sort. Serial verb constructions describe what is conceptualized as a single event. They are monoclausal; their intonational properties are the same as those of a monoverbal clause, and they have just one tense, aspect, and polarity value. SVCs may also share core and other arguments. Each component of an SVC must be able to occur on its own. Within an SVC, the individual verbs may have same, or different, transitivity values.

One verb in a serial construction may describe the effect of the other. SVCs can express grammatical meanings, as in (1), where an SVC introduces an argument: a ‘beneficiary’ *me*. One verb in a serial construction may describe the effect of the other, as in (3). SVCs may refer to sequences of actions, as in (4)-(6); or just form lexical idioms, as in (2). They may consist of two, or more than two, verbs, as in (5) and (6).

- Baule (Kwa, Niger-Congo: Creissels 2000: 240)

(1) ɔ̀-à-fà í swā n à-klè mĩ  
he-ANT-take his house DEF ANT-show me  
 ‘He has shown me his house.’ (take-show)

- Igbo (Igboid, Benue-Congo, Niger-Congo: Lord 1975: 27)

(2) ó tì-wà-rà étéré à  
 he hit-split.open-TENSE plate the  
 “He shattered the plate”.

- Taba (Austronesian: Bowden 2001: 297)

(3) n=babas welik n=mot do  
3sg=bite pig 3sg=die REAL  
 “It bit the pig dead”.

- Alambalak (Papuan area: Bruce 1988: 27)

(4) wa-yarim-ak-hi ta-n-m-ko  
IMP-ELEV-get-put-2sg-3pl-ELEV  
 “Get them on a level plane toward me (and) put them up there”.

- Dâw (Makú, Northwest Amazonia)

(5) yõ:h bə:-hām-yɔ w  
 medicine spill-go-happen.straight.away  
 “The medicine spilt straight away”

- Tariana (Arawak, Northwest Amazonia)

(6) phia-nihka [phita pi-thaketa] pi-eme ha-  
 ne-na hyapa-na-nuku ha-ne-riku-ma-se  
 you-REC.PAST.INFER 2sg+take 2sg-  
 CROSS+CAUS 2sg-stand+CAUS DEM-  
 DISTAL-CL:VERTICAL hill-CL:VERTICAL-  
 TOP.NON.A/S DEM-DISTAL-CL:LOC-  
 CL:PAIR-LOC

“Was it you who brought that mountain across (lit. take-cross-put.upright) (the river) to the other side?” (asked the king)”

Also, according to Aikhenvald [2], serial verb constructions are a grammatical technique covering a wide variety of meanings and functions. They do not constitute a single grammatical category. They show semantic and functional similarities to multiclausal and subordinating constructions in non-serializing languages. SVCs serve to provide in a uniform way the sort of information that in the surface grammar of languages like English is handled by a formally disparate array of subordinating

devices: complementary infinitives, *-ing* complements, modal auxiliaries, adverbs, prepositional phrases, even whole subordinate clauses. The author concludes [2:3]:

“Serial verb constructions come in a variety of guises. They may consist of several phonological and grammatical words, as in examples (1), (3), and (6); or form one word, as in (2), (4), and (5). Their components may always be contiguous, as in (6); or they may be interruptable by other constituents, as in (1) and (3). Some verbal categories may have to be marked on every verb in a series, as with anterior in (1) and person in (6); or just once per construction, as with realis in (3). All components of a serial construction may share subject, as in (1-2), and (4-6). Or they may share another argument: in (3) the object of the first component (“bite”) is the same as the subject of the second one (‘die’). The sharing of one or more participants enables serial verb constructions to represent a single event with high contiguity.”

Aikhenvald, like other authors in the volume, calls attention to the distinction between SVCs and other idiomatic verb combinations as well as their iconicity in order to distinguish the meanings and functions of various types of SVCs in the same language. In many serializing language, it is impossible to question each component of SVCs separately. When repeated, an SVC may not be shortened as a single verb. The order of SVC components may correspond to the temporal, sequential occurrences of the actions they denote. A multi-componential SVC can express a series of sub-events conceptualized as a holistic entirety, or sub-events with their own internal structure. The limit as to how many predicators can form an SVC depends on each specific language.

With regards to the essential terms referring to this particular structure, Aikhenvald [2:59] reports,

“The term “serial verb construction” was introduced by Balmer and Grant (1929), and then reintroduced by Stewart (1963). The terms “serial verb construction” and “serial verb” have won general acceptance. A few alternative terms appear in the literature — such as “verb concatenations” (Matisoff 1969, 1973), or ‘tandem patterns of verb expressions’ (Senft 1986); or “multi-verb constructions”, or “verb series” (Enfield forthcoming).”

These are general views towards serial verbs and SVCs. However, because these terms contain the word *verbs*, and in many languages, other parts of speech may behave like verbs, some confusion has entailed. Following are a few noteworthy examples. Please note in passing that the examples indicated by the small Roman letters are our own, while those marked with common Arabic numbers are original evidence provided by the authors cited.

### 3. Adjectives vs. Verbs

In serializing languages like Korean and Vietnamese, adjectives can assume the predicative function which is normally performed by verbs in other languages, and in Korean, these adjectives have exactly the same morphological endings as verbs. Due to their identical syntactic behaviors, some authors even have tried to argue that in fact “Korean lacks the category of Adjective. I claim that what have been traditionally analyzed as adjectives are stative verbs. I demonstrate that apparent noun-modifying adjectives in Korean are predicates inside relative clauses” [3:71]. For example, Kim [3:72] presents the following evidence in Korean:

- (2) a. John-un ppang-ul mek-nun-ta  
 J-TOP bread-ACC eat-PRST-IND  
 “John eats bread”.  
 b. John-un holangy-ke musep-ø-ta  
 J-TOP tiger-NOM scary-PRST-IND  
 “John is scared of tigers”.

Compared:

(i) Tôi đói (Vietnamese)

I hungry

“I am hungry” (be + adjective *hungry*)

ii) J’ais faim (verb *avoir* + noun *faim*)  
(French) “I am hungry”

iii) Я голоден (Ya goloden) (verb *goloden*),  
(Russian) “I am hungry”, yet

(iv) Я маленькое (Ya malenkoye)

I small

“I am small”

This could be the reason why some author argues:

“In the Vietnamese parts of speech, a basic state verb is a verb as well as being an adjective. Therefore the use of negation is one of the arguments to justify status as a verb as in (1) and (1a)

(1) Anh ấy nhanh lắm.  
eld bro that fast very

“He is very fast.”

(1a) Anh ấy không nhanh lắm.  
eld bro that not fast very

“He is not very fast.”

The following sentence (1b) has a serial verb construction.

(1b) Anh ấy hiểu nhanh lắm.  
eld bro that understand fast very  
NP VP VP AdvP

“He understands very fast.”

Sentence (1b) is derived from the underlying sentence (1c)

(1c) Anh ấy<sub>i</sub> hiểu *pro* [CP [IP PRO<sub>i</sub> nhanh.]]  
NP VP VP  
Agt Pat Agt

“He understands very fast.”

In (1c), the verb *hiểu* “to understand” is a transitive verb, and the non-overt object of this

verb is *pro*, which is governed by the verb *hiểu*. In the infinitival clause the non-overt subject is PRO, which is controlled by the overt object of the main clause. This non-overt subject PRO is not governed by I(nflection), which is empty in the infinitival clause in Vietnamese. The infinitival clause is an adjunct of the main clause.” [4:137-138]

In our view, this is a confusion. Since Vietnamese is an isolating language with words remaining unchanged in forms in all the variety of meanings and functions they assume, classifying Vietnamese words into different parts of speech is not easy and may not always promise accuracy. Such categorization generally must base on their functioning in the sentence as one of the criteria while their functions vary significantly. In (1) and (1a), *nhanh* cannot be categorized as a verb in terms of parts of speech, and it may not be accurate to conclude that *a basic state verb is a verb as well as being an adjective*. *Nhanh* can be classified as an adjective or an adverb, depending on the type of sentence component it modifies, and it can serve as the predicate in the sentence on its own, like many nouns, quantifiers and other parts of speech in Vietnamese, as shown by quantifier and adjective predicates in the following example:

(v) Bảy năm về trước em mười bảy  
seven years back before you seventeen  
Anh mới đôi mươi trẻ nhất làng  
I just twenty young SUP<sup>(1)</sup> village

“Seven years ago you were seventeen, I was twenty, and we were the youngest in the village”.

Since *nhanh* is a predicative adjective, it can be negated by the preceding *không*, like any other verbs, adjectives or adverbs, which is normal in Vietnamese. Negation, therefore, cannot be taken as justification for the verbal

<sup>(1)</sup> SUP: superlative marker

status of *nhanh*. Semantically, *nhanh* can be associated with a number of nouns like *nhanh tay*, *nhanh mắt*, *nhanh mồm*, *nhanh trí* (*fast-hand*, *fast-eye*, *fast-mouth*, *fast-mind*), etc., and can generate a variety of interpretations in this case: *he is handy*, *sociable*, *quick-witted*, *dynamic*, *smart*, etc. By contrast, in (1b), *nhanh* modifies the preceding verb *hiểu*, which is the function of an adverb, and the negator can be inserted either before *hiểu* or *nhanh*. Furthermore, the combination *hiểu nhanh* does not indicate any specific sub-events in a single composite whole like (1), (2) and (3) in Aikhenvald [2]:

(1) Anh ấy đưa tôi đi xem nhà  
eld bro that take I go see house

“He showed me his house.”

(1) Hấn đập vỡ cái đĩa  
He hit break CLA<sup>(2)</sup> plate

“He shattered the plate.”

(2) Nó cắn chết con lợn  
It bite kill CLA pig

“It bit the pig dead”

*Anh ấy hiểu* (*He understands*) and *Anh ấy nhanh* (*He is fast*) are two different events, which apparently differ from *Anh ấy hiểu nhanh* (*He understands fast*). If this author’s arguments held, as both *understand* and *fast* are predicative, the English combination *understands fast* then would qualify as an SVC, which is obviously not the case. Likewise, *hiểu nhanh* fails to be categorized as an SVC in Vietnamese.

Continuing the same vein, this author argues for the co-occurrence of two verbs in

(5a) Ông đến trễ.

You arrive late

“You arrived late.”

Again, *trễ* is a predicative adjective and can function as an adverb, not a verb, so in our view *đến trễ* does not qualify as an SVC in Vietnamese like the author claims.

In sharp contrast, the combinations *nhanh nói* and its opposite *chậm nói*, or *nhanh/chậm biết nói* in the following are true SVCs in Vietnamese:

(vi) Cháu chị nhanh (biết) nói thê!

child sister fast (know) speak so

“Your child is so fast to speak!” (compared to his/her age, i.e. your child starts speaking earlier than others of the same age)

Cf. (vii) Thằng bé này chậm (biết) nói quá!

boy this slow (know) speak too

“This boy is too slow to speak.” (i.e. this boy starts speaking much later than others)

(viii) Thầy giáo nói nhanh/chậm quá!

Teacher speak fast slow too

“The teacher speaks too fast / too slowly!”

The reason why there exists such a difference between *nhanh/chậm biết nói* and *nói nhanh/chậm*, even though they contain the same words, is in the semantic relations which bind them together under governing principles. In *nhanh/chậm (biết) nói*, *nhanh* and *chậm*, adjectives as they remain in terms of parts of speech, are the governing **predicators** which subcategorize a verbal complement *nhanh/chậm làm gì?* (*fast/slow to do what?*) while in *nói nhanh/ chậm*, these two are not governing predicators; instead, they are governed by the predicator *nói* which merely subcategorizes some kind of utterance as the product of the speaking act and **may**, not **must**, require an adverbial modifier indicating the manner or speed of the speaking act. Subcategorization, or inherent semantic properties of the governing predicators, thus qualify the combination *nhanh/chậm biết nói* as an SVC, while *nói nhanh/chậm* fails. This also explains why different word orders of the same words in

<sup>(2)</sup> CLA: classifier

Vietnamese can result in strikingly different meanings, although some cases allow for reversing word order without significant change of meanings.

#### 4. Random Sequence of Verbs vs. SVCs Proper

Another likely confusion in identifying Vietnamese SVCs, as found in the same author's article [4], is the inclusion of structures with loosely, randomly connected components in SVC treatment. For instance,

(6a) Tôi nghỉ một lát  
I rest one moment  
lại tiếp tục làm  
again continue work

"I rest a moment then continue to work."

not all the three verbs *nghỉ*, *tiếp tục* and *làm* form an SVC, since *nghỉ* and *tiếp tục* do not refer to sub-events in a single entirety. Rather, they merely share the same subject and describe successive events, just like the following English sentence

(ix) Surprisingly enough, they went through the wall of the room easily, flew in the air, and stood on a country road covered with snow (*Three Spirits*, Folk Tale)

or a customary saying among our parent generation who were Vietnamese young men in the sixties and seventies of the previous century:

(x) cắt cơm, bơm xe, nghe thời tiết, liếc đồng hồ, vồ xe đạp

These are a series of actions, one after another: [they] *canceled meals at the cafeteria, pumped up the tyres, listened to the weather, grabbed the bike* and rode off on weekend to meet their dates. In this example (6a), only *tiếp tục* and *làm* constitute an asymmetrical SVC with *tiếp tục* (*continue*) being a type of defective verb which must be accompanied by a verbal complement, and such asymmetrical

SVCs with defective verbs abound in Vietnamese, sufficient to form a sub-class of their own.

Meanwhile, the author [4] posits that in the following instance:

(7a) Chúng ta đưa con đi chơi công viên  
we bring child go play park  
NP VP NP VP NP

"We bring our child to the park to play"

(Our family have a day out in the park)

there are only two verbs *bring* and *play* while constructions with *go* and another verb like *play*, *eat*, *get* are widespread SVCs in Vietnamese, which means there are as many as 3 verbs in the sentence. Other instances in Vietnamese reveal that SVCs are frequently formed with 3 or even more than 3 verbs and/or coverbs, e.g.:

(xi) Tuy nhiên, sau khi viên sĩ quan Hoa Kỳ vừa được trả tự do thì ông [Nguyễn Văn Trỗi] bị đưa đi xử bắn

bring go try shoot

"However, as soon as the American officer was released, Nguyen Van Troi was taken to be shot by a firing squad in execution of the death sentence."

(xii) Bình đưa quà bánh vào thăm Năm

bring enter visit

"Bình brought gifts to Nam in her visit" [while Nam was in jail]

(xiii) Chính Quyên đưa cái thư điều đình

bring/hand

cho chúng tôi xem.

give see

"It was Quyên who showed us the letter of agreement."

or Bisang [5] noticed in our language:

(xiv) Muốn biết được thua phải đi hỏi

want know win lose must go ask

(lit. “if you want to know whether you have won or lost, you must go and ask” or “if you want to know who has won or lost, you must go and ask”) in which Bisang believes the first SVC comprises 4 different verbs *want know win lose* and the second SVC is composed by two verbs *go ask*, and the whole sentence contains nothing but verbs. However, we would argue that there are two SVCs in this sentence: the second SVC is made up of *đi hỏi* (*go ask*), but the first consists of only two verbs *muốn* and *biết* (*want to know*), while *được thua* (*win lose*) is in fact not a mere combination of two verbs; rather, this is a reduced embedded clause in which everything else has been removed, leaving only the two verbs behind, as the English explanation in parentheses above has clearly shown.

In English, the type of constructions *go/come + V* (bare infinitive) such as *go jump in the lake, go fly a kite, go eat lunch, go see who's at the door, come have dinner with us* is common, too, and these qualify as SVCs proper. Therefore, the reason why *đi chơi, go play* are not considered SVCs in this article [4] remains unclear.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

Through our analyses and discussion in the paper, we have argued that serial verbs do not necessarily include solely verbs in Vietnamese; rather, they comprise *predicators*, which in turn encompass both verbs and predicative adjectives. The Vietnamese equivalent terminology to *Serial Verbs* therefore should be *vị từ kết chuỗi* [6] or *vị từ chuỗi* (lit. *serial predicators*) for short rather than *động từ chuỗi*, and SVCs would be translated as *kết cấu vị từ chuỗi*. Meanwhile, the expressions *series of verbs* or *sequence of verbs - chuỗi vị từ* are broad terms which can refer to any occasions of predicators occurring together which may happen to share the same subject.

In fact, apart from the afore-mentioned confusion, our on-going study of Vietnamese SVCs has encountered a number of other issues

of theoretical and practical nature as well, which cannot be presented in a short paper like this one. However, the issues analyzed and discussed herein serve as the fundamentals before one can be clear what are SVCs and what not in his/her linguistic treatment.

It is important to note that SVC concepts which have effectively applied in other serializing languages may not readily apply to Vietnamese SVCs without necessary modifications or being located within its internal linguistic system. In other words, Vietnamese SVCs must be considered within the context of the language itself, and any immediate importation of SVC patterns from other languages, serializing or non-serializing, may render the treatment imprecise, alien or untrue to the nature of our language.

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