0 Introduction. There is a strong tendency in Mainland Southeast Asia, particularly in casual spoken language, to express ideas in a serial manner, to spin ideas as it were from a reel, with a minimum of interruptive elements. One could easily say that the languages of Mainland Southeast Asia are serializing languages in that semantically different but like-functioning coordinate elements within a single framework tend to occur serially, without such markers as conjunctions or embedding prepositions or nouns. I will explore this notion in three units of grammar: predicates with concatenated verbs, noun phrases with multiple noun modifiers, and coordinate clauses. With particular reference to serial verbs I will claim that serialization of verbs is significant only when it is not predictable from features of lexical items but nevertheless pervades language usage.1

I will use here only a few of the languages:2 Austroasiatic: Vietnamese, Khmer, Chrau, Jeh; Tai: Bangkok Thai, Black Tai, Nung; Hmong-Mien (Miao-Yao): White Hmong.

The languages in the "core" Mainland Southeast Asia area have a basic Subject - Verb - Object (-Indirect Object / Locative) and Noun-Modifier word order.

1 Zero NP anaphora. One of the characteristics of Mainland Southeast Asia which enhances the aforementioned reeling quality is the prevalence of zero noun phrase anaphora, most especially in informal conversation. The noun phrases most commonly elided are subjects and objects, especially the latter. Zero anaphora are optional omissions in the context of discourse. Obligatory non-presence of noun phrases which are implied by coreferentiality and predicted in the features of lexical items cannot properly be termed zero anaphora since "zero anaphora" implies that non-zero anaphoric reference may be present. Examples of zero subject (ØS) and object (ØO) noun phrases follow.3
(1.1) Áo chị đẹp quá! (Chị) mua ØØ & dâu vậy?
Viet blouse sister pretty very sister buy at where so

Đạ, ØØ mua ØØ & đường Lê-Lợi.
POLITE buy at street Le Loi

'Your blouse is very pretty, where did you buy it?'
'I bought it in LeLoi Street.'

(1.2) Ab, kuv ntsia ØØ mas ØØ tsis yog ØØ tiag na.
Hmg oh! I look-at (he) then (he) not be (husband) truly not-so?

'No, it doesn't look like him to me.'
'(I stare at him (again) and he's surely not your husband?)'

(1.3) ØØ yàak pay sùu khọη mañana ØØ yàak (ØV ØV ØØ).
Thai want go buy thing QUES want

'Do you want to go shopping?' 'Yes, I want to (go buy things).'</n

(1.4) ØØ ngám chéng bat ma ØØ téo pây.
Nung just then when come again go

'He had just come, when he went again.'

(1.5) Qou, kñom qat yook ØØ mook tee!
Khm oh I notCOLLOQ take hither EMPH

'Oh! I didn't bring one (a mat)!
ØØ cuol qaññŋ múay tiw!
rent hammock one go(ahead)

'You can just rent a hammock.'

(1.6) Ānh sǎng ØØ lūh pām ØØ.
Chrau I send out beat

'I'll send it (the hammer) out to pound you.'

Under certain circumstances, non-subject/object NP's can also become zero anaphoric, particularly benefactives, as in (1.7)-(1.8), but also comitatives, as in (1.9). Such omissions may be sufficiently idiomatic for benefactive and comitative adverbs to have been derived from their respective prepositions so that here zero anaphora is not synchronically involved.

(1.7) Ðê' bác Thi mua ØØ cho ØB.
Viet leave uncle Thi buy for

'Let old Mr Thi buy it for you.'
Of course it is to be assumed that not every one of these languages is equally inclined toward zero-anaphoric noun phrases, or for that matter to any of the processes of serialization discussed here. To determine in what hierarchy the languages stand, however, is not easy. This is because the phenomena of NP zero anaphora and serialization of unmarked constituents are characteristic of informal language of the sort that is not readily available in print and is often denied or rejected by native speakers in response to query.  

2 Serial verbs. Serial verbs have been much discussed for many languages of the world and are widely recognized as characteristic of the languages of Mainland Southeast Asia. Serial verb constructions have been defined, when they have been defined at all, with varying degrees of precision. Most definitions and descriptions are fairly loose, allowing different kinds of constructions to be considered as having serial verbs if there is more than one verb in a sentence. I attempt here to define serial verbs in such a precise way that to say a clause is a serial verb construction is to make a significant statement.

2.1 Constraints on serial verbs. I will define a serial verb construction as one in which

1) concatenated verbs represent coordinate statements referring to related events and expressed as a single proposition, i.e. with a single finite verb and where each participant occurs overtly only once.;

2) a serializing verb is not predictable in the feature matrix of the finite (main) verb or of other verbs with which it serializes;

3) the subject of a serializing verb is coreferential with the subject of the finite verb but is never present in the construction (as stated in 1), i.e., a serializing verb is nonfinite;
4) the non-finite serial verbs are in a coordinate relationship with the finite verb and with each other if there is more than one serializing verb, but no coordinating marker is present;

5) an inner argument -- Patient object, Locus (inner locative or dative), inner Correspondent -- may intervene between serial verbs. When the same object is implied by more than one serial verb, it occurs only once (again, as in 1), the occurrence being not necessarily with the first transitive verb but depending on particular language preferences;

6) the time of a serial verb is either after or simultaneous with the time of the preceding verb.

In Mainland Southeast Asian languages the first verb of a verb series is the head of the serial construction, i.e. the head of the proposition, the one finite verb in the series.

I differ with many others (e.g. Jarkey In Prep: Sec.2) on what comprises serial verbs. Whereas I feel that serial verbs must share a nominative NP, Jarkey (and others) allow as serial verbs concatenated verbs which share any core argument NP (if not the nominative NP, usually a complement argument, for example, an NP which is the object of the first verb but the subject of the "serializing" verb). That is, she allows as a serial verb one whose presence is predictable from the features of the first verb. If serialization is significant as a phenomenon, it is because it is not predictable in features of lexical items. Serialization of items predicted by sister constituents is not especially notable; persistent serialization not lexically predictable is worthy of note.

Thus, by criterion 2, a verb which requires a complement, such as the first verb in (2.1), is not part of a serial verb construction. (All the verbs in (2.1) are considered by Thepkanjana (1986:81) to be serial verbs.) Also, the second verb in (2.2) (from Thepkanjana 1986:27) may not serialize with the first verb by criterion 2: predictability, by criterion 3: having a different subject from the succeeding verb, and by criterion 1: being in a superordinate not a coordinate relationship with the succeeding verb.

(2.1) Suriי chop pay duu năŋ.
Thai Suri like go look movie
'Suri likes to go to a movie.'