Serial Verbs and Propositions in White Hmong

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Serial verbs are a well-known feature of many languages spoken in East and Southeast Asia, West Africa, and Papua New Guinea, as well as of some Creole languages. An important issue in the study of serialization is the relationship between the number of verbs and the number of separate propositions expressed, with each proposition assumed to represent a separate event, action, or state of being. Some linguists, such as Filbeck (1975) and Noonan (1985), assign a single propositional structure to all serial constructions. Filbeck argues that verb serialization in Thai is sub-propositional rather than propositional, in the sense that the first verb in the series "carries the true predicate meaning of the proposition", with subsequent verbs expressing "a functional meaning which is related to the predicate or propositional meaning of the initial verb" (119). Noonan, who looks at serialization crosslinguistically, considers all serial constructions to represent single assertions and uses this as one criterion for differentiating serial from paratactic constructions, which represent more than one assertion.

In contrast, Li and Thompson (1981) classify Chinese verb concatenations standing for more than one separate event or state of affairs as serial constructions, although they state that the individual events are interpreted as related parts of a larger single situation. Sebba (1987) discusses serialization in Sranan, a Creole language, distinguishing between constructions arising from VP coordination, which represent more than one action, and subordinating serial constructions, which represent a single action but which may involve several motions.

Some studies assign propositional structure according to the particular functions which a given type of serial construction serves. For example, Stahlke (1974) suggests that some Yoruba serial verbs, such as those meaning 'accompany' and 'use', are best analyzed as adverbs expressing accompaniment and instrumental functions rather than as verbs belonging to separate VPs. This means that they would not represent separate propositions. Li, Harriehausen and Litton (1986) consider serial constructions expressing 'motion in a direction' in Green Hmong always to represent single propositions, with the direction verb in the series operating as a function word.

In short, there are a number of different approaches to the question of the relationship between the number of verbs and the number of propositions. There is a tendency, however, to analyze those serializations which translate as verb + adverbial into English as representing single propositions.

This paper takes a different tack. I argue that in White Hmong, the interpretation of the number of propositions expressed by a serial construction ultimately depends on lexical and pragmatic factors. That is, when the lexical content of the individual serial verbs apparently serving an adverbial function is considered in detail, it can be seen that they are not fully grammaticized as adverbial function words. Rather, in many such concatenations, each verb can contribute its prototypical verbal sense and thus be interpreted as representing a separate proposition, depending on the larger linguistic and situational contexts in which it occurs. It is noteworthy that in his discussion of other aspects of serialization in Lahu, Matisoff (1969) draws attention to the importance of detailed lexical analysis in understanding the syntactic structure of concatenated verbs.

I will begin with a discussion of the 'motion in a direction' type of serial construction discussed by Li et al. for Green Hmong, a dialect very closely related to White Hmong. The White Hmong equivalent of their example 5 is given below:

> 1. Nws ua luam dej hla   tus hav dej lawm.[1]
>    3sg swim        cross cl stream    perf
>    'S/he swam across the stream.'

Li et al. claim that in the Green Hmong equivalent of this sentence, *ua luam dej* 'swim' represents an action and *hla* 'cross' the direction of motion, with the two verbs together expressing a single proposition.

For this White Hmong sentence given in isolation, their claim seems valid. However, *hla* in White Hmong does not act as a function word with a purely directional sense in all such serial constructions. Moreover, substitution of a different "direction" verb and use of this serial construction within other syntactic structures and various situational contexts affects the interpretation of the number of separate propositions expressed.

Consider first how the meaning of *hla* compares with that of a similar "direction" verb *dhau*. In example 2, *dhau* 'cross over' is substituted for *hla*, 'cross.'[2] In addition, for the NP *tus hav dej* 'stream' is substituted the NP *tus dej* 'river', which is more appropriate for the verb *dhau*. (This point will be elaborated below).

> 2. Nws ua luam dej dhau      tus dej   lawm.
>    3sg swim        cross-over cl river  perf
>    'S/he swam across the river.'

*Dhau* differs from *hla* in that the latter focuses on the action or process of crossing per se, and can be considered an activity verb in Vendler's (1967) sense, while *dhau* stresses the attainment of the end result and is an accomplishment verb. It has a more perfective sense than *hla*. Note that this is independent of the perfective marker *lawm*, which occurs in both sentences. This difference in meaning shows that these verbs are not pure function words in the given serial constructions.

Another piece of evidence is the behavior of yes-no questions, which are formed by placing the question marker *puas* before a verb. As 3 and 4 show, this question marker can occur before the first verb in the series with either *hla* or *dhau* as the second verb.

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3.  Koj  puas  ua luam dej hla    lawm?
    2sg.  Q    swim        cross perf
    'Will you swim across?'

4.  Koj  puas  ua luam dej  dhau        lawm?
    2sg.  Q    swim         cross-over perf
    'Will you swim across?'
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If the entire serial construction in each case could represent only a single proposition, we would expect the question marker *puas* only to be permitted before the first verb in the series, as in 3 and 4, questioning the pair of verbs combined. However, as 5 shows, *dhau* can be independently questioned, with *puas* placed immediately before it.

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5.  Koj  ua luam dej  puas  dhau        lawm?
    2sg  swim          Q     cross-over perf
    'Can/will you swim across?'
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Each of the sentences in 3, 4, and 5 has a slightly different sense. 3 is a relatively neutral question about whether swimming across a small body of water will take place. No particular difficulty is involved which might lead one to question final accomplishment. Swimming is questioned as a means of crossing the river. Sentence 4 is more goal-oriented than 3, since the verb *dhau* conveys a strong sense of accomplishment. This is probably why *dhau* in 4 is more compatible with *tus dej* 'river' as the object NP, since crossing a river is a larger task than crossing a small stream. However, the primary focus of the question is still on the general event of swimming. This contrasts with a typical possible context for 5, where two people are in the process of swimming across the river, and the questioner asks whether the addressee is going to be able to make it all the way to the other side. Another possible context for 5 is that the questioner knows that the addressee has managed to cross the river by swimming in the past, but this time there is reason to question whether s/he can make it across, perhaps because the river has been swollen by heavy rain. In each context, the specific concept being questioned is whether the addressee will be able to reach the termination point. Thus sentence 5 is even more goal-oriented than 4.

In contrast to *dhau*, when *hla* appears as the second verb in the series, it cannot be independently questioned, as shown in 6:

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6.  *Koj  ua luam dej  puas  hla    lawm?
     2sg  swim          Q     cross perf
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Perhaps this sentence is semantically and pragmatically odd because if the notion of making a crossing is to be emphasized over swimming in a given sentence, it is more appropriate to use the other available lexical item, *dhau*, which inherently focuses on the accomplishment of crossing. This analysis is supported by the existence of sentence 7, where *hla* and *dhau* are both used. (In this sentence the future marker *yuav* is used to make the example more pragmatically natural.)

> 7. Koj   hla   puas   yuav   dhau?
>    2sg   cross  Q     future  cross-over
>    'Can you get across?'

This question would be asked before any swimming had taken place. Here, *hla* contributes the process sense of crossing and *dhau* the proceding to a terminal point, which is the notion being questioned.

    These facts show that contrary to Li et al.'s claim for Green Hmong, in White Hmong a so-called direction verb in a motion and direction series can be interpreted as representing a separate event, and therefore, a separate proposition.

    The relationship between the meanings of these verbs and the number of propositions expressed can be considered in terms of prototype theory. Typically, a crossing by swimming episode would be viewed as a single event unless specific factors such as considerable distance or rapids call into question achievement of the goal. In general, it would serve no practical purpose or communicative function to separate out the parts of the overall situation into different events. This seems to be the typical case where *hla* is used as the second verb in the series.

    The fact that *hla* can also be used as the only verb in a relatively neutral question such as 8 shows that it does not have a purely directional sense, however, and that it can represent an individual act, depending on the context of use.

> 8. Koj   hla   li cas?
>    2sg   cross  how
>    'How did you cross?'

When there are special conditions surrounding the swimming across, *dhau*, is more appropriate in the serial construction, which is then open to interpretation as representing more than one proposition, given the right context. Consider again example 2:

> 2. Nws ua luam dej dhau        tus dej   lawm.
>    3sg swim          cross-over cl  river  perf
>    'S/he swam across the river.'

Here, there is a suggestion that perhaps some difficulty, such as great distance, rapids, or ambush had to be overcome. It is somewhat like saying in English, 'S/he swam and made it across'.