The So-called Serial Verb Constructions[1]

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1. Introduction. This paper presents an analysis within the lexicase theory of a number of constructions that have been labelled serial verbs. The constructions which are analyzed in this paper occur in many Asian languages. The data on which I base the analyses are taken from Thai, Mandarin Chinese, and Khmer. I focus on properties of serial verb constructions (SVCs) and propose that the so-called SVCs do not deserve the special label 'serial verb construction', if this is meant to refer to a marked construction, different from coordination and subordination. I argue that, to the contrary, most of the patterns which have been given the label SVC are in fact just one type of nonfinite subordination construction.

2. Overview of Serial Verb Constructions. Linguists disagree as to the definition of a serial verb. In order to limit the topic for the discussion, I will define SVCs as constructions with the following characteristics which I have extracted from discussions in the literature:

1. All verbs are lexical verbs not auxiliary verbs. That is, they are capable of appearing as the only verb in a single sentence.
2. There is no conjunction to separate the verbs in sequence.
3. Only the first verb takes a nominative NP as its subject.
4. All verbs are interpreted as referring to one event. They are interpreted as having the same tense or the same aspect. For example V1 cannot be interpreted as past while V2 is interpreted

as future.
5. Only the first verb in the series can be marked for negation.

Thus, this definition applies to the following sentences from Thai:

Manner verbs
1.   khaw   nang   duu   thiiwii
      he   sit   watch   television
      He sat watching television.

Purpose clause
2.   khaw   thOOt   kay   khay
      he   fry   chicken   sell
      He fried chicken and sold it.

Directional verbs
3.   khaw   wing   pay   baan
      he   run   go   home
      He ran home.

This definition distinguishes the SVCs from auxiliary verbs and some 'control' verbs, and it excludes sentences containing auxiliaries verbs such as the example below:
4.   khaw   khuan   pay   yuroop
      he   should   go   Europe
      He should go to Europe.

Sentence (4) is not considered to contain serial verbs because of property 1, since verb khuan 'should' cannot occur as a single verb in a sentence without any context[2]. Sentence example (5) is not considered to contain a serial verb because of property 4.
5.   khaw   chuan   nit   pay   yuroop
      he   persuade   Nit   go   Europe
      He persuaded Nit to go to Europe.

Sentences containing verbs such as chuan 'persuade' can take two different adverbs of time, while the sentences (1) - (3) cannot.

      Consider an example in Thai:
6.   mIawaannii   khaw   chuan   chan   pay   ngaan
      yesterday   he   persuade   I   go   party
      piinaa
      next year

Yesterday he persuaded that I went to the party next year.

Sentence (7) is not considered as a serial verb construction since the second verb can be negated:
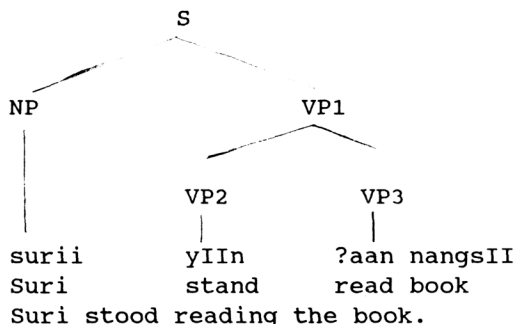
7.　　khaw　tii　　nguu　　tay
　　　he　　beat　snake　die
　　　He beat the snake to death.

2.1. Previous Analyses of SVCs

This part of the paper consists of a brief review of previous work on SVCs in different syntactic theories, pointing out some problems with these analyses.

2.1.1. Thepkanjana (1986)

Working within the Government and Binding theory, Kingkarn Thepkanjana uses the term 'serial verbs' broadly to cover a number of different kinds of constructions in Thai. For constructions like example (3), she claims that they cannot have a multiclausal underlying structure but she argues for the following structure:

```
                        S
              /                  \
          NP                      VP1
          |                  /          \
          |              VP2            VP3
          |               |              |
        surii           yIIn        ?aan nangsII
        Suri            stand       read book
        Suri stood reading the book.
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This structure is proposed because the subject of each verb in SVC must have the same thematic role, V2 cannot be negated, and SVCs share same subject. One problem with this analysis is that the syntactic structure predicts that we should be able to reverse these two VPs, since they look like a coordinate construction. Nevertheless, the result of reversed VPs gives rise to ungrammaticality, as shown in example (8) below.
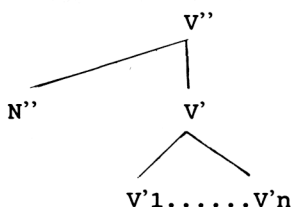
8.　　*surii ?aan　　nangsII　yIIn
　　　Suri　read　　book　　stand
　　　Suri stood reading the book.

2.1.2. Schiller (1991)

Working within autolexical theory, Eric Schiller's 1991 study covers a wide range of languages including various Southeast Asian languages such as Thai and Khmer as well as some African languages. He divides serial verbs into three major types: subordinating serial verb constructions, coordinating serial constructions and deictic serial constructions. His study focuses on subordinating serial verb constructions, which have special properties such as:

a. A subordinating serial verb construction contains two or more V' nodes immediately dominated by a single V' node.

Thus, the following structure is proposed for the subordinating SVCs:

$$
\begin{array}{c}
\text{V''} \\
\diagup \quad \big| \\
\text{N''} \qquad \text{V'} \\
\diagup \diagdown \\
\text{V'1......V'n}
\end{array}
$$

This structure is quite similar to that proposed by Thepkanjana (1986), since in Autolexical theory, V'' corresponds to S and V' is equivalent to VP in Chomskyan X-bar theory. The problem with this structure is that it does not look like a representation of a subordination construction since two V' nodes dominated by a single V' have the same status; and neither syntactically dominates the other. It seems to represent a coordination construction rather than a subordinating construction as Schiller claims. The problem with this analysis is thus similar to that of Thepkanjana's. This coordination syntactic representation predicts that these two VPs should be able to be reversed. However, the reversed VPs are not acceptable.