Serial verb constructions in Vietnamese

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A serial verb construction in Vietnamese is a sequence of verbs occurring together with a non-overt subject and/or a non-overt object in terms of Government and Binding Theory. The sentence with the non-overt subject is claimed to be an infinitival clause.

The non-overt NP is syntactically active but has no overt form. This non-overt subject of infinitivals will be represented as PRO whereas the non-overt object will be represented as pro, which is non-referential.

A sentence with one main verb will be illustrated first, a sentence with a serial verb presented second, and the underlying sentence presented third.

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 lâm.
eld bro that fast very
“He is very fast.”

(1a) Anh ấy không nhanh lâm.
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 lâm.
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, hiểu pro [CP [IP PRO i nhanh.]]
eld bro that understand fast
Agt VP
Agt Pat
“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 subject of the main clause. This non-overt subject PRO is not governed by l(Inflection), which is empty in the infinitival clause in Vietnamese. The infinitival clause is an adjunct of the main clause. The structure of this sentence is shown in (1d).

The sentence in (2) has only one basic state verb in one clause.
(2) Tôi ốm.
   I sick
   "I am sick."

In (2a) there are two verbs occurring together.

(2a) Tôi nghỉ ốm hai ngày.
   I rest sick two day
   NP VP VP NP
   "I've rested (because I was) sick for two days."

In (2a) the verb nghỉ ‘to rest’ is an intransitive verb. The non-overt subject of the infinitival clause is PRO, which is controlled by the overt NP subject of the main clause. This sentence is subject controlled. The infinitival clause is the adjunct of the main clause as in (2b).

(2b) Tôi [CP [IP PRO i ốm hai ngày.]]
   I rest sick two day
   NP VP VP NP
   "I've rested (because I was) sick for two days."

(3) Lan chăm chỉ.
   Lan diligent
   "Lan is diligent."

In (3a) there are two verbs occurring together which have a derived preposition về ‘to return/ back’ which need to be observed.

(3a) Lan chăm chỉ viết thư về nhà.
   Lan diligent write letter return home
   NP VP VP NP P NP
   "Lan is diligent to write letters back home."

(3a) has the same structure as (2a). chăm chỉ ‘diligent’ is an intransitive verb. The non-overt subject of the infinitival clause is PRO, which is controlled by the overt NP subject of the main clause. This sentence is subject controlled. In (3b) the infinitival clause is an adjunct of the main clause.

(3b) Tôi [CP [IP PRO i viết thư về nhà.]]
   Tôi diligent write letter return home
   NP VP VP NP P NP
   Agt Pat Des
   "Lan is diligent to write letters back home."

vé ‘to return, back’ is not claimed to be a verb because it cannot be preceded by a negative or an auxiliary to the verb as in (3c). Therefore it is claimed as a preposition which is the head of the PP: P về ‘back’ + NP nhà.
(3c) \[ \text{Lan}_{i} \text{ chăm chỉ [CP [IP PRO i] viết thư]} \]
\[ \text{Lan} \text{ diligent write letter} \]
\[ \text{NP} \text{ VP VP NP} \]
\[ \text{Agt} \text{ Agt Pat} \]
\[ \text{*không/*sẽ về nhà.}] \]
\[ \text{not will return home} \]
\[ \text{NEG AUX P NP} \]
\[ \text{Des} \]

"Lan is diligent to write letters *not/*will back home."

(4) \[ \text{Lan là cô giáo.} \]
\[ \text{Lan be teacher} \]
\[ \text{NP VP NP} \]

"Lan is a teacher."

(4b) \[ \text{Lan là một giáo viên tiếng Anh có kinh nghiệm.} \]
\[ \text{Lan be one teacher language English has experience} \]
\[ \text{NP VP NP VP NP} \]

"Lan is a teacher of English (who) has experience."

In (4b) there are two possible ways to justify status as a verb as in (4c) and (4d). In (4c) the non-overt subject of the infinitival clause is controlled by the overt subject of the main clause.

(4c) \[ \text{Lan i là một giáo viên tiếng Anh} \]
\[ \text{Lan be one teacher language English} \]
\[ \text{NP VP NP} \]
\[ \text{[CP [IP PRO i có kinh nghiệm.]]} \]
\[ \text{has experience} \]
\[ \text{VP NP} \]

"Lan is a teacher of English (who) has experience."

Another possibility is that PRO is controlled by the overt object of the main clause which refers equally to the overt subject of the main clause. The infinitival clause is the adjunct of the main clause as in (4d).

(4d) \[ \text{Lan i là một giáo viên tiếng Anh i} \]
\[ \text{Lan be one teacher language English} \]
\[ \text{NP VP NP} \]
\[ \text{[CP [IP PRO i có kinh nghiệm.]]} \]
\[ \text{has experience} \]
\[ \text{VP NP} \]

"Lan is a teacher of English (who) has experience."

Goral (1986: 292-293) calls this kind of verb an adjectival verb which is equivalent to the basic state verb in this study.
(5) Ông trễ.
you late
"You are late."

(5a) Ông đến trễ.
you arrive late
"You arrived late."

(6) Trần dau tiếp tục.
clf battle continue
NP VP
"The battle is going on."

In (6) the verb tiếp tục ‘continue’ is an intransitive verb.

(6a) Tôi nghỉ một lát lại tiếp tục làm.
I rest one moment again continue do
NP VP NP AdvP VP VP
"I rest a moment then continue to do it."

In (6a) there are three verbs in the sentence which can be analysed as in (6b).

(6b) Tôi i nghỉ một lát [CP [IP PRO i lại tiếp tục]]
I rest one moment again continue
NP VP NP AdvP VP
Agt

[CP [IP PRO i làm pro]].
VP
Agt Pat
"I rest a moment then continue to do it again."

In (6b) there is one main clause and two infinitival clauses. The non-overt subjects of the infinitival clauses are PROs which are controlled by the overt subject of the main clause. The non-overt object of the verb làm ‘to do’ is pro, which is governed by the verb làm. The third clause is the complement of the second clause, whereas the second clause is an adjunct of the main clause.

(7) Tôi đi chợ.
I go market
"I go to the market."

(7a) Chúng ta đưa con đi chơi công viên.
we bring child go play park
NP VP NP VP NP
"We take a child and go for a walk in the park."

In (7a) there are two verbs in the sentence, as shown in (7b).
(7b) Chúng ta đưa con [CP [IP PRO i đi chơi công viên]].
we bring child go play park
NP VP NP VP NP
Agt Pat Agt Loc
“We take a child and go for a walk in the park.”

In (7b) the non-overt subject of the infinitival clause is controlled by the overt subject of the main clause. The second clause is the complement of the first clause.

(8) Họ hết âm lên.
they scream noise up
NP VP NP P
“They screamed very noisily.”

(8a) Chi ấy gọi như hết vào tai.
eld sis that call as scream into ear
NP VP A VP P NP
“She calls like (she is) screaming into one’s ear.”

In (8a) there are two verbs, as shown in (8b).

(8b) [CP [IP Chi ấy gọi pro]] như
eld sis that call as
NP VP A
Agt Pat

[CP [IP PRO i hết vào tai.]]
scream into ear
VP P NP
Agt Des
“She calls like (she is) screaming into one’s ear.”

In (8b) the verb ‘to call’ is a transitive verb which has as its complement the non-overt object pro. It is governed by the verb gọi, whereas the non-overt subject of the infinitival clause is PRO, which is controlled by the overt subject of the main clause. The second clause is the complement of the main clause. vào ‘enter, into’ is claimed to be a preposition, not a verb, because it cannot be negated or preceded by an adverb as a verb can be.

(9) Nuoc mát lan tren go ma.
water eye roll on knoll cheek
NP VP P NP
“The tears rolled down her cheeks.”

(9a) Bà nga lan ra dat.
grandmo fall down roll out/exit ground
NP VP VP P NP
“Grandmother fell down and rolled on the ground.”
In (9a) there are two verbs in the sentence. The non-overt subject of the
infinitival clause is controlled by the overt subject of the main clause, as shown in
(9b).

(9b)  Bà nga [cp [ip PRO i] lan ra/dat].
grandmo fall down roll out ground
NP VP VP P NP

“Grandmother fell down and rolled on the ground.”

In (9b) ra ‘out / exit’ is not a verb because it cannot be preceded by a
negative or an adverb. It is a derived preposition which is the head of the PP.

Goral (1986:376) analyses derived prepositions as directional verbs, e.g.
nhìn ra [lit: look (at) exit] ‘to recognize’, but I analyse this kind of verb as a
coverb.

(10) Tôì nghe dài.
I listen radio
NP VP NP

“I listen to the radio.”

(10a) Chù ý nghe tôì giáng lai.
pay attention listen I explain again
VP VP NP VP Adv

“Pay attention and listen to my explanation again.”

In (10a) there are three verbs in the sentence. There are non-overt subjects
of the main and the second clauses which are PRO. Because Vietnamese is not an
inflectional language like Italian or Spanish, therefore pro is not used in these
positions because these empty elements have no definite reference to a verbal
inflection. The non-overt object of the verb giáng ‘to explain’ in the third clause is
pro which is governed by the verb giáng. The third clause is the adjunct of
the second clause, whereas the second one is the complement of the first clause, as in
(10b).

(10b) [cp [ip PRO Chù ý ] [cp [ip PRO nghe tôì i]]]
pay attention listen I
VP VP NP

[cp [ip PRO Giáng pro lai]].
explain again
VP Adv

“Pay attention and listen to my explanation again.”

Goral (1986:436-7) sets up criteria for considering a verb concatenation as a
single verb: if verbs are separated by unambiguous clause or sentence boundaries,
then they do not belong to a single concatenation. But my study permits boundaries
between clauses in one sentence, such as the complement or the complementizer
(e.g. dể ‘for’). These internal boundaries do not affect my criteria because there is
related reference within each sentence. Since verbs are considered a sequence because there are both non-overt subjects and non-overt objects in the main and infinitival clauses. The non-overt subject is referred to as PRO, the non-overt object is referred to as pro.

REFERENCES