SERIAL VERB CONSTRUCTIONS
IN ENGLISH AND CHINESE

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Traditionally, the term serial verb construction refers to a sequence of verbs or verb phrases in a sentence in which there is no intervening conjunction. The English expression *go eat*, for example, might be considered as a kind of serial verb construction since there is no infinitive or other morphosyntactic marker present to indicate a coordinating or subordinating relationship between the two verbs *go* and *eat*.

English is traditionally termed as a non-serial language; however, this does not suggest that in English there is no serial verb construction (SVC). Chinese is classified as a serial language; however, according to the results obtained from the Lancaster Corpus of Mandarin Chinese only one out of five sentences contains serial verbs though Chinese is thought to have high frequency in serial verbs. In fact, the issue of serial or non-serial language is basically a matter of frequency.

1.   Common Types of VV Sequence in English and Chinese

Although Chinese and English is different in the total number of SVC types the following three types of VV sequence are found to be common across English and Chinese:

(1)   purposive SVCs
    a.   go eat   (English)

    b.   qu chifan   (Chinese)
       'go eat'

(2)   causative SVCs
    a.   I made him laugh.   (English)

    b.   Wo   shi   ta   xiao. (Chinese)
       I   make   him   laugh
       'I made him laugh.'

(3)   perceptive SVCs
    a.   I saw him laugh.   (English)

    b.   Wo   kan   ta   youyong.   (Chinese)
       I   see   he   swim
       'I saw him swim'

However, it has been noticed that not any VV sequence or multi-verb structure can be regarded as an SVC. For lack of agreed-upon defining criteria, different linguists have given different classifications to these structurally

similar constructions. Some analyses only reveal some aspects of SVCs and others include irrelevant structures such as coordination as SVCs. So this study aims at categorizing and understanding the constructions that have been called serial verb constructions at one time or another. In so doing, I hope to provide an integrated account of Chinese and English multi-verb constructions. But before presenting my analysis to achieve this goal, it would be helpful to provide brief discussions about event structure.

2.   Definition of 'Conceptual Event'

Since my approach proposes that there is a connection between grammatical structure and cognition such that one can link a canonical SVC to a single (or unitary) complex event, it is important to provide a tenable definition of 'event'. Events can be simple or complex depending on how many phases they contain and on how the speaker conceptualizes the event. Simple events only consist of a single phase while complex events contain more than one phase. Whether simple or complex, all events have a core component – the main activity – which is usually highlighted and salient. If an event is only composed of a core verbal component it is deemed a simple event, as in (4).

(4)   Ta   zai   sha   yizhi zhu.
       He   PROG kill   one   pig
       'S/he was killing a pig (the pig might or might not die).'

However, in addition to the main element, an event could have an inception phase and/or termination phase, with the former serving as a preparatory stage and the latter usually signaling a resultative stage. Thus, an event can contain the core phase plus a verb which serves as an inception phase and/or termination phase. If more than one phase is involved in the event it necessarily becomes a complex event.

(5)   Ta   na   dao   sha   yizhi zhu.
       S/he take   knife kill   one   pig.
       'S/he took a knife to kill a pig.'

Example (5) is construed as a complex event with two purposively related phases or stages and, thus, it is considered as an SVC.
An action or an activity can also cause a termination, fulfillment, or change of state – that is, a result. An action and its result are termed by Talmy (2000) as a *macro event*. A macro event is a kind of complex event since it consists of at least two phases. In Mandarin, the resultative phase of an event is often realized by an achievement verb like *si* 'die' as in (6).

(6)   Ta   sha   si   le   yizhi zhu.
       S/he kill   die   PERF one   pig
       'S/he killed a pig (the pig actually died).'

In addition to the core component, a description of an event could include both an inception phase and a termination phase as (7) illustrates.

(7) Ta   na   dao   sha   si   le   yizhi zhu.
     S/he take knife kill die   PERF one   pig.
     'S/he took a knife and killed a pig.'

Almost all types of SVCs denote in varying degrees a unitary complex event and they consist of at least two phases of an event: the core phase and either an inception phase or a termination phase. Table 1 illustrates the correspondence between different phases and event/construction types.

Phases	Type of events
core phase	simple event – non-SVC
inception phase + core phase	complex event – SVC
core phase + termination phase	complex event – SVC
inception phase + core phase + termination phase	complex event – SVC
core phase + core phase	2 separate events – non-SVC

Table 1   Correspondence between Different Phases and Types of Constructions

In the literature, there has been much debate over whether SVCs involve coordinate structures or subordinate structures or both, that is, some are the former and others the latter (e.g., Li & Thompson 1973; Steward 2001). However, a few linguists assert that SVCs are not typical coordinate or typical subordinate structures (Chao 1968; Langacker 1991; Song 1992), but no one has explained the differences between SVCs and coordination or subordination in detail. I propose that typical SVCs have unique features distinct from typical subordinate constructions or coordinate constructions. The differences mainly lie in their respective profiling.

3.   Event Structure of Coordination, Subordination and SVCs

In a subordinate construction, there is usually a main clause in addition to a subordinate clause. A main clause is the profile determinant and lends its profile to the composite structure of a multi-clausal expression and it is the head at a particular level of organization. A subordinate clause is defined as one whose profile is overridden by that of a main clause at the composite structure.
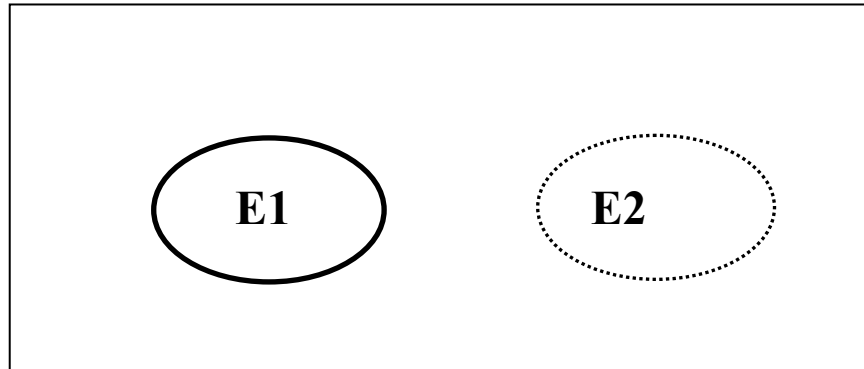
Figure 1   Event Structure of Subordination

        In typical coordinate constructions, neither clausal profile overrides the other at the higher level of organization. The two clauses in coordination are co-equal and they do not stand in a main clause/subordinate clause relationship and, thus, each clause has main clause status. Therefore, typical coordinate constructions have two processual profiles. The two clauses in coordination are independent and there is no situational inter-dependence between them.
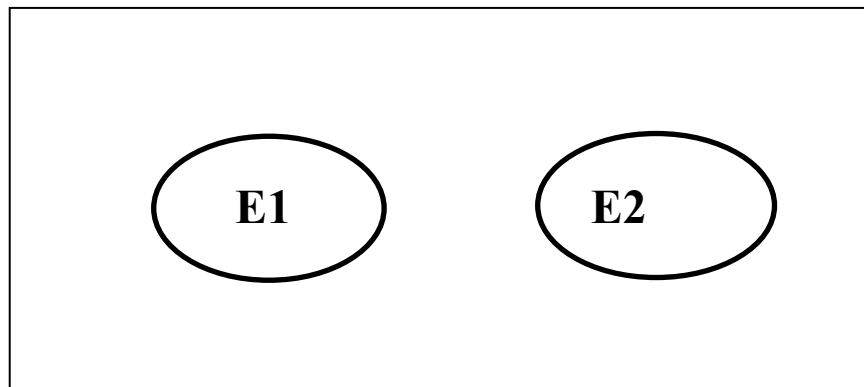

Figure 2   Event Structure of Coordination

        In typical SVCs, two or more content verbs of equal status are incorporated within a single clause. Both events are profiled as in the typical coordinate structure. However, there is situational inter-dependence between the two events. As in the SVC 'go eat', the two verbs represent successive temporal and interdependent phases. These two purposive related phases are construed to be one overall event. Thus, typical SVCs profile a single process comprising

two or more separately coded phases. These phases join to form a composite verb which acts as a clausal head. Both in English and Chinese typical SVCs signal two phases under one overall umbrella (event).
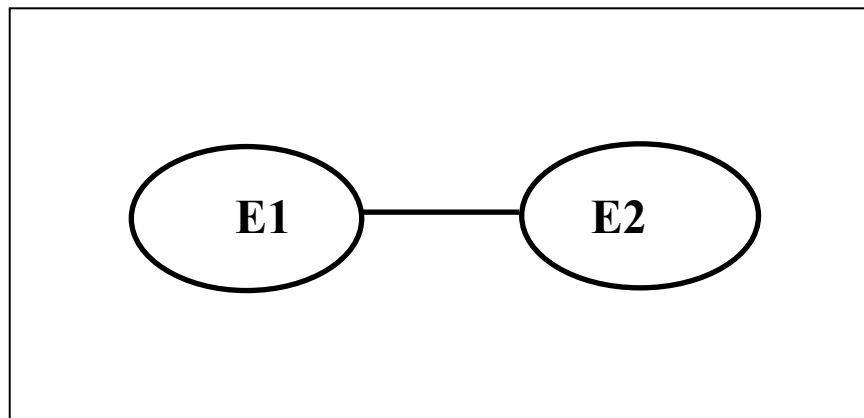

Figure 3   Event Structure of SVCs

Cognitive Grammar provides us useful mechanisms for describing event structures of coordination, subordination and SVC. It enables us to discern the similarities and differences of these three constructions. Each of these three constructions involves two events (or sub-events). The two events are both profiled in coordinate constructions and in SVCs. However, the two events in typical coordinate constructions are independent while those two in SVCs are semantically inter-dependent to be construed as two phases under one umbrella. In subordinate constructions, only one event denoted by the main event is profiled but the other event denoted by the subordinate clause is not profiled, which usually serves as complementation or modification.

4.   Construal Parameters (Three Semantic Principles)

In order to categorize and understand multi-verb sequences, operational principles are needed. The present analysis for classifying SVCs uses the following three semantic principles: the Principle of Temporal Sequence, the Principle of Shared Participants, and the Principle of Situational Dependence. These three semantic principles are assumed to play a role in construing or interpreting English and Chinese multi-verb expressions.

4.1 The Principle of Temporal Sequence

The Principle of Temporal Sequence holds that "the relative word order between two syntactic units is determined by the temporal order of the state which they represent in the conceptual world" (Tai, 1985:50). In SVCs, any interpretation with regard to temporal sequence between two verbal phrases should mirror the chronological order of their temporal phases.

Purposive constructions are typical cases of obeying this principle. Causative constructions also obey this principle in the sense that the event of causing should happen before the event of being caused. However, the perceptive constructions do not obey this principle quite well.

4.2 The Principle of Shared Participants

The Principle of Shared Participants refers to the phenomenon in which two verbs share at least one participant such that at least one of the coreferential participants is omitted.

In purposive constructions the subject is shared by V1 and V2. Causative constructions and (possibly) perceptive constructions shared a participant in the way that the object of V1 also functions as the subject of V2.

4.3 The Principle of Situational Dependence

The Principle of Situational Dependence is defined as a purposive, causal or resultative interdependent relationship between two VPs. Means and aims or cause and effect are two common types of situational dependence conveyed in SVCs.

In purposive constructions and causative constructions, a purposive, causal relation can be held. However, such relation cannot be established in perceptive constructions. Therefore, a perceptive construction is not a good candidate for an SVC.

Loosely, the three iconicity-based semantic principles proposed in this paper reflect whether the sequenced VPs in question share a temporal window, event participants, or reflect some other kind of conceptual unity with two phases.

5. Why does Chinese have more types of SVC?

The differences in event structures and three semantic principles do not explain why there are more types of SVC in Chinese than in English. One reason is the difference of verb lexicalization in English and Chinese. Chinese is a strongly satellite language, which regularly uses its satellites to specify realization or fulfillment. Many Chinese verbs require a satellite verb for their realization. The following example is entirely acceptable in Chinese but sounds strange in English:

(8)   Wo   sha   le   zhu   (keshi mei   sha   si)
        I   kill   PERF   pig   (but   not   kill   die)
        * 'I killed the pig but it didn't die'

(9)   Wo   sha   si   le   zhu.
       I   kill   die   PERF pig
       'I killed the pig.'

The semantics of the above examples can be explained as follows. In (8), the first clause means that I performed the action with the intention of killing the pig and the second clause in parentheses indicates that the action did not achieve the goal: success in killing the pig. However, with the confirmational satellite *si* 'die' in (9), the sentence is now an undeniable assertion that I succeeded in killing the pig.

So the English verb *kill* used to gloss the Chinese verb *sha* does not really correspond in meaning. Therefore, a sentence gloss like *'I killed the pig but the pig didn't die'* is really contradictory in English but thus incorrectly represents the non-paradoxical Chinese original. The original meaning is that *'I performed the action with the intent to kill, but the pig didn't die.'* English verb such as *kill*, *open*, *kick* are generally construed to refer to a simplex action of the fulfillment type and they specify the attainment of a certain final state.

In Chinese, the concept covered by a typical English verb such as *kill* is divided into two parts: the final outcome, usually conformed by a verb satellite and an action performed with the intent to lead to that outcome, which is signaled by the verb. As a result, the unitary concept of an English verb often has a counterpart in Chinese two-part conceptualization expressed by a verb plus another verb (satellite). This is one of the important factors which contributes to the fact that there are much more serial verb constructions in Chinese than in English.

Furthermore, the semantics of the Chinese verb-satellite system ranges more widely than in English. Some Chinese verbs can enter into constructions not only with resultative verbs (satellites) to indicate fulfillment, but also with those that express underfulfillment, overfulfillment, antifulfillment (Talmy, 2000).

(a)   fulfillment

(10)   Wo   ba   kuaizi   zhe   duan   le.
       I   OBJ   chopstick   break broken   PERF
       'I broke the chopstick.'

In (10), the first verb *zhe* means to squeeze in on an object with the intent to break it and the second verb *duan* express the fulfillment that the action achieves its goal of breaking it.

(b)   underfulfillment

(11)   Wo   ba   kuaizi   zhe   wan   le.
       I   OBJ   chopstick   break bend   PERF
       'I broke the chopstick bent.' (I squeezed in on the chopstick to break it, but only managed to bend it.)

In (11), the verb *zhe* 'break' takes a state-change satellite *wan* that denotes a 'bent' state. Usually in the efforts of breaking something, a bent state for the object is on the way to a broken state. Therefore, the verb *wan* 'bent' indicates an insufficient fulfillment of the full scope of intention. Thus, the resultative verb *wan* in this example sentence marks underfulfillment.

(c)   overfulfillment

(12)   Wo   ba   kuaizi   wan   zhe   le.
       I   OBJ   chopstick   bend   broken   PERF
       'I bent the chopstick broken.' (I squeezed in on the chopstick to bend it, but wound up breaking it.)

In (12), the verb *wan* 'bend' takes a state-change satellite that denotes a broken state. Since the concept of breaking is on a continuum with that of bending and conceived as lying beyond it, the resultative verb that marks this excess is properly termed as overfulfillment (Talmy, 2000).

(d)   antifulfillment

(13)   Wo   ba   yifu   xi   zang   le.
       I   OBJ   clothes   wash   dirty PERF
       'I washed the clothes dirty.' (I washed the clothes [e. g., in a lake] but it turned out dirtier than before.)

In (13), the verb *xi* 'wash' takes the state-change satellite *zang* 'dirty' to express the following combined meaning: immerse and rub the clothes with the intention to make them clean, but they turned out to be dirtier than before. Talmy (2000) terms a satellite for this semantic effect on the verb as an antifulfillment satellite.

In verb-satellite relations, the state indicated by the satellite could lie somewhere along the conceptual axis leading to the intended goal. "Thus, the state expressed by the satellite was either before the starting point, almost at the goal, or past the goal" (Talmy, 2000).

Unlike Chinese, English generally uses one word to express action and goal suck as *pull*. However, it is very common for Chinese to use two words such as *pull open* to indicate action and goal respectively. As a result, VV sequences to denote action and goal are very common in Chinese.

The fact that Chinese has few syntactic markers or inflections is also responsible for more types of SVCs. If in Chinese two verbs in a sentence lacks an intervening conjunction or a syntactic marker a VV structure will be created as in the following example:

(14)   Ta   zhong cai   mai.
       He   plant vegetable   sell
       'He   plant(s) vegetables (to) sell'.

However, with an infinitive marker in English an SVC will not be available in this case.

It should be noticed that not every VV sequence created in this way is a case of an SVC.

(15) Ta   meitian   kan   shu   hui   ke.
      He   everyday   read   book   receive   visitors
      'He reads books (and) receives visitors everyday.'

Normally, there is no situational dependence between reading books and receiving visitors. Also we do not know which one of the two events happens first or they may happen more than once a day. This structure is better to be analyzed as a case of coordination.

In Chinese, frequent pronoun dropping is also quite common. For example, if the subject in the embedded clause is omitted as in the following sentence, a string of two verbs will be formed.

(16) Ta   chengren   zuo   cuo   le.
      He   confess   do   wrong   PERF
      'He confessed (that he) did wrong'

However, this sentence can not be considered as an SVC since the clause 'doing wrong' is subordinate to the main clause.

6.   Conclusions

Structurally similar and underspecified constructions like VV sequences display a continuum of interpretation and syntactic behavior. Both English and Chinese have serial verb constructions. Serial verb constructions are different from typical cases of coordination and subordination mainly in event structure and profiling. The fact that there are more types of serial verb construction in Chinese than in English is mainly due to these three factors: (1) differences of lexicalization between English and Chinese; (2) lacking of syntactic markers and inflections in Chinese; (3) frequent pronoun dropping in Chinese.

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