



Research article

Derivation of serial verbal constructions

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Abstract

Earlier works failed to account for the derivation of serial verbal constructions. This is because the deletion method adopted could not account for the derivation of the modified serial verbal construction type. In this paper, we employ the Minimalist Framework of generative syntax for the derivation of this problematic SVC-type. This is done through the works of two principles in the Minimalist Program, these are operations select and merge.

Keywords

deletion; computational system; select; merge; serial verbal construction

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1. INTRODUCTION

The familiar phenomenon known as serial verbal construction is prominent in West African languages. Other names by which the construction is known include verb serialization, serial verbs, verbal combinations, verbs in series (George 1975, 78). Bámgbóṣé (1974, 17) gives the following definition of SVC:

The term 'serial verbal construction' or 'serial verbs' has been applied to the combination of verbs found in many West African languages where all the verbs share a common subject in the surface structure.

2. Types of serial verbal constructions (SVCs)

George (1975), Bámgbóṣé (1983, 1990), Oyelaran (1982) give various types of SVCs in Yorùbá. Bámgbóṣé (1983, 1990) will be our guide because it is the most recent of all classifications or types. These are sequential SVC, consequential SVC and durational SVC. Others are modifying SVC, causative SVC and complex SVC.

In a sequential SVC, the action of the first verb precedes that of the second (Bámgbóṣé 1983, 4). Two examples are given below.

- 1a. Adé à bẹ ọkà rhan zẹ lí oko
Ade fut. cut maize roast eat at farm
'Ade will harvest, roast and eat maize in the farm'.
- b. Adé ní bẹ ọkà rhan zẹ lí oko
Ade fut.neg cut maize roast eat at farm
'Ade will not harvest, roast and eat maize in the farm'.

In consequential SVCs, 'the event symbolized by the second verb is understood to be the consequence of that symbolized by the first' (Omamor 1977, 81; Bámgbóṣé 1990, 161). This is the situation in the two sentences in (2).

- 2a. Ọlọpàá à gwó olé tiẹ pa
policeman fut. beat thief the kill
'The policeman will beat the thief to death'.
- b. Tọpẹ ó mọ omi kú
Tọpẹ agr drink water die
'Tọpẹ drank water till he died'.

In the modifying SVC, one verb modifies another verb in much the same way as an adverb modifies a verb (Bámgbóṣé 1983, 6). In the examples below, the second verb té 'to reach' modifies the first mọ 'to know'.

- 3a. Mo mọ Bíódún té ulí
I know Biodun reach house
i.e. 'I know Biodun intimately'.
- b. Mí ì mọ Bíódún té ulí
I pres. neg know Biodun reach house
i.e. 'I don't know Biodun intimately'.

In durational SVC, the action or state of the first verb continues until the action or state of the second verb is attained (Bámgbóşé 1983, 5). The sentences in (4) are instances of durational SVC in Ào.

- 4a. Ọgá wa ó fu sùúrù yanzú ọfọ tié
 boss our agr use patience settle matter the
 ‘Our boss patiently settled the matter’.
- b. Olúwàásù à sù ùre fú in
 preacher fut. say blessing give you(pl)
 ‘The preacher will bless you/pray for you’.

In the causative SVC, the first verb is the verb that causes the action or event of the second verb (Bámgbóşé 1990, 62). Consider the sentences below.

- 5a Ọjé jí ó rọ mí dì ọbọn
 cold this agr make me become dirty-one
 ‘This cold weather has made me a dirty person’.
- b. Ọba ó bè mi dá urá ọzà díró
 king agr send me make people market stop
 ‘The king asked me to stop the marketers’.

3. The structure of serial verbal constructions

The structure of the SVC is such that it has only one subject or doer in the sentence (at the surface level) with more than one verb without any evidence of co-ordination (Yusuf 1995, 40). Consider the following examples.

- 6a. Tọpé ó mọ ọtín jó yá ulí
 Tọpé agr drink wine full come house
 i.e. ‘Tọpé came home drunk’.
- b. Ọba ó bè mi fu àáké gé ugin
 king agr send me use axe cut tree
 i.e. ‘The king asked me to use the axe to cut the tree’.

The SVCs in (6) consist of three verbs each. In (6a), we have mọ ‘drink’, jó ‘full’ and yá ‘come’ while the three verbs in (3b) are bè ‘send’, fu ‘use’ and gé ‘cut’. Because sentences like those above contain at least two verbs, Awóbùlúyì (1978, 116) says they are always complex and are formed by combining parts of simple sentences. Bámgbóşé (1990, 159) goes ahead to say that the first verb in a SVC must refer to the subject of the sentence but the verb that follows may



refer to the subject or the object of the sentence. Following Awóbùlúyì (1978) and Bámgbóšé (1990: 160–161), the SVCs in (6) are derived from the sentences in (7) and (8) respectively.

7a. Tópé ó mọ ọ́tín
Tópé agr drink wine
i.e. Tópé drank wine’.

b. Tópé ó jọ
Tópé agr full
i.e. ‘Tópé was drunk’.

c. Tópé ó yá ulí
Tópé agr come home
i.e. ‘Tópé came home’.

8a. Ọba ó bè mi
king agr send me
i.e. ‘The king asked me’.

b. Mo fu àáké
I use axe
i.e. ‘I used the axe’.

c. Mò gé ugín
I cut tree
i.e. ‘I cut the tree’.

As Professor Awóbùlúyì rightly observed, parts of the simple sentences in (7) are combined to form the SVC of (6a). These are the whole of the sentence in (7a), the verb in (7b) and the verb plus its object in (7c). This is done by deleting the subjects of (7b) and (7c) because they are identical with that of (7a). In (6a) therefore, all the verbs refer to the subject. In the case of the SVC in (6b), it is derived from the simple sentences in (8) by the same deletion method where only the subjects of (8b) and (8c) are deleted. Unlike in (6a), not all the verbs in (6b) refer to the subject; only the first verb does; while the remaining two verbs refer to the object.

However, the derivational method fails to account for the SVC in (9).

9. Mo mọ Bíódún té ulí
I know Biodun reach house
i.e. ‘I know Biodun intimately’.

The failure of the derivational method is due to the fact that the SVC in (9) cannot be said to be derived from the combination of (10a) and (10b) below.



- 10a. Mo mọ Bíọdún
 I know Bíọdún
 i.e. 'I know /knew Bíọdún'.
- b. Mó té ulí
 I reach house
 i.e. 'I reached the house'.

The subjects of the two simple sentences in (10) are identical. One of them, that of (10b), should be deleted and the remaining parts of the simple sentence should be merged with (10a) to give us (9). Such a derivation cannot give us the same meaning as that of (9). Due to the inability of the deletion derivational method to account for SVCs like the one in (9), Oyelaran (1982) does not discuss the derivation of SVCs. Rather he gives a 'list of SVC types in (standard) Yorùbá together with the characteristic surface constituent structure and an indication of the functional relations between NP's and VP's' (Oyelaran 1982, 124). The structure of the SVC in (9) according to Oyelaran (1982, 125) is given in (11).

11. Mo mọ Bíọdún té ulí
 NP1 V1 NP2 V2 NP3
 NP1 subj V1 subj V2 NP2 objV3

Because of the inability of the earlier theories and works to account for the derivation of all the SVCs, we shall give the structural representations and show the derivations of SVCs within the Minimalist Framework of generative syntax adopted for this study.

3.1. The structure of serial verbal constructions within the MP

Recent theories of generative syntax (e.g. The Principles and Parameters Theory, PPT) have abandoned the notion of deletion. This is because of the inability to recover the deep or D-structure from the surface or S-structure. In the Minimalist Program, we try to account for the formation or derivation of a sentence in a non-complex manner unlike the deletion and substitution methods (Marantz 1995; Napoli 1996; Radford 1997a). Operation Select and Operation Merge are the two operations that take place in the lexicon through the Computational System (Chl) (Chomsky 1995a; Chomsky 1995b, Radford 1997b). If the right lexical item is selected in the lexicon, it is merged with another one in a pairwise manner (Radford 1997a; Radford 1997b). For example in the SVC in (9), repeated below for convenience,

9. Mo mọ Bíọdún té ulí
 I know Biodun reach house
 i.e. 'I know Biodun intimately'.

The verb mọ 'to know' and the noun Bíọdún are selected in the lexicon by the Computational System and are merged together by Operation Merge to give us the VP mọ Bíọdún

In the structural sketch above, there is only one AgrsP projection. But others such as TaspP, AgroP and the VP have two projections each. The two projections have to do with the two verbs in (9). Each of the two verbs has to move from its position as head of the VP, adjoin to Agro to check off its agreement features, and then to the Tasp node to check and erase its uninterpretable Tense and Aspect head featuresⁱ. Hence, TaspP, AgroP, and VP are projected twice for the two verbs. This is because there is only one subject in SVCs. Though there could be two projections of the VP, only the first VP has a specifier; others do not. Bámgbóşé (1990) and Yusuf (1995) have rightly observed that the verbs in SVCs will either be referring to the only subject in the construction or only one of the verbs will refer to the subject while the other will refer to the object. This is also the point brought out by Oyelaran (1982, 124) where the functional relations between NPs and VPs in SVCs were emphasized.

Since there is only one AgrsP in SVCs, the AgrsP in (Fig. 1) is not marked. Other maximal phrases have two projections each. These projections are marked differently to differentiate one from the other. TASPP1, AgroP1, VP1 Agro1 and the rest are the projections of the first verb while TASPP2, AgroP2, VP2, Agro2 are the projections of the second verb.

The SVC with three verbs in (6b) has the structure in (Fig. 2).

The structural representations in (Fig. 1) and (Fig. 2) above are for affirmative serial verbal constructions. The derivation of negative SVCs will still involve the two operations – Operations Select and Merge – that take place in the lexicon through the Computational System. However, it will also involve the selection and merging of the relevant negative markers in the languageⁱⁱ. For this reason, the NegP will be projected for convergence to take place in negative SVCs. For example, the negative counterpart of the SVC in (6b) is given in (14).

14 Ọba à bẹ mi fu àáké gé ugin
 king past neg. send me use axe cut tree
 i.e. ‘The king did not ask me to use the axe to cut the tree’.

The negative sentence above has the structure in (Fig. 3) below.

4. CONCLUSION

We have, in this paper, shown one of the merits the Minimalist Program has over earlier frameworks of generative syntax. This is the ability to handle the derivation of complex structures such as serial verbal constructions in a non-complex manner. Unlike earlier theories which failed to account for the derivations of some serial verbal constructions, especially the modifying serial verbal construction type, the MP handles its derivation and that of other types successfully.

i (Ajongolọ 2005) for these various features and how they are checked for convergence to take place. Ajongolọ T.O. is a former name of Oye Taiwo.

ii Ajongolọ (2005, 76-196) gives a detailed discussion of the various negative markers in the Ao dialect of Yorùbà language.

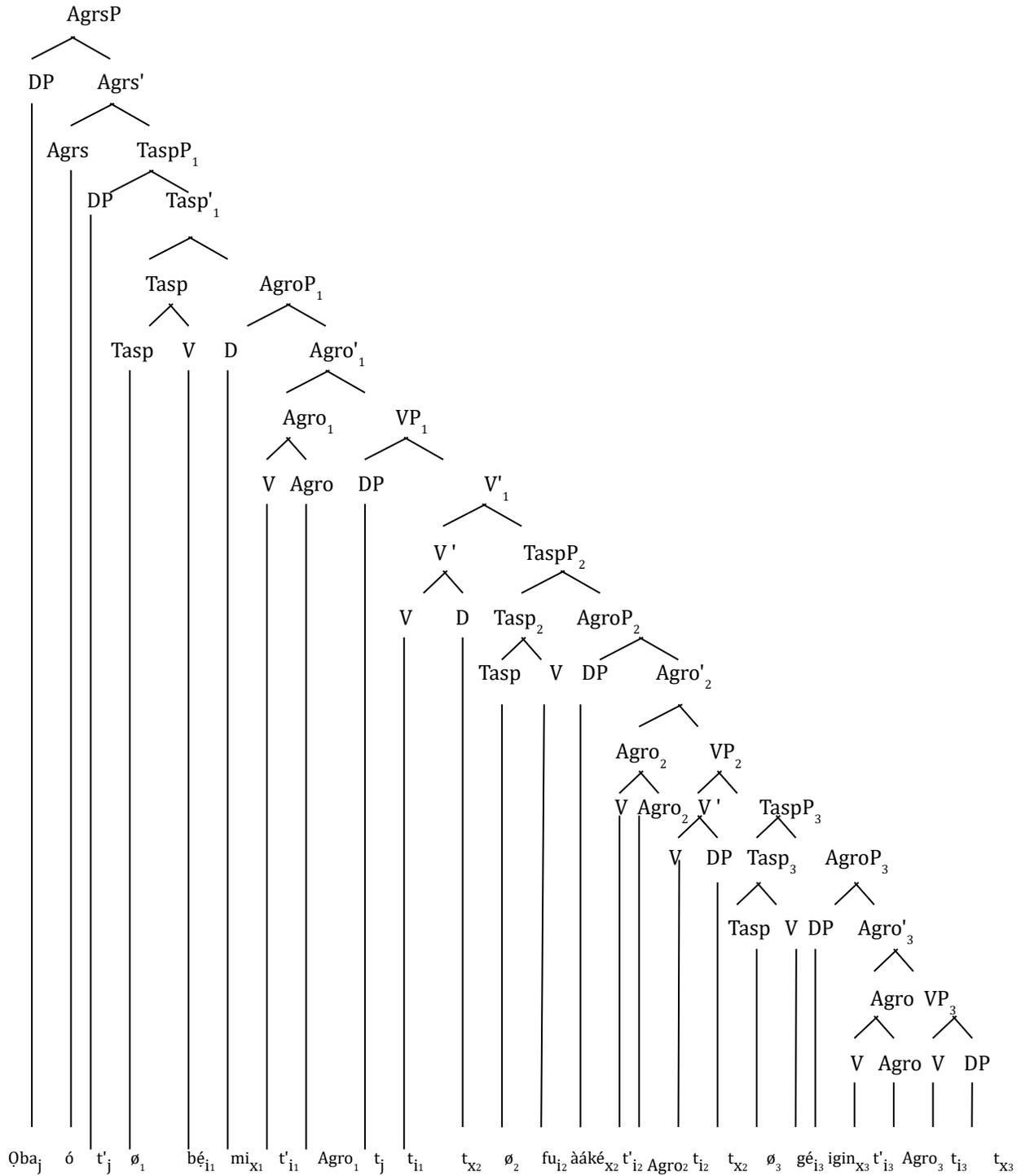


Figure 2.

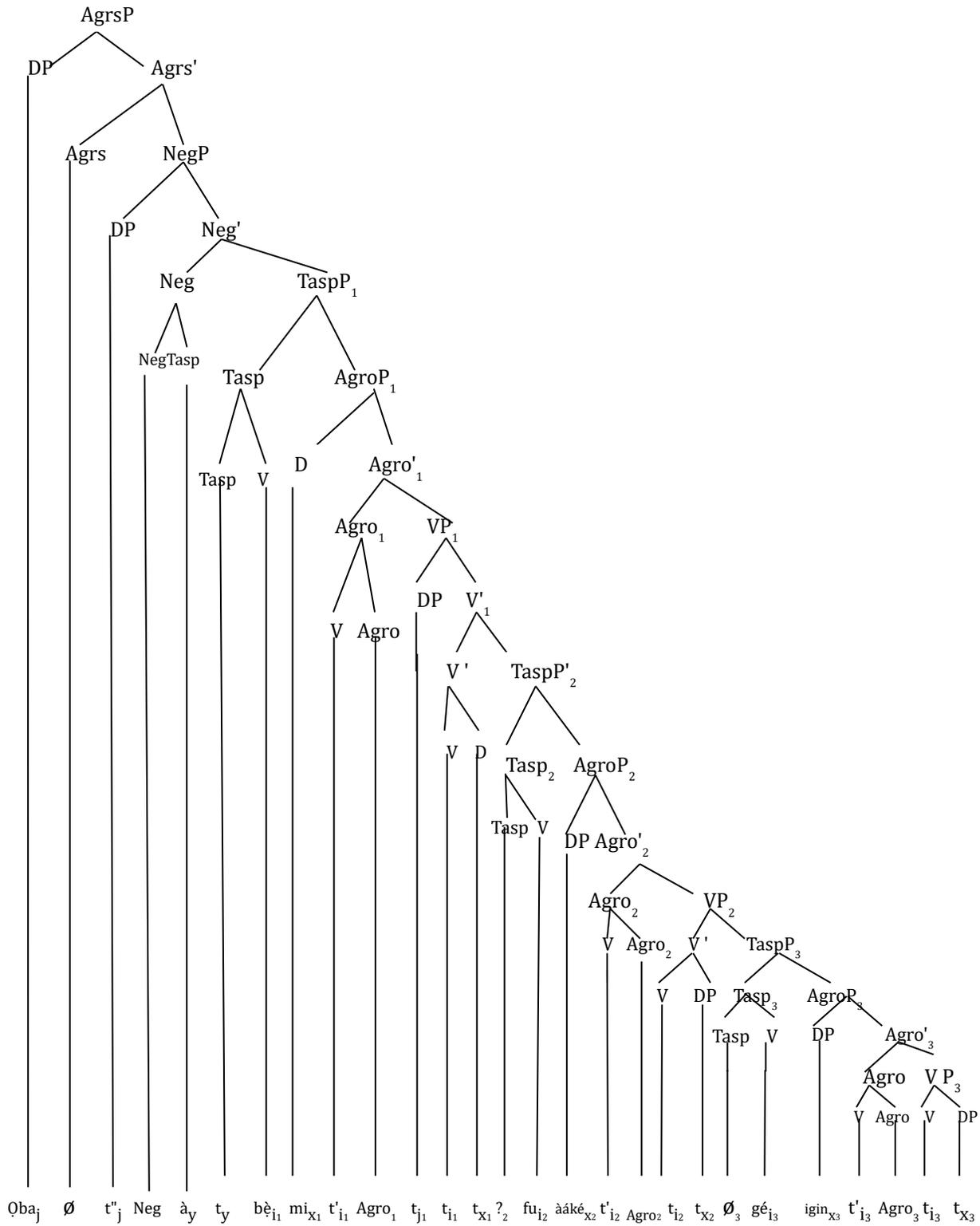


Figure3.

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