

**“THE GIRAFFES BURST THROW EMERGE CLIMB PASS THROUGH THE ROOF OF THE HUT”: VERBAL SERIALISATION IN THE WEST RING LANGUAGES (ISU, WEH, AGHEM)<sup>1</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT**

Verbal serialisation – formerly called “Formverben” (Schlegel 1857), “combination of verbs” (Christaller 1875:69), “Verbalkombinationen” (Westermann 1907, Melzian 1942), “Verbhäufungen” (Westermann 1927: 10) – is a well known feature of many West African languages such as Ewe, Igbo, Nupe, Yoruba, all affiliated to New Kwa and New Benue-Congo within Niger-Congo. Within New Benue-Congo and outside the former Eastern Kwa branch, verbal serialisation also occurs in the Plateau languages (Gerhardt 1994) of Central Nigeria and extends as far to the South-East as the Bantu borderland. It could be found in the Bantoid languages of the Grassfields of Cameroon, e.g. in Mbam-Nkam languages of the Eastern Grassfields such as Fe’fe’-Bamileke (Hyman & Voeltz 1971). Against the background of what Ameka (2001) proposed as diagnostic features of serial verb constructions (SVCs) in the Kwa languages, I will sketch the characteristic morphosyntactic and semantic features of what Bamgbose (1974) would call the modifying type of serialisation in three Western Grassfields languages, i.e. Isu, Weh and Aghem of the West Ring branch.

Modifying SVCs are semantically asymmetrical in that they could be viewed as consisting of a core verb which is semantically specialised and at least one coverb which is semantically more generalised. Typically, there is a semantic split between verbs in their basic meaning and their extended or generalised use as coverbs in SVCs which is increasingly reflected in distinct morphosyntactic profiles, which is a well-known consequence of progressive grammaticalisation and an indicator of the emergence of new grammatical structures heading towards morphosyntactic consolidation. As a conclusion, it becomes obvious that in West Ring modifying verbal serialisation, the generalised coverbs undergo a process of verbal attraction (Heine & Reh 1984) and bunch up in the central field of the clause to form what looks like a complex verbal compound. One of the major effects of this syntactic shift is that intransitive verbs used as coverbs in a SVC could be found taking over transitivity and the syntactic assignment of semantic roles from the main verb.

## 1 GENERAL FEATURES OF VERBAL SERIALISATION IN WEST RING

In discussing the properties of serial verb constructions (SVCs) in Kwa languages, Ameka (2001) proposes a distinct “Kwa type serialisation”: a monoclausal construction in which (a) verbs cannot be formally independently negated, where (b) each verb may occur with its own complements and where (c) the subject is the same for all verbs in the series, but expressed only once on the first verb. Regarding the West Ring languages, this kind of generalisation is valid only for a subgroup of SVCs, namely the “coordinate” or “linking” type (Bamgbose 1974), also called “narrative” (van Staden n.d.) or “symmetrical” (Aikhenvald n.d.), where the verbs in series represent what is cognitively perceived as a string of two or more immediately succeeding events or actions, every verb encoding one event or action. The “modifying” type (Bamgbose 1974), however, also called “component” (van Staden n.d.) or “asymmetrical” (Aikhenvald n.d.), where the verbs in a string form a conceptual unit, seems to violate Ameka’s criterion (b) in that all the serialised verbs share both, the same subject which precedes the verbal series, and the same object which follows, respectively. The list in (1) which is inspired by König’s treatment of !Xun (2002) presents the features that characterise the “modifying” or “component” SVC type of Isu and Weh.

- (1) West Ring “component” or “modifying” serialisation:
- (a) Two verbs (or more) follow one another within the same clause.
  - (b) There is no formal device linking the two.
  - (c) Nothing may be inserted between the two (or more) verbs.
  - (d) All verbs in series share both, the same subject, which precedes the first verb, and the same object, which follows the last verb.
  - (e) The verbs cannot be separately negated.
  - (f) The verbs cannot be separately focalised.
  - (g) The verbs form a close-knit structure perceived as a conceptual unit.
  - (h) In a number of verb collocations, one verb acts as the semantic core, whereas the others tend to function as grammatical modifiers whose order is rigidly constrained.

As a consequence of feature (1h), verbs in the West Ring languages fall into two classes which could be defined as those verbs that could make up a sole core verb of a predication, as opposed to those verbs that also could, but only rarely do, since instead they come up in conjunction with other verbs most frequently to form SVCs. Those of the second group belong to a restricted set of verbs, mostly motion verbs (e.g. Isu *zù* ‘go, go to’), manner verbs (e.g. Isu *tiálí* ‘do carelessly’), aspectual and modal verbs (e.g. Isu *mày* ‘finish’), and verbs of manipulation and change of state (e.g. Isu *mà?à* ‘throw, throw away’). Since they tend to undergo semantic shift and acquire more general meanings in SVCs vis-à-vis their basic meanings as sole verbs, modifying, elaborating or extending some aspect of the core verb, they are called ‘coverbs’, following Clark (1979).

One and the same verb could be used as a core verb or a coverb, which is reflected in its position relative to other verbs in the SVC. Thus, in (2a) Isu *jí* ‘go out,

come out’ is used as the core verb ( $V_1$ ), as could be seen from its initial position in the series, with *dyáŋí* ‘move through’ following as a coverb, whereas in (2b) it serves as a coverb  $V_2$  modifying the preceding core verb *ŋwò* ‘rise, leave’.

(2a) Isu: *fyí* ~ *fi* ‘go out, come out’ as a core verb ( $V_1$ )  
*ú*                      *ʼfi*      *dyáŋí*  
 S3sg:P3              go.out    move.through<sup>2</sup>  
 ‘He went out through / immediately.’

(2b) Isu: *fyí* ~ *fi* ‘go out, come out’ as a coverb ( $V_2$ )  
*ú*                      *ŋwò*    *fi*  
 S3sg:P3              leave    go.out  
 ‘He went away.’

Modifying SVCs of West Ring come up with three remarkable semanto-syntactic features discussed below that relate to (a) the marking of verbal grammatical categories such as aspect and subordination (single marking vs. concordant marking) (section 1.1), (b) argument structure (section 1.2), and (c) transitivity and verb valency (section 1.3).

### 1.1 SINGLE VS. CONCORDANT MARKING OF MORPHOSYNTACTIC CATEGORIES IN SVCS

Regarding the expression of grammatical categories within SVCs – such as subject agreement, tense, aspect and modality –, basically two types of marking could be found: concordant marking or single marking (Aikhenvald n.d.:57ff.). In concordant marking a grammatical category is expressed on every single verb in the SVC, whereas in single marking a grammatical category is marked only once in the entire SVC, obviously always on the initial verb. In West Ring languages, subject person, polarity and tense are single marked, i.e. in the verbal series as a whole there is only one marker for the person of the syntactic subject, for tense and negation. In contrast to this, aspect<sup>3</sup> and subordination are marked by concord, i.e. every single verb of the series bears the mark for aspect or subordination.<sup>4</sup>

## (3) Isu: Single vs. concordant marking of grammatical categories in SVCs

	V <sub>1</sub>	V <sub>2</sub>	V <sub>n</sub>
<i>Subject person</i>	+	-	-
<i>Object person</i>	-	-	+
<i>Tense</i>	+	-	-
<i>Negation</i> <sup>5</sup>	(+)	-	(+)
<i>Nominalisation</i>	+	-	-
<i>Aspect (imperfective)</i>	+	+	+
<i>Subordination</i>	+	+	+

Imperfective aspect is marked in two ways: by a verbal suffix which has allomorphs such as *-lə* and *-ə* (Kiebling (in print)) and by a verb initial floating \*L. Thus in (4b) and (5b) all verbs in series display the imperfective suffix, not to be found in the perfective in (4a) and (5a). At the same time all imperfective verbs have initial floating \*L which is absorbed in most cases though, except where it comes to stand between two Hs: in that case \*L surfaces by causing a downstep, as could be seen in <sup>4</sup>*dyáŋǎ* (5b).

## (4a) Weh: perfective aspect in SVC

*mə-m bəʔə kəʔ táí ʔtú z-ə*  
 S1sg-P0 carry:PFgo.up:PF stone DEF 5-D0  
 'I have lifted the stone.'

## (4b) Weh: Concordant marking for imperfectivity in SVC

*m-î bəʔ-lə kəʔ-ə nú táí ʔtú z-ə*  
 S1sg-F1IPF:carry-IPF IPF:go.up-IPF IPF:FOC stone DEF 5-D0  
 'I shall lift the stone.'

## (5a) Isu: perfective aspect in SVC

*mbám ə məŋ tami kəʔ nú dyáŋǎ yə wə*  
 cobra 9:D0:P3just:PFstand:PFsee:PF enter:PFmove.through:PF thither O3sg  
 'The cobra just stood and saw him inside immediately.'

## (5b) Isu: Concordant marking for imperfectivity in SVC

*ù meʔ mbám yə kɪ məŋ-ə tyim-ə kəʔ-ə*  
 S3sg QUOT cobra 9-D0 F1 IPF:just-IPF IPF:stand-IPF IPF:see-IPF  
<sup>4</sup>*nu-ə ʔdyáŋǎ-ə wə íyé*  
 IPF:enter-IPF IPF:move.through-IPF hither O3log  
 'He found that the cobra would just stand and see him inside immediately.'

If the SVC as a whole is embedded, subordination is marked by a succession of verb initial floating \*HL. Initial \*HL could be seen to change a basically L tone verb such as *fùk* 'harvest' (6a) to acquire falling tone HL, whereas basically H verbs such as

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*sák* ‘go to the bush’ (6a), *fán* ‘return home’ and *ní* ‘enter’ (6b) change their tone pattern to <sup>1</sup>H after H (6a) or to a contour H<sup>1</sup>H after L or <sup>1</sup>H (6b), respectively.

(6a) Isu: Concordant marking for subordination

<i>má</i>	<i>díy</i>	<i><sup>1</sup>sák</i>	<i>fúk</i>	<i>màn-tsòmbì</i>
<i>má</i>	<i>díy</i>	*HL- <i>sák</i>	*HL- <i>fúk</i>	<i>màn-tsòmbì</i>
S1sg	want	SJN-go.to.the.bush	SJN-harvest	6ab-groundnuts

‘I want to harvest groundnuts.’

(6b) Isu: Concordant marking for subordination

<i><sup>1</sup>wá</i>	<i>ngáy</i>	<i>wó</i>	<i>ù</i>	<i>fán<sup>1</sup></i>	<i>ní<sup>1</sup></i>	<i>ù</i>	<i>díy</i>	<i>yá.</i>
<i><sup>1</sup>wá</i>	<i>ngáy</i>	<i><sup>1</sup>wó</i>	<i>ù</i>	*HL- <i>fán</i>	*HL- <i>ní</i>	<i>ù</i>	<i>díy</i>	<i>yá</i>
child	POSS.1pl.incl	1.ref	S3sg	SJN-return	SJN-enter	REL	S3sg	be where?

‘That child of ours who returned home, where is he?’

1.2 VERBAL CONCENTRATION IN THE CENTRAL FIELD OF THE CLAUSE

In the West Ring languages serialised verbs tend to bunch up in the central field of the clause between subject and object, forming a structure S V<sub>1</sub> V<sub>2</sub> ... V<sub>n</sub> O (8-9). This syntactic behaviour is in contrast to what is frequently found in many other West African serialising languages which come up with a serialising structure S V<sub>1</sub> O V<sub>2</sub>, where O is at the same time the object complement of V<sub>1</sub> and the subject of V<sub>2</sub>, a construction that van Staden (n.d.: 47f.) calls “codependent serialisation”. Thus the constituent “the child” in the Yoruba example (7) is at the same time the object of the first verb, *ti* ‘push’, and subject of the second verb, *şubú* ‘fall’.

(7) Yoruba (Bamgbose 1974: 23)

<i>Olú</i>	<i>ti</i>	<i>omọ</i>	<i>náà</i>	<i>şubú</i>
Olu	pushed	child	the	fall

‘Olu pushed the child and the child fell.’

A “codependent serialisation” like this has not been found in Isu and Weh. Instead the second verb undergoes “verbal attraction” (Heine & Reh 1984:50ff.) which drags V<sub>2</sub> towards V<sub>1</sub> with the direct object ending up after the series as a whole. Thus, in (8) the verbs *bò?ò* ‘carry’ and *mà?à* ‘throw away’ are combined with their shared object *ítái* ‘stone’ coming after them. And in (9) the direct object *<sup>1</sup>mwi* ‘water’ comes after the series of *túw* ‘carry on the head’ and *fúrí* ‘increase’.

- (8) Weh: word order S V<sub>1</sub> V<sub>2</sub> ... V<sub>n</sub> O in SVCs  
*má-m*            *bò?ò*    *mà?à*            *tái*    *‘túí*    *z-ǎ*  
 S1sg-P0        carry    throw.away    stone    DEF    5-D0  
 ‘I have lifted the stone and thrown it away.’
- (9) Isu: word order S V<sub>1</sub> V<sub>2</sub> ... V<sub>n</sub> O in SVCs  
*dziy*    *ù*        *mbáb*    *zù*        *túw*            *fúrí*            *‘mwi*  
 saying S3sg    fast    go        carry.on.head    increase        water  
 ‘...asking him to hurry back to carry more water again.’

Yoruba also comes up with such a bunching type as (10), but in all those cases the verbs are arranged in an order obeying iconicity principles, i.e. it is only the final verb in the series that seems to be transitive immediately preceding its object complement.

- (10) Yoruba: S V<sub>1</sub> V<sub>2</sub> O in the “modifying type” of SVC (Bamgbose 1974:42)  
*ó*        *sáre*            *mú*        *ìwé*    *nàà*  
 he        ran.race        took        book    the  
 S        V<sub>1</sub>            V<sub>2</sub>        O        DET  
 ‘He took the book quickly.’

This is different in the West Ring languages, where serialised verbs generally tend to be concentrated between S and O. This has three consequences. First, on the syntactic level, this manipulation prevents the serialised verbs from having their own complements; instead, they all have one common complement which comes after the last verb of the series. Second, intransitive coverbs in the series lose part of their semanto-syntactic features, i.e. their restriction to intransitive reading, which might be viewed as diagnostic of an incipient grammaticalisation, e.g. in (4), (5) and (11). Third, on the conceptual level there is a violation of iconicity principles, since a succession of events is put in linear order before the obligatory object participant needed for the initial core verb V<sub>1</sub> has been mentioned, as in (8) and (9).

(11) presents an extreme example of a series of five verbs, with four coverbs (*mà?à*, *fyi*, *kwǎ?*, and *dyáyi*) – three of them actually intransitive in their basic reading – intervening between the core verb, *bwǎ?ǎ* ‘burst’, and its direct object, *ùtáa ú kǎtáa* ‘roof of the hut’. The second verb in the series, *mà?à*, basically means ‘throw away’ and is generalised in SVCs to express abuse, misuse or disposal of something. In this case it indicates that the action causes irreversible damage of the roof. The third verb, *fyi* ‘go out’ and the fourth verb, *kwǎ?* ‘climb, ascend, go up’ indicate the path of the movement, i.e. out of a container and upwards. The fifth verb, *dyáyi* ‘pass through, pass along closely, move ahead’, specifies a path again and that the movement penetrates an obstacle without difficulty and delay. The direct object of the initial core verb *bwǎ?ǎ* ‘burst’, *ùtáa ú kǎtáa* ‘roof of the hut’, is to be found at the very end of the entire series.

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- (11) Isu: core verb and its direct object separated by four coverbs
- |                |               |           |                 |                   |              |               |                 |
|----------------|---------------|-----------|-----------------|-------------------|--------------|---------------|-----------------|
| <i>bə́ʰ</i>    | <i>ŋgìy</i>   | <i>tə</i> | <i>díyʰ</i>     | <i>níay</i>       | <i>kə́</i>   | <i>mámwìy</i> | <i>yú</i>       |
| <i>bə́ʰ</i>    | <i>ŋgìy</i>   | <i>tə</i> | *HL- <i>díy</i> | *HL- <i>juàay</i> | <i>kə́</i>   | <i>mámwìy</i> | <i>yú</i>       |
| whenever       | giraffe       | 13        | SJN-want        | SJN-stretch up    | necks        |               | NS3pl           |
| <i>bwə́ʰə́</i> | <i>màʔà</i>   |           | <i>fyí</i>      |                   | <i>kwə́ʔ</i> | <i>dyáŋi</i>  |                 |
| <i>bwə́ʰə́</i> | <i>màʔà</i>   |           | <i>fyí</i>      |                   | <i>kwə́ʔ</i> | <i>dyáŋi</i>  |                 |
| burst:PF       | throw.away:PF |           | go.out:PF       |                   | go.up:PF     |               | pass.through:PF |
| <i>yə̀</i>     | <i>ùtáa</i>   | <i>ú</i>  | <i>kə́táa.</i>  |                   |              |               |                 |
| <i>yə̀</i>     | <i>úta</i>    | <i>ú</i>  | <i>kə́tʰá</i>   |                   |              |               |                 |
| centrifugal    | ceiling       | 8         | hut             |                   |              |               |                 |
- ‘When the giraffes want to stretch their necks, they burst out immediately through the upper section of the roof of the hut.’

1.3 TRANSITIVITY

The most frequent verbs to be encountered as coverbs in SVCs are intransitive motion verbs such as Isu *fyí* ‘go out’, *juí* ‘go in, enter’, *kwə́ʔ* ‘ascend’, *tswíy* ‘descend’. When they are used as sole core verbs, they never take direct objects. As coverbs, though, they take over transitivity from the core verb, since they could frequently be encountered in transitive settings with direct objects of the entire SVC immediately following them. This could be seen in Aghem (12) and Isu (13), where basically intransitive verbs, such as Aghem *tsúyó* ‘go down, descend’ and *kwə́ʔ* ‘ascend, climb’ (12) and Isu *fyí* ~ *fi* ‘go out’ and *fán* ‘return home from the bush’ (13), take over transitivity when fit into transitive frames set by transitive core verbs such as *nì* ‘take’ (12), *nìy* ‘take’ (13a) and *bə́ʰə́* ‘carry’ (13b).

- (12) Aghem: intransitive coverbs in transitive SVCs (Hyman 1979: 209)

- (a) *yé* *nì* *kwə́ʔ* *tífú*  
 S3pl take go.up hoes  
 ‘they take up hoes’
- (b) *ò* *nì* *kwə́ʔ* *zuù* *báŋʰátó* *tsə́ʔsí* *tsúyó* *á* *krítu*  
 S3sg take go.up soil red rub down on head  
 ‘he rubs red soil on her head’

- (13) Isu: intransitive coverbs in transitive SVC

- (a) *ú* *nìy* *fi* *bə́* *dìy*  
 S3sg:P3 take:PF go.out:PF hither Di  
 ‘He brought out Di.’

- (b) *yú fàt fài wò dìy á'n-í bò?ò fən*  
 S3pl instead:PF help:PF hither Di to-5 carry:PF return.home:PF  
*wò fòŋ ə wé ʔyá*  
 hither buffalo 9 O3sg 9-D0  
 'Instead they helped Di to carry home his buffalo.'

(13b) is remarkable in three ways. First, the intransitive coverb (V<sub>2</sub>) takes over transitivity of the core verb (V<sub>1</sub>) as a consequence of its being fit into a transitive syntactic frame which is set by the core verb (V<sub>1</sub>). Second, the direct object *fòŋ* 'buffalo' is placed after the verbal series as a whole which is in this case even augmented by a deictic marker *wò* for centripetal action. Third, dependency is only marked once by the nominalising proclitic {i} on the initial core verb.

## 2 ASPECTS OF GRAMMATICALISATION

Verbal serialisation is a laboratory that produces morphemes from lexemes (Lord 1993). Serialised verbs often display a functional split in a core verb and a coverb use; the coverb use is frequently accompanied by semantic and syntactic generalisation. There is also a whole class of adverbials in Isu and Weh which display verbal properties such as taking part in the imperfective marking, but which lack a core verb counterpart. This suggests that there is a cline from the status of a full-fledged verb to an adverb or "verbid" (Ansre 1966), through intermediary stages of uses as a coverb with various degrees of semantic generalisation and loss of verbal qualities such as suffixal and tonal marking for imperfectivity and subordination and features of syntactic subcategorization. Thus, the Isu adverbial *nám* 'still' retains most morphosyntactic properties of a full-fledged verb, such as marking for the imperfective aspect by suffix *-ə* in (14b), with the exception of the capacity of functioning as the sole main verb in a clause.

(14) Isu aspect sensitive adverbial *nám* 'still (PF)' vs. *námə* 'still (IPF)'

- (a) *mə mə ʔnám fà? áwò wè*  
 S1sg P0 still:PFwork:PF for O3sg  
 'I have still worked for him.'
- (b) *mə kî nám-ə fà?-à áwò wè*  
 S1sg F1 still-IPF work-IPF for O3sg  
 'I will still work for him.'

Examples of aspect-insensitive adverbials are the directional markers *wò* ~ *bò* 'hither' (5b, 13a & b), *yə* 'thither' (5a, 11), *tsə* for momentary or immediate action and



*kə́* for upward movement (11), exclusiveness (‘only’), durational, and assertive. Typically they occupy the very last position in the verbal series.

### 3 CONCLUSION

The Ring languages present a type of “modifying” serialisation that deviates at least in one parameter from Ameka’s (2001) “Kwa type” of serialisation, in that the verbs in the series are concentrated in the central field of the clause and share both, the same subject, which precedes the first verb, and the same object, which follows the last verb.<sup>6</sup> In this they resemble the situation found in serialising Khoisan languages such as !Xun (Heine & König 2001, König 2002), Ju’hoa (Sebba 1995), !Xõó (Traill 1994). West Ring serialisation also drifts towards syntactic consolidation, manifested in the arrangement of coverbs in a fixed order and accompanied by a progressive grammaticalisation of these coverbs as adverbials which becomes manifest in their loss of verbal morphology (aspect-sensitivity) and subcateriorial restrictions (intransitivity).

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Special thanks to Christa König & Bernd Heine for inspiration, useful hints and drawing my attention to and supplying me with concise treatments of verbal serialisation so far unpublished, such as Aikhenvald n.d. and van Staden n.d..

<sup>2</sup> List of abbreviations: A Aghem, D determinator, FOC focus marker, I Isu, IPF imperfective, log logophoric pronoun, O object marker, P past (with added numbers referring to various degrees of remoteness from the point of reference), S subject marker, SJN subjunctive, W Weh. Numbers refer to noun classes. Coverbs are underlined in all examples.

<sup>3</sup> This has also been observed by Anderson (1979:112) for Aghem: serialised verbs, called “consecutive verbs” there, cannot disagree in their aspect form, i.e. “both verbs must be either complete or incomplete, with mixing of forms being disallowed”.

<sup>4</sup> Here, West Ring languages are at odds with Aikhenvald’s generalisation that “if a serializing language has concordant marking for at least one of tense, aspect, mood or modality, it must also have concordant person marking” (Aikhenvald n.d.:65), and: “The person of the subject is more likely to receive concordant marking than any other category” (op.cit. p.81). The West Ring languages Isu, Weh and Aghem constitute a clear counterexample, since the imperfective aspect is marked on every single verb in the SVC (concordant marking), whereas the person of the subject is only marked once by a verbal proclitic (single marking).

<sup>5</sup> Bracketing indicates that there are various strategies of negation that involve negative marking in front of the first verb or negative marking after the last verb, respectively.

<sup>6</sup> Word order varies under special pragmatic conditions. Thus, in a subject focus constructions which is characterised by a preverbal expletive marker *à* and the subject shifted into immediate postverbal focus position, the SVC comes before the subject *and* the object which results in a syntactic structure  $V_1 V_2 \dots V_n S O$ . (Hyman 2001).

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