

The “serial verb construction” in Chinese: A Gordian knot

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Given that the term “construction” is not a label to be assigned randomly, but implies a precise structural analysis and the establishment of an associated set of syntactic and semantic properties, we will demonstrate that the term “serial verb construction” (SVC) as currently used in Chinese linguistics simply refers to any surface string with more than one verb i.e., it subsumes a multitude of different constructions. This state of affairs has two important consequences, both for synchronic and for diachronic studies. The “synchronic” consequence is that SVCs in Chinese linguistics are not commensurate with SVCs in Niger-Congo languages, hence it is futile at this stage to undertake typological studies aiming to derive the differences between so-called “serializing” and “non-serializing” languages in terms of a “serialization parameter”. On the diachronic side, SVCs are invoked as a privileged site for verb > preposition reanalysis, but it is left open what structure is referred to under this label. In order to make meaningful statements about language change, however, it is indispensable to have a precise structural analysis of both the input and the output structure.

1. Preliminaries

The basic assumption serving as the starting point of the present article is that the term *construction* is not a label to be assigned randomly. Instead, to talk of a *construction* implies that a precise structural analysis is available and that the syntactic and semantic properties associated with the structure at hand have been established. Against this background, we will demonstrate that the term *serial verb “construction”* (SVC) as currently used in Chinese linguistics simply refers to any surface string with more than one verb i.e., it subsumes a multitude of different constructions in the sense outlined above. Consequently, the term SVC is often used when in need of a passepartout label for a badly understood structure in Chinese. By contrast, in African linguistics (Niger-Congo languages), the term SVC is more narrowly defined. Despite diverging views on the exact coverage of the term, there exists the consensus that an SVC is not a coordinate construction, that it denotes a single (composite) event and presents one clausal domain.

This state of affairs has two important consequences, both for synchronic and for diachronic studies. The “synchronic” consequence is that SVCs in Chinese linguistics are not commensurate with SVCs in Niger-Congo languages, hence it is futile at this stage to undertake typological studies aiming to derive the differences between so-called “serializing” and “non-serializing” languages in terms of a “serialization parameter”. On the diachronic side, SVCs are invoked as a privileged site for verb > preposition reanalysis, but it is left open what structure is referred to under this label. In order to make meaningful statements about language change, however, it is indispensable to have a precise structural analysis of both the input and the output structure.

The article is organized as follows. Taking the different “definitions” of SVC proposed by Li & Thompson (1981; 1974, 1973) as representative of the current practice in the field, section 2 carefully examines them one by one and argues that in Chinese linguistics “SVC” has served as a cover term for distinct constructions with different properties; it does not refer to a unique construction with a predictable set of properties. Section 3 compares the situation in Chinese linguistics with that in Niger-Congo languages and concludes that there is hardly any overlap between the phenomena labeled SVC in each language (family). Section 4 illustrates how the indeterminacy of the term SVC may lead to an incorrect analysis of a

language specific phenomenon as well as to wrong crosslinguistic generalizations. Against the background of the preceding sections where the term SVC in its current use in Chinese linguistics is shown to be too vague to be of any use, section 5 opens up a new perspective. Adopting the narrow definition of SVC as object-sharing in the sense of Collins (1997), we suggest to analyse in terms of SVC the so-called *directional verb compounds* i.e., verb sequences of the type ‘V_{displacement} (- V_{direction}) -come/go’ such as *gǎn-chū-qù* ‘chase-exit-go’ = ‘to chase away’, which so far have not received a satisfactory analysis. Section 6 concludes the article .

2. The SVC and its “definitions” in Chinese linguistics :

Li & Thompson (1981, 1974, 1973)

It is important to note at the outset that we do not intend to give an overview of the abundant literature on SVCs here, nor do we claim to even attempt to do justice to all the different conceptions of SVC present in the literature. Instead, we have chosen Li & Thompson’s view of SVC as representative for the current practice in the field. Not only has their work been quite influential in Chinese linguistics but at the same time it offers the advantage to be very explicit about the coverage of the term SVC and can therefore give us a good idea of the large variety of phenomena subsumed under this label.

In the following, I will first present Li & Thompson’s point of view and then subject the phenomena claimed to instantiate SVC to a detailed scrutiny.

2.1. Li & Thompson (1981)

“We will use the term serial verb construction to refer to a sentence that contains two or more verb phrases or clauses juxtaposed without any marker indicating what their relationship is between them. What this means is that in Mandarin there are many sentences that all have the same form, namely [...] (NP) V (NP) (NP) V (NP) but that convey different types of messages because of the meanings of the verbs involved and the relationships that are understood to hold between them. That is, the property they all share is that the verb phrases in the serial verb construction always refer to events or states of affairs which are understood to be related as *parts of one* overall event or state of affairs. The exact way in which they are related varies according to the meanings of the verbs in these verb phrases.” Li & Thompson (1981: 594; emphasis mine)

Li & Thompson (1981) propose to distinguish four different types of SVC:

1.type:

The SVC expresses “two or more separate events” (L&T 1981: 595; emphasis mine) and “may be understood to be related in one or more of the following four ways”: (i) consecutive, (ii) purpose, (iii) alternating, (iv) circumstance:

- | | | |
|-----|---|----------------|
| (1) | Wōmen kāi huì tāolùn nèi -ge wèntí ¹ | |
| | 1PL hold meeting discuss that-CL problem | |
| | ‘We’ll hold a meeting to discuss that problem.’ | (purpose) |
| | ‘We’ll discuss that problem holding a meeting.’ | (circumstance) |

¹ The following abbreviations are used in glossing examples: CL classifier; PERF ‘perfective aspect’; NEG negation; PART sentence-final particle; PL plural (e.g. 3PL = 3rd personplural); SG singular; SUB subordinator

- (2) Tā tiāntiān chàng gē xiě xìn
 3SG every:day sing song write letter
 ‘Every day she sings songs and writes letters.’ (consecutive/alternating)

2nd type:

“One verb phrase or clause is the subject or direct object of another verb” (p. 598).

- (3) Tā fǒurèn tā zuò-cuò-le (= Li & Thompson’s (19))
 3SG deny 3SG do -ERR -PERF
 ‘S/he denies that s/he was wrong.’
- (4) Tā gàosù wǒ nǐ tóu téng (= Li & Thompson’s (37))
 3SG tell 1SG 2SG head ache
 ‘S/he told me that you had a headache.’
- (5) Dàshēng niàn kèwén kěyǐ bāngzhù fāyīn (= Li & Thompson’s (42))
 loud read lesson can help pronunciation
 ‘Reading the lesson aloud can help one’s pronunciation.’
- (6) Xué Ménggǔhuà hěn bù róngyì (= Li & Thompson’s (43))
 learn Mongolian very NEG easy
 ‘It is not easy to learn Mongolian.’

3rd type:

The so-called *pivotal construction* where “a noun phrase [...] is simultaneously the subject of the second verb and the direct object of the first verb” (p. 607)

- (7) Wǒ quàn tā xué yīxué (= Li & Thompson’s (61))
 1SG advise 3SG study medicine
 ‘I advised him/her to study medicine.’

4th type:

The so-called *descriptive clause construction* which “involves a transitive verb whose object is ‘described’ by a following clause” (p. 611):

- (8) Wǒ pèngdào-le yī-ge wàiguórén huì shuō Zhōngguóhuà
 1SG meet -PERF 1-CL foreigner can speak Chinese
 ‘I met a foreigner who can speak Chinese.’ (= Li & Thompson’s (76))
- (9) Tā chǎo-le yī-ge cài tèbié hǎochī (= Li & Thompson’s (78))
 1SG fry -PERF 1 -CL dish especially delicious slightly modified
 ‘He has prepared a dish which is particularly delicious.’

A quick glance suffices to see that the preceding list represents quite a rich array of phenomena. In the following, we will demonstrate that in fact a range of completely different constructions is subsumed under the unique label SVC here, thereby making the concept of SVC totally void.

Let us start with the first type where the SVC expresses two or more separate events and has four possible “interpretations”: (i) circumstance, (ii) purpose, (iii) alternating, (iv)

consecutive. A correction is immediately called for here: the so-called different “interpretations” in reality indicate the existence of different structures i.e., the surface string in (10a) can be parsed in different ways:

- (10a) Wǒmen kāi huì tāolùn nèi -ge wèntí (= (1) above)
 1PL hold meeting discuss that-CL problem
- (10b) Wǒmen_i [VP [adjunct clause pro_i kāi huì] [VP tāolùn nèi -ge wèntí]]
 1PL hold meeting discuss that-CL problem
 ‘We’ll discuss that problem holding a meeting.’
- (10b’) Wǒmen [VP [adjunct NP/PP míngtiān /zài xuéxiào/yīdìng] [VP tāolùn nèi -ge wèntí]]
 1PL tomorrow/at school/certainly discuss that-CL problem
 ‘We’ll discuss that problem tomorrow/at school/for sure.’

With *kai hui* ‘hold a meeting’ analysed as a clause adjoined to the main VP and having an adverbial function, we obtain the structure and corresponding interpretation in (10b). (10b) is thus on par with (10b’) where the main VP *taolun nei-ge wenti* ‘discuss that problem’ is modified by an NP, PP or adverb, respectively, rather than by a clause as in (10b). (In the following, we will refer to the structure illustrated in (10b) and (10b’) as *adjunct structure*).

By contrast, in (10c), it is *kai hui* ‘hold the meeting’ which is analysed as the main VP and *taolun nei-ge wenti* ‘discuss that problem’ represents the purpose clause subordinate to the main VP:

- (10c) Wǒmen_i [VP kāi huì [purpose clause pro_i tāolùn nèi -ge wèntí]]
 1PL hold meeting discuss that-CL problem
 ‘We’ll hold a meeting to discuss that problem.’

The difference between the adjunct structure, on the one hand and the purpose clause structure, on the other, is e.g. reflected in the distribution of the perfective verb suffix *-le*; *-le* marking the main verb, (10d) and (11b) must be analysed as the adjunct structure and (11c) as the purpose clause structure:

- (10d) Wǒmen_i [VP [adjunct clause pro_i kāi huì] [VP tāolùn -le nèi -ge wèntí]]
 1PL hold meeting discuss-PERF that-CL problem
 ‘We’ll discuss that problem holding a meeting
- (11a) Tā dǎ diànhuà jiào chē (Li Linding 1986: 135)
 3SG beat phone call car
- (11b) Tā [VP [adjunct pro dǎ diànhuà] [jiào-le chē]] yìhòu hái deng-le èrshí-fēnzhōng
 3SG beat phone call-PERF car after still wait-PERF 20-minute
 ‘After she had called a taxi by phone, she still waited for twenty minutes.’
- (11c) Tā_i [VP dǎ -le diànhuà] [purpose clause pro_i jiào chē]]
 3SG beat-PERF phone call car
 ‘He phoned to call a taxi.’

Note in passing that Li Linding himself observes the two different “interpretations” possible for (11a), but like Li & Thompson, he does not link the availability of different interpretations to the existence of different parsing possibilities.

So far we have discussed the ‘circumstance’ and ‘purpose’ “interpretation” invoked by Li & Thompson for a sentence such as (10a) and provided the corresponding structures. Contrary to their claim, such a sentence can not be analysed as a coordinate structure, giving rise to the “consecutive” or “alternating” interpretation. This is only possible when a slight pause occurs between the two VPs or in the presence of explicit marking by e.g. adverbs (also cf. Chao 1968: 325-26, Li Linding 1986: 132).²

(12a) Wǒmen [_{VP} [_{VP} kāi huì] , [_{VP} tāolùn nèi -ge wèntí]]
 1PL hold meeting discuss that-CL problem
 ‘We hold a meeting and discuss that problem.’

(12b) Tā yī -miàn pāi shǒu yī-miàn xiào
 3SG one-side clap hand one-side laugh
 ‘He is clapping hands and laughing simultaneously.’

(12c) *Tā [_{VP} [_{VP} pāi shǒu] [_{VP} xiào]]
 3SG clap hand laugh
 (‘He claps his hands and laughs.’)

(12d) Tā_i [_{VP} [_{adjunct clause} pro_i pāi (-zhe) shǒu] [_{VP} xiào]]
 3SG clap -DUR hand laugh
 ‘He laughs (while) clapping his hands.’

Importantly, as illustrated in (12c), an analysis in terms of a coordinate construction is precisely not a viable analysis for a sentence with two VPs lacking any overt marking. Instead, the sentence is parsed as an adjunct structure, which for some speakers necessitates the presence of the durative aspect suffix *-zhe* in the adjunct clause (for further discussion, cf. below section 2.2).

The second type mentioned by Li & Thompson where “One verb phrase or clause is the subject or direct object of another verb” in fact groups together two different structures: that with a sentential subject (cf. (5) - (6)) and that where the verb selects a complement clause ((3) - (4)).

Let us first look at the sentential subject structure. As illustrated in (13) - (14), the sentential subject constitutes a propositional domain of its own and can be negated independently of the matrix predicate:

(13) [Zhǐ tīng bù niàn] bù néng bāngzhù fāyīn
 only listen NEG read NEG can help pronunciation
 ‘Only listening without reading cannot help one's pronunciation.’

² Note in this context that Li & Thompson’s example (2) is not as “unmarked” as they pretend it to be. On the contrary, it is the presence of the adverb *tiantian* ‘every day’ in combination with a pause between the two VPs which makes it possible to analyse (2) as a coordinate structure and which leads to the interpretation of alternating actions rather than consecutive or simultaneous actions.

- (14a) [Zài zhèlǐ tíng chē] bù wéizhāng
 at here stop car NEG against:rules
 ‘To park here is not against the rules.’
- (14b) [Chuǎng hóng-dēng bù tíng chē] shì wéizhāng de
 rush red -light NEG stop car be against.rules DE
 ‘To rush through a red light without stopping is against the rules.’

That the first verb i.e., the verb within the sentential subject, is not the matrix verb is demonstrated by the unacceptability of the *A-bu-A* question here:

- (15a) [Dàshēng niàn kèwén] kěyǐ bāngzhù fāyīn
 loud read lesson can help pronunciation
 ‘Reading the lesson aloud can help one's pronunciation.’
- (15b) [Dàshēng niàn kèwén] kě -bù kěyǐ bāngzhù fāyīn ?
 loud read lesson can-NEG can help pronunciation
 ‘Can reading the lesson aloud help one's pronunciation?’
- (15c) *[Dàshēng niàn bù niàn kèwén] kěyǐ bāngzhù fāyīn ?
 loud read NEG read lesson can help pronunciation
 (‘Can reading the lesson aloud help one's pronunciation?’)

Example (16) finally illustrates that the verb within the sentential subject may be marked for aspect:

- (16) [Tā qù (-le) měiguó] zhēn kěxī
 3SG go-PERF America really a.pity
 ‘It's really a pity that he went to America.’

This point is important for the comparison of the sentential subject structure with the structure where the verb selects a complement clause; in the latter, the presence of *-le* is precisely excluded. Accordingly, to put these two constructions into one and the same group leads to wrong predictions concerning e.g. the distribution of the aspectual suffix *-le* and must therefore be rejected.

- (17a) Tā fǒurèn (*-le) [s tā zuò-cuò-le]
 3SG deny PERF 3SG do -err -PERF
 ‘S/he denies that s/he was wrong.’
- (17b) Tā fǒurèn (-le) [NP zhèi-ge cuòwù]
 3SG deny -PERF this-CL mistake
 ‘S/he denied this error.’
- (18a) Tā gàosu (*-le) wǒ nǐ yě cānjiā huìyì
 3SG tell -PERF 1SG 2SG also assist meeting
 ‘He told me that you assist the meeting, too.’

- (18b) Tā gàosu (-le) wǒ nǐ -de gùshi
 3SG tell -PERF 1SG 2SG-SUB story
 ‘He told me your story.’

The (b) examples with a nominal complement show that the verbs themselves are perfectly compatible with *-le* and that the unacceptability of *-le* in (17a) - (18a) must therefore be due to the structure.

Finally, the verb in the clausal complement can be negated independently of the matrix predicate:

- (19a) Tā méi gàosu wǒ nǐ yě cānjiā huìyì
 3SG NEG tell 1SG 2SG also assist meeting
 ‘He hasn’t told me that you assist the meeting, too.’
- (19b) Tā gàosu wǒ nǐ méi cānjiā huìyì
 3SG tell 1SG 2SG NEG assist meeting
 ‘He told me that you didn’t assist the meeting.’

Two completely different constructions, one involving a sentential subject, the other involving a complement clause subcategorized for by the matrix verb, are subsumed under the same type. Furthermore, the distribution and interpretation of negation illustrates that the sentential subject and the complement clause form a propositional domain independent of the matrix predicate, with a subject different from the matrix subject in the case of the complement clause. Li & Thompson's (1981: 600) statement that "in sentences of this type [with a complement clause, cf. (16) – (17); WP] the meaning of the first verb determines the type of verb phrase or clause that functions as its direct object" is nothing but a very roundabout way of stating the selectional restrictions imposed by the verb on its complement. To impose selectional restrictions, however, is a general property of verbs and not a particularity of verbs when part of an SVC.

Last, but not least and putting aside all the other problems shown to arise from the indeterminacy of the term SVC, the structure with a clausal complement does not even satisfy the loosest of all “criteria” for “SVC-hood” i.e. uniqueness of the subject within an SVC.

The third type of SVC postulated by Li & Thompson is the so-called *pivotal construction* where “a noun phrase [...] is simultaneously the subject of the second verb and the direct object of the first verb” (Li & Thompson 1981: 607). Once again this is not a special construction typical of Chinese nor of “serializing” languages. On the contrary, it is well-known from all kinds of other languages and called *control construction* in general linguistics, the matrix object controlling i.e., determining the reference of, the null subject in the embedded clause:

- (20a) Wǒ quàn tā_i [_S *pro*_i / (*nǐ) xué yīxué
 1SG advise 3SG 2SG study medicine
 ‘I advised her to study medicine.’
 (‘I advised her that you should study medicine.’)
- (20b) Wǒ quàn (*-le) tā_i [_S *pro*_i / (*nǐ) xué yīxué
 1SG advise 3SG 2SG study medicine
 ‘I advised her to study medicine.’

- (20c) Wǒ méi quàn tā xué yǔyánxué, tā háishi yào xué
 1SG NEG advise 3SG study linguistics 3SG still want study
 ‘I didn’t advise him to study linguistics, but he still wants to study it.’
- (21a) Wǒ qiú tā bù yào bèipàn wǒ
 1SG beg 3SG NEG want betray 1SG
 ‘I implored her not to betray me.’
- (21b) Wǒ quàn tā bù yào xī dú
 1SG advise 3SG NEG want inhale drug
 ‘I advised her not to take drugs.’

The fourth type finally, the *descriptive clause construction*, has been analysed by Huang (1982, ch. 2) as involving a (secondary) predication on the object NP. This analysis allows him to account for the constraints holding for the object NP as well as for the matrix predicate.³

First, the object NP must be specific and indefinite; definite NPs and bare nouns are excluded:

- (22a) Wǒ pèngdào-le yī-ge wàiguórén / *nèi -ge wàiguórén huì shuō Zhōngguóhuà
 1SG meet -PERF 1-CL foreigner / that-CL foreigner can speak Chinese
 ‘I met a/the foreigner who can speak Chinese.’
- (22b) Tā chǎo-le yī-ge cài / *nèi -ge cài tèbié hǎochī
 1SG fry -PERF 1-CL dish / that-CL dish especially delicious
 ‘He has prepared a/the dish which is particularly delicious.’
- (22c) *Wǒ zài zhèlǐ méi pèngdào wàiguórén huì shuō Zhōngguóhuà
 1SG at here NEG meet foreigner can speak Chinese
- (22d) Wǒ zài zhèlǐ méi pèngdào [DP [S huì shuō Zhōngguóhuà] de wàiguórén]
 1SG at here NEG meet can speak Chinese SUB foreigner
 ‘I haven’t met a foreigner who can speak Chinese.’
- (22e) Wǒ pèngdào-le [DP yī-ge / nèi -ge [S huì shuō zhōngguóhuà] de wàiguórén]
 1SG meet -PERF 1-CL / that-CL can speak Chinese SUB foreigner
 ‘I met a/the foreigner who can speak Chinese.’

(22d) and (22e) show that no similar constraints hold for prenominal modifiers; the relative clause *huì shuō zhōngguóhuà* ‘who can speak Chinese’ is acceptable, irrespective of the definite or indefinite character of the NP.

Second, the matrix predicate must be “existential” of some sort either by its inherent lexical meaning (as in the case for e.g. *you* ‘have’, *fasheng* ‘happen’) or by the fact that it is

³ These constraints likewise invalidate any analysis which considers the secondary predicate as a postnominal modifier contained within the NP. For it is completely implausible for a nominal modifier to depend on properties of the matrix predicate, to be acceptable only in a non-definite NP and only in an NP which is postverbal.

marked with the perfective aspect suffix *-le*; otherwise, the secondary predicate is not acceptable:

- (23a) Wǒ yǒu jǐ -ge xuéshēng hěn yònggōng
 1SG have several-CL student very diligent
 ‘I have several students who are very diligent.’
- (23b) *Wǒ zài zhǎo jǐ -ge xuéshēng hěn yònggōng
 1SG have several-CL student very diligent
 (I’m looking for several students who are very diligent.)
- (23c) *Tā xiǎng chǎo yī-ge cài tèbié hǎochī (compare (22b))
 1SG want fry 1-CL dish especially delicious
 (‘He wants to prepare a dish which is particularly delicious.’)

The constraints at work here are clearly different from those observed for the other “types” of SVC and once again question the plausibility of subsuming them under the same label SVC.

To summarize our critical analysis of the seven “types” of SVC established by Li & Thompson (1981)⁴, we have argued in detail that completely different constructions are involved here, with in each case a different set of syntactic and semantic properties. To indistinctly call all of them “SVC” amounts to no more than stating the rather trivial fact that they all contain two (or more) verbs. SVC, despite its claim to the status of *construction*, is therefore nothing else but a surface label referring to the linear sequence of constituents, and in no case gives us any indication as to syntactic structure of the sequence at hand. Viewed from this perspective, the great majority of Chinese sentences could be considered SVCs. This is indeed what Li & Thompson (1981: 594) claim: “[...] in Mandarin there are many sentences that all have the same form, namely [...] (NP) V (NP) (NP) V (NP) [...]” (cf. p. 1 above). Last, but not least, note that all the constructions dubbed SVC by Li & Thompson likewise exist in other “non-serializing” languages as well, which makes the term completely void.

2.2. SVC in a “narrow” sense (Li & Thompson 1973)

It is correct that Li & Thompson’s (1981) conception of SVC is somewhat extreme within Chinese linguistics insofar as it covers a very large variety of phenomena. However, as to be argued for in this section, their earlier and more constrained view of what constitutes an SVC (cf. Li & Thompson 1973) proves equally inadequate, because once again it employs the term *construction* as a pure surface label encompassing separate constructions with different syntactic and semantic properties.

Let us first look at the quote below from Li & Thompson (1973: 99; emphasis mine):
 “We claim [...] that it is ‘knowledge of the world’, and not linguistic knowledge which is responsible for suppressing or encouraging a particular reading for a serial verb sentence. [...] the choice between them in any given speech situation depends on the context and the hearer’s knowledge of what the world is like.

⁴ Given that some of the four major types are further subdivided, we obtain no less than seven “types” of SVC. This quantitative “inflation” in itself already hints at the uselessness of using the same cover term SVC here.

What is the optimal linguistic account of these facts? We will demonstrate in the following that there is ample evidence in favor of a structural distinction between one serial verb representation expressing purpose and another expressing any of the conjunction meanings [...] We claim, then, that sentences with consecutive, simultaneous, and alternating action readings are all structurally conjunctions, and that such sentences do not convey any structural or semantic information concerning the relationship in time between the two events in the predicate. Whether the actions are taken to be consecutive, simultaneous, or alternating depends completely on inferences which the hearer makes.” (Li & Thompson 1973: 99):

- (24) Ta guìxiàlai qiú wǒ (= Li & Thompson’s 1973: 98; (1), (1’))
 3SG kneel:down beg 1SG
 (i) 'He knelt down in order to beg me.' (purpose)
 (ii) 'He knelt down and then begged me.' (consecutive actions)
 (iii) 'He knelt down begging me.' (simultaneous actions)
 (iv) 'He knelt down and he begged me.' (alternating actions).

Li & Thompson (1973) is clearly superior to their own subsequent analyses in acknowledging two different structures, a coordinated one for the interpretation in terms of consecutive, alternative or alternating actions, on the one hand, and a subordinate one for the purpose clause interpretation, on the other hand. Nevertheless, their point of view is still far from satisfying.⁵

First, they do not make the in fact logically necessary step to the conclusion that the so-called SVC cannot be a unique construction if it can systematically be assigned two completely different structures with separate properties. Instead, they state a systematic ambiguity for the SVC in Chinese (p. 102).

Second, the multiple ambiguity claimed for a surface string such as (24) by Li & Thompson (which in fact is a case of structural ambiguity) does not actually exist to that extent (cf. Chen Xilong 1993: 50, Chan, Stephen 1974). More precisely, sentences with a simple juxtaposition of VPs and without overt marking indicating the relation between these two VPs do NOT lead to an interpretation in terms of simultaneous, alternating or consecutive actions i.e., they are not analysed as coordinate structures. Instead, the first VP is analysed as an adverbial phrase adjoined to and modifying the second VP (giving rise the interpretation dubbed “circumstance” by Li & Thompson 1981, cf. (10b) above):

- (25a) Tā_i [VP [adjunct clause *pro*_i guì-xiàlai] qiú wǒ]
 3SG kneel:down beg 1SG
 ‘He begged me kneeling down.’

As discussed above (ex. (11) - (12), section 2.1), a slight pause between the two VPs or explicit marking by e.g. adverbs *yimian ...yimian* ‘at the same time’ is necessary for an analysis in terms of a coordinate structure. Contrary to current assumptions, this analysis is precisely not available for the juxtaposition of VPs in the absence of any marking, and even less so a default analysis.

Evidence for an analysis of (25a) as an adjunct structure comes e.g. from verb copying, where the verb to be copied must be the matrix verb, not the verb of the adjunct clause:

⁵ Note that Li & Thompson (1973) went more or less unnoticed and that it was Li & Thompson (1974, 1981) which had the biggest impact on the field. As later in their grammar (L&T 1981), Li & Thompson (1974) only mention the availability of different interpretations for a sentence such as (24) and do not link the observed difference in interpretation with a difference in structure.

(25b) Tā_i [[adjunct clause *pro*_i guìxiàlai] qiú wǒ] [qiú -le shí-fēnzhōng]
 3SG kneel:down beg 1SG beg-PERF 10-minute
 ‘He begged me on his knees for ten minutes.’

(25c) *Tā_i [[adjunct clause *pro*_i guì-xiàlai] qiú wǒ] [guì -le shí-fēnzhōng]
 3SG kneel:down beg 1SG beg-PERF 10-minute

Let us now combine these results with our observation from section 2.1 above that a sentence such as (26a) with a juxtaposition of VPs cannot only be analysed as an adjunct structure, but also as a purposive clause structure:

(26a) Tā dǎ diànhuà jiào chē (= (11a) above)
 3SG beat phone call car

(26b) Tā [VP [adjunct *pro* dǎ diànhuà] [jiào chē]]
 3SG beat phone call car
 ‘He called a taxi by phone.’

(26c) Tā_i [VP dǎ (-le) diànhuà] [purpose clause *pro*_i jiào chē]
 3SG beat-PERF phone call car
 ‘He phoned to call a taxi.’

We thus obtain the following picture. The default analysis of a surface string ‘VP₁ VP₂’ without any markers is either an analysis where the first VP is an adjunct of the second (main) VP, or an analysis where the first VP is the main VP and the second VP represents a purposive clause whose covert subject is controlled by the matrix subject. An analysis as a conjoined structure is, however, excluded. Consequently, even the rather “narrow” conception of the SVC as denoting two or more separate events giving rise to four different “interpretations” (consecutive, alternating, purpose, and circumstance) remains inadequate. For it wrongly claims the coordinate structure analysis (underlying the consecutive and alternating interpretations) to be among the parsing possibilities. Furthermore it makes wrong predictions for the interpretation of so-called SVCs; an adjunct structure such as (25a) where the first VP modifies the second VP is understood as a single event, and not as two separate events.

The failure to correctly apply the basic notion of *construction* as referring to a given structure with a fixed set of syntactic and semantic properties which we have demonstrated for Li & Thompson’s conception of SVC, is in fact ubiquitous in works on SVC in Chinese linguistics. Accordingly, “SVC” in Chinese linguistics serves as a cover term for distinct constructions with different properties; it does not refer to a unique construction with a predictable set of properties. In other words, to “know” that a given sequence is an SVC amounts to not knowing anything, neither its structure nor its syntactic and semantic characteristics.⁶ Though several linguists have come to a similar conclusion (cf. e.g. Chen Xilong 1993, Wippermann 1993), they have, however, not taken the logically necessary step: to abandon the term SVC altogether. That is exactly what we want to propose here, the more so as the phenomena labelled SVC so far in Chinese turn out to be structures well-known from other so-called “non-serializing” languages.

⁶ That nevertheless this too permissive view of SVC still persists is partly due to the fact that for a lot of the constructions tucked away under the label SVC, we have not established their exact properties.

3. The term SVC in African linguistics (Niger-Congo languages)

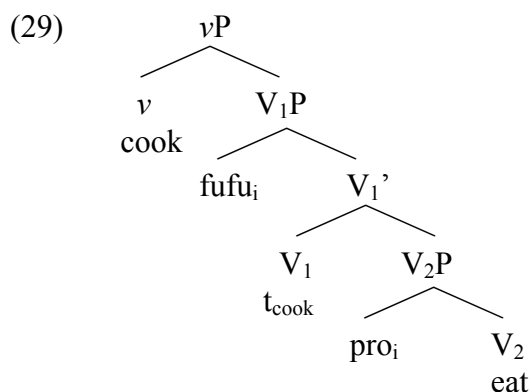
Notwithstanding diverging views on the exact coverage of the term SVC in Niger-Congo languages, there exists a consensus that an SVC is not a coordinate construction, that it denotes a single (composite) event, presents one clausal domain (as evidenced by a unique tense/aspect value) and displays argument sharing (i.e. a common subject and/or object). This first list of properties ascribed to SVC already demonstrates that the attempts to define the SVC here mainly use syntactic criteria; this contrasts with the general approach current in Chinese linguistics where the different interpretations obtained serve as the starting point.

Collins' (1997) work on the Kwa language Ewe is a good illustration of an effort to associate the SVC with a precise structure and a fixed set of syntactic and semantic characteristics. We will present his analysis in some detail, not only in order to see which tests he applies to distinguish the SVC from other superficially similar constructions, but also because his analysis can shed some light on a so far badly understood phenomenon in Mandarin Chinese, viz. the so-called *directional verb compounds* (cf. section 5 below.)

Taking up previous works by Déchaine (1986), Foley & Olson (1985) and Baker (1989), Collins (1997), chooses object sharing as the crucial criterion for the SVC, more precisely, sharing of the internal argument. It is sharing of the internal argument rather than object sharing because this allows to include cases such as (27) where *fufu* is both the object of *da* 'cook' and *du* 'eat' as well as cases such as (28) where 'child' is the object of chase and the unique, and for that matter, internal argument of 'leave':

- (27) Wo da fufu du (Collins 1997: 46)
 3PL cook fufu eat
 'They cooked fufu and ate it.'
 (N.B. Collins' translation is not meant to imply a coordinate structure for (27).)
- (28) Me nya devi-e dzo
 1SG chase child leave
 'I chased the child away.'

The structure he proposes is given in (29) where V_1 takes V_2P as its complement and the (covert) internal argument of V_2 is coreferent with that of V_1 . More precisely, the object of the first verb controls the empty category in the specifier position of V_2P . In other words, V_2P is analysed as a kind of secondary predication, a proposal similar to that by Larson (1991).



As indicated in (29), V raises to small v .

The control structure in (29) correctly predicts the unacceptability of an overt pronoun following the second verb:

- (30) Wo-a da fufu du -(**i*)
 they-FUT cook fufu eat it
 'They will cook fufu and eat it.'

Furthermore, Collins provides evidence for the distinction between the SVC in (29) and coordinate structures in Ewe: whereas in the SVC the future is marked only on the first verb, in a coordinate structure it must appear in front of each verb:

- (31a) Me fo kadεgbε gba (= Collins' (7))
 I hit lamp break
 'I hit the lamp and broke it.'

- (31b) Me a fo kadεgbε gba (= Collins' (9))
 I FUTURE hit lamp break
 'I will hit the lamp and break it.'⁷

- (32) Me a fo kadεgbε *(a) gba (yεme) tsimini (= Collins' (10))
 I FUT hit lamp FUT break its glass
 'I will hit the lamp and break its glass.'

(32) does not involve argument sharing. Hence, it is not an SVC, but a case of *parataxis* or *covert coordination* (cf. Baker 1989) and needs future marking on both verbs.⁸

Besides the strict definition of SVC such as the one proposed by Collins (1997), the studies on Niger-Congo languages naturally have also led to more encompassing conceptions of SVC. For Baker & Stewart (2002) e.g. there exist two other types of SVC along with the object sharing one, viz. the resultative and purposive SVC which each have a structure different from the object sharing SVC. Law & Veenstra (1992) distinguish between theme serials (roughly equivalent to the internal argument sharing SVC à la Collins) and instrumental serials. Déchaine (1993: 800) in her overview article finally emphasizes the differences observed in the degree to which so-called “serializing” languages make use of SVC and proposes still another structure for SVC i.e., a “bivalent” VP where one VP is adjoined to another.

Evidently, it is impossible here to do justice to the abundant literature on SVC in Niger-Congo languages and to the richness of the detailed language descriptions used as evidence for a certain conception of SVC. However, even a limited overview as the one given here should suffice to show that we face a situation similar to the one encountered in Chinese linguistics: when confronted with the term SVC, we do not know what structure is referred to among the different conceptions of SVC prevalent in the studies on Niger-Congo languages (modulo the minimal consensus on SVC stated above) and this despite the fact that the authors are rather explicit about the syntactic structure they postulate for (each type of) SVC]

⁷ Collins (1997) does not give any translation for (31b) nor for (32).

⁸ The presence of the future markers shows that what is coordinated here are IPs or I-bars rather than VPs or V-bars. Collins points out that Ewe does not allow covert coordination of VPs or V-bars, because otherwise a covert coordination with only one future marker should be possible.

This problem linked to the indeterminacy of the term SVC increases exponentially in crosslinguistic comparison when e.g. SVC in Chinese are to be compared with the SVC in Niger-Congo languages. In such a case, we do not know to what extent the phenomena covered by the term SVC in each language overlap, nor whether they overlap at all. Coordinated structures are a good example here: while there is a consensus that they do not count as SVC in Niger-Congo languages, they are included under SVC in Chinese. This demonstrates that the terms SVC as they are used in Chinese and African linguistics, respectively are not commensurate. Things get even worse in typological studies where so-called “serializing” languages are confronted with so-called “non-serializing” ones, where the crosslinguistic comparison relies on the illusory assumption that in each case we deal with a well-defined homogeneous group.

4. The futility of the so-called “serialization parameter”

Unfortunately, the conceptual difference between SVCs “à la chinoise” and SVCs à l’afrique” and the heterogeneity of the phenomena subsumed under this label is hardly paid any attention in the literature. On the contrary, reference is made from SVCs in Chinese to those in Niger-Congo languages and vice versa as though one and the same phenomenon were involved (cf. Lord 1973, Lefebvre 1991).⁹ Furthermore, important theoretical consequences in terms of a typologically relevant “serialization parameter” (cf. Larson 1991, Den Dikken & Sybesma 1998, Stewart 2001 among others) distinguishing so-called “serializing” from so-called “non-serializing” languages have been drawn on the basis of incommensurable phenomena. (But cf. Déchaine (1993) and Law & Veenstra (1992) who question the plausibility of a serialization parameter.)

In general, SVCs are said to be a typical property of languages lacking verbal inflectional morphology (as e.g. Chinese). However, a closer look at the languages with and without SVCs reveals this at first sight plausible generalisation to be wrong. English e.g. is troublesome in this respect, because “although” it does not show any person/number agreement on the verb, it does not have SVCs. In Yorùbá, by contrast, mood/tense is marked on the verb (cf. Stahlke 1970), and “nevertheless” it allows SVCs. Likewise, the Misumalpan languages Miskitu and Sumu have SVCs (cf. Salamanca 1988, Hale 1991), but display a rather rich inflectional morphology: the verb is not only marked for tense and person, but also for *proximate* (same subject) vs. *obviative* (different subject).

4.1. Example of a “serialization parameter” based on an incorrect analysis of Chinese: Den Dikken & Sybesma (1998)

Since Den Dikken & Sybesma (1998) take as starting point for their serialization parameter the *ba* construction in modern Mandarin, we will study it in some more detail. Our discussion will once more serve to illustrate the fact that the problems arising from the vagueness of the term SVC go far beyond a simple labelling issue.

⁹ In the same way that Li & Thompson mention examples from Niger-Congo languages where - like Chinese - prepositions evolved from verbs, Lord (1973: 292) vice versa refers to the situation in Chinese as confirming evidence, because the historical development of prepositions in these two languages differ from that in Indo-European languages (where prepositions are derived from locative case-form nouns). While it is true that both languages show homophonous verbs and prepositions, the parallel drawn cannot be extended to SVC. For as we have seen, SVCs in Chinese cover quite a different spectrum of phenomena from SVC in Niger-Congo languages. It is thus not correct to state as Lord (1973: 292) does that “Mandarin Chinese has serial verb constructions analogous to those in Kwa”.

For Den Dikken & Sybesma (1998), the basic distinction between languages with and without SVC is that "...serialising languages differ from non-serialising ones such as English in their inability to spell out the v -V combination as one single lexical element ..." (p. 1) They then introduce - without further comment - yet another definition of SVC as sequences ' V_1 NP V_2 ' where V_1 does not assign a theta-role to NP. Under this definition, e.g. the internal argument sharing SVC from Ewe (cf. (27) -(28) - though representing one of the SVC core cases in Niger-Congo languages - would not count as SVC, because the shared argument NP clearly receives a theta-role from the first verb. With this caveat in mind, let us proceed to their next claim, namely that the modern Mandarin *bǎ*-construction (cf. 33) is an SVC, with *bǎ* in v :

- (33) Wǒ bǎ Zhāngsān gǎn -zǒu -le (= D & S's (4b); their glosses)¹⁰
 1SG BA Zhangsan expel-away -PERF
 'I chased Zhangsan away.'

Furthermore, they postulate the following (interrelated) assumptions concerning the *bǎ*-construction:

- (34a) The *bǎ*-construction is only possible with a complex verb.
 (34b) One component of this complex verb is non-verbal.
 (34c) This non-verbal component functions as the predicate of a small clause (SC)
 (with the NP following *bǎ* as the subject of the small clause).

Accordingly, (33) is assigned the structure in (35):

- (35a) [_{VP} [_v gǎn] [_{SC} [_{NP} Zhāngsān] [_X zǒu]]] (= their (17))
 expel Zhangsan away

The "dummy" element *bǎ* is inserted into v and the NP raises to Spec, FP between v and V :

- (35b) [_{VP} [_v bǎ [_{FP} Zhāngsān_i [_{F'} F_{asp} [_{VP} gǎn [_{SC} [_{NP} t_i] [_X zǒu]]]]]]]]]
 BA Zhangsan expel away

(35b) is the structure of an SVC proposed by den Dikken & Sybesma (1998): the verb does not raise to v and v is therefore lexicalised by an independent morpheme, in this case *ba*, a process said to be typical of serializing languages.

However, their analysis of the *ba* construction in (35) and the assumptions (34a) - (34c) underlying it are wrong.

First of all, the *bǎ*-construction is perfectly acceptable with simple verbs and not at all limited to complex verbs as claimed by Den Dikken & Sybesma (1998):¹¹

- (36a) Tā bǎ Zhāngsān piàn -le
 3SG BA Zhangsan cheat-PERF
 'She cheated Zhangsan.'

¹⁰ As to be demonstrated further below (cf. (37b)), the item *zǒu* glossed as 'away' by den Dikken & Sybesma (1998) in fact is nothing else but the verb *zǒu* 'leave'. Since its verbal status is uncontested, we fail to see any reason for its gloss as 'away' other than to make it comply with their small clause analysis of *ba*.

¹¹ Examples such as (36a-c) are easy to find in any book on Chinese grammar. Also cf. Li (2001) for an extensive overview of the relevant data and the range of analyses proposed for the *ba*-construction.

- (36b) Tā bǎ péngzi chāi -le (Li Linding 1987: 31)
 3SG BA shack demolish-PERF
 ‘He demolished the shack.’
- (36c) Tā bǎ shū rēng -le
 3SG BA book throw-PERF
 ‘She threw the book away.’

Accordingly, there is no element available to function as the predicate of the small clause, hence no reason to postulate a small clause at all.

Furthermore, the statement in (34b) that one component of the complex verb is non-verbal is equally wrong, as illustrated by (37) - (38) where the second component in the complex verb clearly functions as a verb. (34b) is the more surprising as resultative verb compounds such as *gǎn-zǒu* ‘chase-leave’ = ‘chase away’, *chī-wan* ‘eat-finish’ = ‘eat up’ etc. are in general analysed as consisting of two verbal elements.

- (37a) Wǒ bǎ Zhāngsān [_v gǎn -zǒu] -le (= (33) above with new glosses)
 1SG BA Zhangsan expel-leave -PERF
 ‘I chased Zhangsan away.’
- (37b) Rénjiā gǎn wǒ le , wǒ néng bù zǒu ma ? (Dòngcí yòngfǎ cídiǎn : 287)
 people expel 1SG PART 1SG can NEG leave PART
 ‘When people drive me away, how can I not leave?’
- (38a) Tā kàn / chī / xiě / fùxí -wán le
 3SG read/ eat / write/ revise-finish
 ‘He has finished reading/eating/writing/revising.’
- (38b) Wǒ yī-huì jiù wán shì
 1SG 1-moment then finish matter
 ‘I’ll have finished in a moment.’

Once the non-verbal status of V_2 in the ‘ V_1 - V_2 ’ compound invalidated, their analysis with V_2 as predicate of the small clause cannot be upheld anymore, either.

Last, but not least, it is not correct to locate *bǎ* in small *v*. Instead, *bǎ* must be analysed as a higher (Aux-like) verb whose complement has the size of *vP*, as evidenced by the possibility to adjoin VP-level adverbs (cf. Paul 2002; Whitman & Paul 2005):

- (39) Tā bǎ Zhāngsān [_{vP} (hěnxīnde) [_{vP} pāoqì -le]] (slightly changed example
 3SG BA Zhangsan cruel-hearted abandon-PERF from Tang 1990: 145; (111))
 ‘She heartlessly left Zhangsan.’
- (40) Nǐ bǎ zhèi-běn cídiǎn [_{vP} zài [_{vP} jiègěi wǒ sān-tiān]]
 2SG BA this-CL dictionary again lend 1SG 3-day
 ‘Lend me this dictionary for another three days.’

As demonstrated in detail above, Dikken & Sybesma's (1998) analysis of the *ba* construction is wrong; in particular, the verb does raise to *v* here, as elsewhere in the syntax of Chinese (and other languages). Consequently, the *ba* construction in fact does not comply with Den Dikken & Sybesma's (1998) definition of SVC for which the lack of V-to-*v* movement is crucial. At the same time, this also sheds doubt on the general typological difference between serializing and non-serializing languages which they derive from their incorrect analysis of the *ba* construction¹²: while serializing languages are characterized by the lack of V-to-*v* movement in correlation with the existence of an independent 'take' element able to lexicalize small *v*, this is not the case for non-serializing languages where V raises to *v*.

To conclude, on the one hand Den Dikken & Sybesma (1998) once again illustrate the rather arbitrary content which can be ascribed to the term SVC, due to the co-existence of diverging conceptions. On the other hand, their article shows how the failure of realizing the problematic status of SVC may lead to questionable typological generalizations.

5. A new approach to SVC in Chinese

Up to now we have provided ample evidence to show that the phenomena subsumed so far under the term SVC in Chinese all turn out to involve structures existing in "non-serializing" languages as well. Since the term SVC in its current usage does not refer to a unique construction with a predictable set of properties, we proposed to abandon it altogether. In this last section now we suggest to make a fresh start.

We propose to adopt the strict definition of SVC à la Collins (1997) in (29) above (internal argument sharing, single event, one aspect/tense marker only) as the relevant definition of SVC and to apply it to the so-called "directional verb compounds" i.e., verb sequences of the form 'V_{displacement} (- V_{direction}) -come/go' such as *sòng-lái* 'send-come' = 'send over' and *duān -shàng-lái* 'serve ascend-come' = 'to serve up' (cf. among others Fan Jiyan (1963), Lu, John H.-T. 1973, Kimura 1984, Li Linding 1984, Lu Jianming 1985, Liu Yuehua 1988, Chang Hsun-Huei 1991, Zou Ke 1994, Yang Defeng 2004). Interestingly enough, these "directional verb compounds - which have not received a satisfying analysis yet - are one of the very few phenomena NOT subsumed under SVC in the literature (but cf. (Ernst 1989), Law (1996) for a first attempt in this direction):¹³

(41a) Tā [v_P sòng-le [v_{IP} yi-ge xiāngzi t_V [v_{P2} pro lái]]]
 3SG send-PERF 1-CL suitcase come
 'He sent a suitcase over here.'

(41b) Tā sòng-lái -le yi-ge xiāngzi
 3SG send-come-PERF 1-CL suitcase
 'He sent a suitcase over here.'

¹² Den Dikken & Sybesma (1998) apply the same analysis (35b) to "take serials" in Fongbè (with *só* as equivalent of *ba*) (cf. Lefebvre 1991).

¹³ Note that Ernst (1989: 128) and Law (1996: 203) both propose a tripartite structure for (41a) where *sòng* 'send' is treated as a double object verb taking two complements, the NP *xiangzi* and the VP *lai*. According to their analysis, no sharing of internal argument is involved here, hence no *pro* in the second VP as postulated in our analysis (cf. (41a)).

- (42a) Tā duān -le yī-wǎn tāng shàng -lái le
 3SG serve-PERF 1 -bowl soup ascend-come PART
 ‘He served up a bowl of soup (towards the speaker).’
- (42b) Tā duān -shàng -lái -le yī-wǎn tāng (le)
 3SG serve-ascend-come-PERF 1 -bowl soup PART
 ‘He served up a bowl of soup (towards the speaker).’
- (43a) Tāmen gǎn liǎng-zhī gǒu chū-qù le
 3PL expel 2 -CL dog exit -go PART
 ‘They chased two dogs out (away from the speaker).’
- (43b) Tāmen bǎ liǎng-zhī gǒu gǎn -chū -qù-le (slightly changed example from
 3PL BA 2 -CL dog expel-exit -go-PERF Li & Thompson 1981: 63)
 ‘They chased two dogs out (away from the speaker).’

As illustrated in (41) - (43), despite their denomination, the sequences of the form ‘V_{displacement} (- V_{direction}) -come/go’ cannot be compounds; the first verb can be suffixed with the perfective aspect marker *-le* (cf. (42a)), and the object can occupy a position within the sequence. This is precisely excluded for verbal compounds such as [_V° *pi-ping*], ‘criticize-judge’ = ‘criticize’, ([_V° *gǎn-zǒu*] ‘expel-leave’ = ‘chase away’), [_V° *pāo-qì*] ‘throw-discard’ = ‘abandon’, [_V° *chī-wán*] ‘eat-finish’ = ‘eat up’ etc., given the *Lexical Integrity Hypothesis* (cf. Huang 1984 and references therein) which states that word-internal structure is invisible to syntactic processes:

- (44a) Ta [_V° pi -ping] -le / [_V° pāo -qì] -le Akiu
 3SG criticize-judge -PERF / throw-discard-PERF
 ‘He criticized/abandoned Akiu.’
- (44b) *Ta [_V° pi -le -ping] / [_V° pāo -le -qì] Akiu
 3SG criticize-PERF -judge / throw-PERF-discard Akiu
- (44c) *Ta [_V° pi (-le) Akiu -ping] / [_V° pāo (-le) Akiu -qì]
 3SG criticize-PERF Akiu -judge / throw-PERF Akiu -discard
- (45a) Ta [_V° chī-wán -le wanfan]
 3SG eat-finish-PERF dinner
 ‘He ate up his dinner.’
- (45b) *Ta [_V° chī-le -wán wanfan]
 3SG eat-PERF -finish dinner
- (45c) *Ta [_V° chī(-le) wanfan -wán]
 3SG eat -PERF dinner -finish

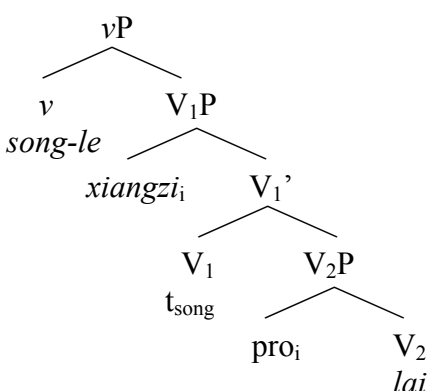
The clear contrast between the verbal compounds in (44) - (45) and the sequences ‘V_{displacement} (- V_{direction}) -come/go’ in (41) - (43) with respect to the object position and the placement of aspect markers challenges the alleged compound status of the latter. The compound status is, however, tacitly assumed in the studies mentioned above, with the exception of Zou Ke (1994). He proposes the following structure for (41a):

- (46) Tā [_{VP} sòng-le [_{V₁P} t_v [_{VP₂} [_{NP} yī-ge xiāngzi] lái]]]
 3SG send-PERF 1-CL suitcase come
 ‘He sent a suitcase over here.’

In (46), the verb *sòng* ‘send’ takes as its unique complement a VP whose specifier position hosts the object NP *xiāngzi* ‘suitcase’. As pointed out by Law (1996: 203), though, this analysis is not feasible, because it makes it impossible for the verb to assign case to and to impose selectional restrictions on the NP.

The data given above show that ‘V_{displacement} (- V_{direction}) -come/go’ sequences do not behave on a par with verbal compounds and must therefore be analysed as phrases. To assign them the structure of an internal argument sharing SVC à la Collins (1997) allows us to account for their syntactic and semantic properties: the object of the first verb is likewise the sole internal argument of the verb *lai/qu* or its combination with a directional verb, respectively. (47b) indicates the structure for (41a), repeated here as (47a):

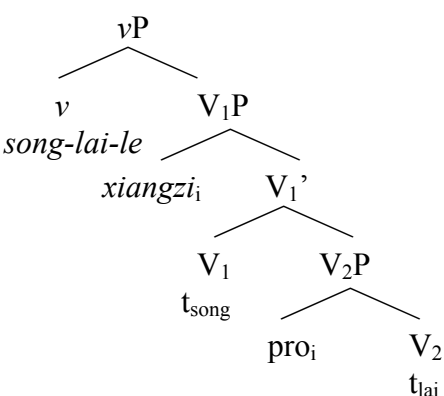
- (47a) Tā [_{VP} sòng-le [_{V₁P} yī-ge xiāngzi t_v [_{VP₂} *pro* lái]]]
 3SG send-PERF 1-CL suitcase come
 ‘He sent a suitcase over here.’

- (47b)  (cf. (29) above)

Adopting the structure in (47b) also allows us to account for the second order observed i.e., ‘V_{displacement} (- V_{direction}) -come/go Object’:

- (48a) Tā sòng-lái -le yī-ge xiāngzi (= (41b))
 3SG send-come-PERF 1-CL suitcase
 ‘He sent a suitcase over here.’

This order is derived by raising of the second verb, here *lai* ‘come’, to *v*:

- (48b) 

The sequence where the displacement verb, the verb of direction and *lai* or *qu* are contiguous thus is no compound, but results from verb movement in syntax, with ‘ $V_{\text{displacement}}$ Object ($V_{\text{direction}}$) -come/go’ representing the initial structure. This is exactly the opposite of what is currently assumed in the literature where ‘ $V_{\text{displacement}}$ Object ($V_{\text{direction}}$) -come/go’ is considered to be a case of the object moving “inside the compound”, an assumption which is in conflict with general principles such as the *Lexical Integrity Hypothesis* and hence untenable.

Naturally, more needs to be said to flesh out the analysis of so-called “directional verb compounds” in terms of an internal argument sharing SVC. It is clear from the literature referred to above that e.g. the positioning of the object depends on the nature of the object NP involved ([± definite] etc.): this and other issues need to be explored in more depth in future studies. But even at this preliminary stage, we already obtain a positive result from having discarded the old term SVC with its numerous definitions. This has allowed us to make a fresh start and to give a new and exact content to the term SVC, which - applied to the so-called “directional verb compounds” - sheds a new light on a so far ill-understood structure.

6. Conclusion

The so-called *serial verb construction* (SVC) plays quite an important role in Chinese linguistics, especially in diachronic studies where it is presented as the privileged site for grammaticalization processes deriving prepositions from verbs. Likewise, in synchronic linguistics, the SVC is appealed to as a kind of *deus ex machina* whenever a sentence containing two or more verbs is difficult to analyse, in particular whenever the categorial status of an item is not straightforward.

Against this common trend, we have argued that the SVC, as it is currently understood, has no theoretical status in the grammar of Mandarin Chinese i.e., it does not represent a unique construction associated with a predictable set of properties (though there are evidently sentences containing more than one verb in Chinese). Instead, the phenomena subsumed under the one label SVC in fact turn out to represent separate constructions with completely different properties. The term SVC should therefore be banned from Chinese linguistics, at least for the structures subsumed so far under this label.

In the studies of Niger-Congo languages, the so-called SVC are also a much discussed phenomenon. Even though the consensus here is greater as to which structure should be subsumed under the term SVC and which not, we still face a situation similar to that in Chinese linguistics. That is, when confronted with the term SVC, we do not know which construction is referred to. This problem linked to the indeterminacy of the term SVC increases exponentially in crosslinguistic comparison when e.g. SVC in Chinese are to be compared with the SVC in Niger-Congo languages. In such a case, it is not clear at all to what extent the phenomena covered by the term SVC in each language overlap, nor whether they overlap at all.

Unfortunately, this problematic status of SVC has never been paid any attention in the literature. On the contrary, reference is made from SVCs in Chinese to those in Niger-Congo languages and vice versa as though one and the same phenomenon were involved (cf. Lord 1973, Lefebvre 1991). Furthermore, important theoretical consequences in terms of a typologically relevant “serialization parameter” (cf. Larson 1991, den Dikken & Sybesma 1998, Stewart 2001, among others)) distinguishing so-called “serializing” from so-called “non-serializing” languages have been drawn on the basis of incommensurable phenomena.

It should be evident now that the term SVC can only be used successfully if given an exact content. We have shown how the narrow definition of SVC as internal argument sharing (cf. Collins (1997), can be successfully applied to so-called directional verb compounds and open new ways to analyse this so far rather badly understood phenomenon. Ultimately, it is hoped that a strict definition of the SVC may lead to a more realistic appraisal of the dichotomy” serializing” vs. “non -serializing” languages and its place in typological studies.

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