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Abstract:

White Hmong is a Southeast Asian minority language rich in productive Serial Verb Constructions (SVCs). In these multi-predicate structures, two or more verbs appear in a single clause, sharing at least one core argument and conveying different facets of a single event (Jarkey, 1991, 2004).

This paper will focus on one of the most common types of SVC in this language, ‘Cotemporal’ SVCs. Both transitive and intransitive verbs occur in Cotemporal SVCs, and all verbs share the subject argument. This SVC type expresses cotemporal motion, as well as motion or stance that is cotemporal with action and, in a very limited way, cotemporal action.

A wide range of motion verbs can occur in a Cotemporal SVC, but their order is fixed. First come manner of motion verbs: transitive Transport verbs like *nqa* ‘carry’ and then intransitive Locomotion verbs such as *ya* ‘fly’. Next come verbs describing motion with respect to Ground: transitive Path verbs like *lawv* ‘follow’ and *hla* ‘cross’, then transitive Source verbs such as *tawm* ‘leave’ and *dim* ‘escape’, and finally the Goal verbs, *mus* ‘go’, *tuaj* ‘come’, *los* ‘come home’.

These introduce Goals when used transitively, but simply convey deixis when used intransitively. Cotemporal SVCs can also express simultaneous action and motion, or action and stance. The action verbs in this construction are always atelic, activity verbs (e.g. *haus* ‘drink, smoke’, *tham* ‘chat’, *qvw* ‘shout’) and the motion verbs always include a telic Goal verb. The activity verb must precede the Goal verb; if an action verb follows a goal verb, the telicity of the goal verb leads to a purposive rather than a cotemporal interpretation. When the SVC conveys action and stance rather than action and motion, however, the order is more flexible: the stance predicate, an atelic state, can precede or follow the activity verb, with no significant difference in meaning.

Two important limits on this SVC type arise from the fact that they refer strictly to a single event. Firstly, serialised verbs in Hmong can never express sequential relationships. A combination such as *dim Nplog-teb mus Thai-teb* (escape Laos go Thailand) ‘escape from Laos to Thailand’, for example, cannot be interpreted to mean ‘escape from Laos and then go to Thailand’. The two cannot be teased apart: the escape from Laos is precisely what constitutes the journey to Thailand. A second limit on this SVC type is that the expression of cotemporal actions is highly restricted. They only occur in situations in which two actions are invariably thought of as inseparable facets of a single event. For example, the actions *noj mov* ‘eat’ (lit: ‘eat rice’) and *haus dej* ‘drink’ (lit: ‘drink water’) often occur together. However, combinations such as *noj qaib* ‘eat chicken’ with *haus cawv* ‘drink beer’ do not occur serially because they are not thought of as parts of a single event. Furthermore, the order of the components in this SVC type tends to be frozen, suggesting that they may be idiomatic to some extent.

References:

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