

## Serial Verb constructions<sup>1</sup> in Igbo: A critical assessment.

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### Abstract

The study investigates the phenomenon of verb serialisation in the Igbo language using transformational generative grammar approach (TGG) and a minimalist framework of analysis. The reason for the frameworks is that the TGG was the forerunner to minimalism and that some concepts are better explained using TGG. The study seeks to ascertain whether the Igbo language qualifies to be classified as SVC language. The data for the study are taken from the existing literature in books and journals. The study is of the opinion that the Igbo language operates SVCs phenomena like other African languages but in a slight different way. Some SVCs in Igbo incorporate NPs covertly which are discovered using the concept of *Empty Category Principle* (ECP) [e] which co-indexes the first NPs with all other NPs in the sentence and some others have disjointed NPs. The study reviews other works on these phenomena from varieties of many African languages including those that have been written by other Igbo scholars in order to find the convergence and divergence inherent in these studies. The study discovers that there is no general consensus even among the Igbo scholars. Based on the comparative nature of the study, it discovers that the Igbo language qualifies to be classified as an SVC language unlike the classifications made by some scholars notably Okorji & Mbagwu (2008) that the Igbo language does not qualify to be so described. The study discovers that the Igbo language has many SVCs phenomena like object sharing and deletion; the multiple covert object NP in the deep structure and peculiar SVC negation. Deep structures are relevant in TGG to account for hidden meanings and that is why it is incorporated in this study.

**Keywords:** serial construction, minimalism, object raising, object deletion, negation

### Introduction

Like any other aspect of human knowledge, verb serialisation or serial verb constructions (henceforth SVCs), which is seen as verbs coming together in series or sequences without any intervention between them is not without its own share of controversies. These controversies stem from the angle the researcher decides to see his/her concept of discourse. Since this phenomenon is not exclusively African (Sebba 1987), Asian, (Li & Thompson 1973) and Burmese (Matisoff 1973), that is, it is not operative in Indo-European languages like English and French, many scholars analyse the phenomenon based on what is operative in the language under consideration. This makes it near impossibility to have a uniform analysis across the languages that claim to have SVCs operative in them.

In the last forty-five years, the issue of serialisation still persists in the literature from many African scholars. Notably among these scholars are Awobuluyi (1973); Bamgbose (1974, 1986); Awoyale (1985, 1987); Baker (1989); Agbedor (1994); Ejele (1995); Onuoha (2014); Okorji and Mbagwu (2008) and Sanusi and Umeozor (2015). Despite the great interest shown in the study of serial verbs across African languages, no consensus has been reached by these various scholars on what should be a yardstick in measuring SVCs in

languages. Interest in verb serialisation stems from the intricacies and the multidimensional nature of issues surrounding the phenomenon in language as well as the cross-linguistic variations identified with such constructions.

Despite the extensive work done on serial verb construction (SVC) in the last forty-five years, there are still more questions than answers. There is also the question of what constitutes a main verb in SVCs. Based on these problems; the question concerning the nature of serial verb construction in languages arises again and again for over four decades of African languages study.

In this study, my main purpose shall be to examine the phenomena of verb serialisation or serial verb construction (SVC) in Igbo and my objective shall be to find out among other things:

- what is the definitional meaning of the phenomenon and how what have been reported in various literature in Igbo align or abhor with the definitional concepts;
- to probe into what have been written in the past on the subject matter by various Igbo scholars and to ascertain the validity or otherwise of their various claims.
- to ascertain whether the Igbo language qualifies to be classified as an SVC language through a critical assessment and a fresh conclusion.

### **The minimalism framework**

The minimalist program (henceforth 'MP') is an attempt to situate linguistic theory in the broader cognitive science. Minimalism, according to Asher (1994) seeks to develop an account of linguistic universals that, on the one hand, will not be falsified by the actual diversity of languages and, on the other, will be sufficiently rich and explicit to account for the rapidity and uniformity of language learning. Within the theoretical framework of minimalist program, linguistic expressions are generated by optimally efficient derivations that must satisfy the conditions that hold on the interface levels, the only levels of linguistic representation. Chomsky (2001) posits that the interface levels provide instructions to two types of performance systems- articulatory-perception (A-P) and conceptual-intentional (C-I). He maintains that all syntactic conditions must express properties of these levels, reflecting the interpretive requirements of language and keeping to very restricted conceptual resources. The minimalist approach to linguistic theory is formulated and progressively developed on the theory of principles and parameters and in particular of economy of derivation and representation.

Economy of derivation is a principle stating that movements (i.e. transformations) only occur in order to match interpretable with uninterpretable features. Chomsky (1995) gives an example of an uninterpretable feature using the plural inflection on regular English nouns e.g. 'dogs'. The word dogs, according to Chomsky (1995) can only be used to refer to several dogs, not a single dog and the inflection contributes to the meaning, making it interpretable. Economy of representation, according to Chomsky (1995), is the principle that grammatical structures must exist for a purpose, i.e. the structure of a sentence should not be larger or

more complex than required to satisfy constraints on grammaticality. The three economy principles that have been most written about in literature thus far are SHORTEST MOVE, PROCRASTINATE AND GREED. Shortest move, in the words of Napoli (1996:394) “tells us that a constituent must move to the first position...that is the hierarchically closest position in an upward direction...of the right kind from its source position”. Shortest move prevents movement from passing over an intervening node, whether that intervening node is lexically filled or empty. Thus, a verb could not move directly to AGRs (Agreement subject) for example, skipping over the head T (Tense). Instead, it must move into T and from there into AGRs. This movement is because if a verb were to move directly to AGRs, its tense feature would not be checked and the derivation would crash in PF (Phonetic form). Violations of shortest move can result in ungrammaticality even without comparing alternative derivation.

This study adopts Minimalist Program framework (MP) as proposed in Chomsky (1995, 1999, 2002). MP is the most recent version of the transformational grammar which employs fewer linguistic apparatus to construct syntactic structures. The apparatus are operations Select, Merge and Agree. Operation Select takes required word items from the lexicon and put them in the numeration to build syntactic structure. Numeration is a place where selected items needed for building syntactic structure are stored. The lexical items in the numeration are in turn put together by an operation dubbed Merge (Olaogun 2017). That is, operations Merge and Agree. Given that operation Move is a form of Merge and that movement of features is replaced by Agree, the computational systems that builds the syntactic tree now consists of two operations namely, Merge and Agree. Merge is the operation that combines syntactic elements to form larger structures.

A derivation is adjudged to be well-formed if it converges at both interface levels: PF and LF, otherwise it crashes. Convergent derivation must also be optional. This means that it satisfies certain natural economy conditions. In other words, a well-formed structure must have followed the most economical path in the course of derivation.

### **Serial Verb Construction (SVC): A wider Perspective**

Omachonu (2012) in his study of SVCs in Igala asserts thus:

SVCs are characterized by two or more verbs acting together as a single predicate and marking a single event. Usually, such verbs occur in sequence without an intervening conjunction (subordination and/or coordination) between them. They are mono-clausal (allow no marks of syntactic dependency on their components) and they display intonational properties that equate with those of monoverbal clause in that there are no intonational breaks and pause markers between the components.

This assertion from Omachanu (2012) could be internal in his Igala language. The implication of the assertion is that the SVCs are spontaneous in the sense that no intervention of is allowed to interface the structure.

The serial verb construction, also known as verb serialisation or verb stacking, according to Omachanu (2012) is a syntactic phenomenon in which *two or more* verbs or *verb phrases* are strung together in a single clause. In the definition above, the concrete words are the number of verbs or verb phrases that can come together to form a serial verb construction. Two or more verbs are highlighted for emphasis. Ejele (1995) defines SVCs as strings consisting of verbs that stand next to each other without an overt connector. In this definition by Ejele (1995) the number of verbs that can come together is omitted but a strong phrase ‘without an overt connector’ is added to throw more light into the concept. Nooman (1985) describes an SVC as a string of verbs within a single clause that express simultaneous or immediately consecutive actions, have a single grammatical subject; have no connective markings, and are marked or understood as having the same grammatical categories such as tense, modality, aspect and negation. In Nooman’s definition, the concept of spontaneity and consecutivisation come in. In the words of Welmers (1973), serialization... “seems to involve actions that can be associated with each other only if they are performed by the same subject”.

Following the same line of thought as Welmers (1973), Bamgbose (1974) opines that a construction where all the verbs share a common subject in the surface structure is in a serial construction and therefore qualifies for serialisation of verbs. Ihionu (1988) sees serialisation as the syntactic/semantic phenomenon whereby verbs occur in series in a sentence or construction. From the definitions of Welmers (1973), Bamgbose (1974) and Ihionu (1988), one could deduce that the condition that stipulates verb serialisation is ‘having a common subject’.

Taking the definition further, Larson (1991:185) describes verb serialisation as a phenomenon whereby notions that would elsewhere be expressed through conjunction, complementation, or secondary predication are rendered uniformly by means of sequences of verbs or verb phrases. Finally, Aikhenvald (2006:1) has this to say about serial verb construction or serialisation.

A serial verb construction (SVC) is a sequence of verbs which acts together as a single predicate, without any overt marker or conjunction, subordination or syntactic dependency of any sort. They are monoclausal; their intonation properties are the same as those of a monoverbal clause and they just have one tense, aspect, and polarity value. Serial verb construction may also share core and other arguments. Each component of an SVC must be able to occur on its right.

They may be actions taking place simultaneously, or one may represent the cause, purpose or result of the other. In most cases, the serial verbs in a sequence are understood to share the same subject. This is collaborated by these examples from different languages.

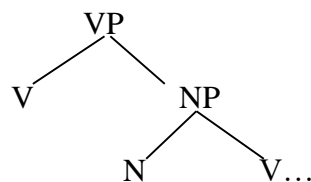
1. Yoruba: Aje sunkun lo ile  
Aje weep go home ‘Aje wept on his way home’ (Awoyale 1987)
2. Haitian: Emil pran liv la bay Mari  
E. take book Det give M. ‘Emil gave the book to Mary’ (Dechaine 1988)

3. Sranan: Kofi nake Amba kari  
Kofi hit Amba kill ‘Kofi struck Amba dead’ (Sebba 1988, Baker 1989)
4. Akan: Kofi tōō bayire dii  
Kofi bought yam ate ‘Kofi bought yam and ate’ (Campbell 1991)
5. Ewe: Kofi da nu du  
K. cook thing eat Kofi cooked something and ate (Agbedor 1994)
6. Igala: Áudù a- la ójè je  
Áudù ASP buy food eat ‘Áudù buys/is buying food to eat’ (Omachonu 2012)
7. Igbo: Ó sì- rì ji ri- é  
3sg cook rV(Past) yam eat OVS<sup>2</sup> ‘He/she cooked yam and ate’  
(Sanusi & Umeozor 2015)
8. Igbo: Ada bù- rù mmiri zò- ó  
Ada carry -rV (Past) water hide -OVS ‘Ada hid the water’ (Onuoha 2014)
9. Igbo: Obi si- ri nri ma ri- e  
Obi cook rV(Past) food and eat- OVS ‘Obi cooked and ate’  
(Okorji & Mbagwu 2008)
10. Igbo: Ọ gà rà ahīa zūta anū  
S/he go rV (Past) market buy animal ‘He went to the market and bought meat’  
(Emenanjo 1978)

A closer look at these structures from different languages reveals that all the structures align with the several definitions of serial verb constructions as it relates to verb phrases and not verbs in series. Some of the constructions have their verbs replaced by preposition in their English translated counterparts. These are noticed in the first example of Yoruba, the second example of Haitian, and the seventh example of Igbo. Maybe, one might think that the English translations of the structures are not perfectly done to reflect the serial verbs in English even though the connectors must be included since English language does not qualify as an SVC language. In the translation of (Okorji & Mbagwu 2008), they even omit the object NP.

The constructions (1-10) apart from Okorji and Mbagwu above could be represented using the tree diagram below.

fig.1



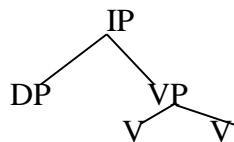
Since all the verbs in the above examples have the objects immediately after them, all the objects share in the activities of the preceding V. The fig.1 example shows that the V1 subcategorises the N which in turn subcategorise the V2. Therefore, fig 1 is a good example of SVC with no connector even after the intervening object.

In the example of serialisation in Nupe, a language spoken in the North-Central Nigeria, it has a sentence like:

11. Musa bé lá èbi  
 'Musa came took knife'

The two verbs *be* (*come*) and *la* (*take*) appear in series and there is no connector between them. To me this type of construction aligns perfectly with the first definition of serialisation in which verbs rather than verb phrases congregate. This construction could be represented diagrammatically using minimalist schema thus:

fig.2

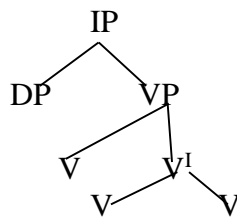


### Serial verb constructions in Igbo

In this section, apart from highlighting that SVCs are operative in the Igbo language sentence structures, efforts would also be made to discuss the concepts of object sharing and object deletion in the subsequent sub-sections that follow immediately. In object sharing, all the subsequent objects are coreferential; that is, they refer to one another whereas in object deletion, an object, possibly the second object is deleted under the condition of identity. That is, the second object is identical to the first.

In the Igbo language for instance, there are many structures that align with the above Nupe sentence or even more. That is, the structures in which two or more verbs come in series without overt intervention. See the structure below.

Fig 3.



12. Ọ bjá- ra hú lá- á  
 3sg come -rV (Past) see go OVS 'S/he came, saw and went (left)'
13. Ó gbù- rù si- é rì- é  
 3sg kill-rV (PAST) cook OVS eat OVS 'S/he killed, cooked and ate'.
14. O tè- rè rá chá  
 3sg cook -rV (Past) lick all 'S/he cooked and licked all'

The sentence (11) above, analysed from (12) through (14) disagrees with the concept of object sharing as propounded by Baker (1989) in his analysis of Yoruba language.

Structures in (12-14) are examples of contiguous verb serialisation in Igbo since the verbs have no nominal interference amongst them. In the three sentences above, (12) and (13) have three verbs in series without any overt connector in the D-structure as it is in Nupe sentence in (11) above. The fact is that the structure (12) is theta-marked for covert *location* (LOC) after the first verb (V1) and theta-marked for covert *benefactive* (BENF) after the second verb (V2) and again theta-marked for LOC after the third verb (V3). This is because the motion verb (V1) *bịara* (came) must as a matter of necessity encode a locative complement either overtly or covertly. The sentence (11) could be rewritten as (15) below.

15. Ọ bịa- ra [LOC] ụ [BENF] lá- á [LOC]  
S/he come rV(Past) [e] see [e] go [e] OVS ‘S/he came, saw and left’

The sentence (15) could necessarily be rendered as (16):

16. Ọ bịa- ra (ebe a)[LOC] ụ (Okee)[BENF] lá- á (ụlọ yá)[LOC]  
S/he come rV (Past) (here) see (Okee) go OVS (house his)  
‘S/he came here, saw Okee and went to his house’

In the sentence above, the objects are not co-referential to one another and so the verbs address different objects. So (16) does not engage in object sharing.

17. Ọ bịa- ra [e]<sub>i</sub> ụ [e]<sub>j</sub> lá- á [e]<sub>k</sub>  
S/he come rV (Past) see go OVS ‘S/he came, saw and left’

The superscripts in (17) above suggest that the verbs encode different objects. The implication of the superscripts is that even though they are invisible in the output of the structure but must be recognised intuitively by the language user. Based on the aforementioned, the question that will generate the answer in (17) is:

18. Ọ bịa- ra ébéé ụ gịni lá- á ébéé?  
S/he come rV (Past) where see what go OVS where  
‘S/he came where, saw what and left for where?’

### **Object Sharing Phenomenon in Igbo**

In (13) above, three verbs are also in series in the S-structure of the sentence. But in the D-structure of the sentence, there are objects which are co-referential to one another. (13) is rewritten as (19) below for analysis. (S- structure and D- structure are used logic-wise in this study since the terminology has been jettisoned in minimalism)

19. Ó gbù- rù [PAT]<sub>i</sub> sì- é [PAT]<sub>i</sub> rì- e [PAT]<sub>i</sub>  
S/he kill rV (Past) [something], cook OVS [something] ate OVS something  
S/he killed a fowl, cooked the fowl and ate the fowl.

The sentence (19) above, agrees with the concept of object sharing enunciated by Baker (1989) and collaborated by Agbedor (1994) as one of the most challenging phenomena in SVC analysis. The superscripts in (19) suggest that all the verbs encode the same objects. Even though the objects are not overt in the construction, i.e., in the S-structure of the sentence, nonetheless, there are there in the D-structure even though minimalist programme does not recognize D-structure. But TGG recognizes the presence of D-structure. A questions after the sentence should be “Ó gbù- rù gị̀nị̀ sìé ríé? “He killed what, cooked and ate?”

20. Ó gbù- rù [e]<sub>i</sub> sìé [e]<sub>i</sub> ríé[e]<sub>i</sub>

The same analysis is applicable to the (13) structure in the sense that the V1 must be followed by a direct object and V2 must as a matter of necessity attract the same object as with V1 as its complement. So the concept of *Empty Category Principle* (ECP) is applicable. Sentence (14) is rewritten as (21) below.

21. Ó té- ré [e]<sub>i</sub> ráchá [e]<sub>i</sub>  
 S/he cook rV (Past) lick  
 S/he cooked[e] licked[e]  
 S/he cooked something, licked something ‘S/he cooked the soup and licked the soup’.

The structures (13) and (14) above could be described as invisible object sharing phenomena of SVC. According to minimalist tenets, once the movements are complete, in this instance, the TP (rV Past) moves to attach to the verb root, the structures undergo transfer to the phonological and semantic components at this point. At the end of the derivation, all remaining undergo transfer. That is, after the movement, the traces left behind receive null spell outs.

There is also a visible object sharing as enunciated by Baker (1989) in the Igbo SVC construction. In this type of construction, the V1 must be accompanied by a visible object of which the second verb V2 shares. This is illustrated with these examples.

22. Ó gbù- rù ánu rì- é (ánu)  
 3sg kill -rV (Past) animal(meat) eat OVS animal (meat)  
 ‘S/he killed an animal (meat) and ate an animal (meat)’

23. Ó sì- rì jì rì- é (jì)  
 3sg cook -rV (Past) yam eat (yam) OVS  
 ‘S/he cooked yam and ate (yam)’

24. Ó tẹ̀- rẹ̀ ńkwụ̀ ñụ- ọ̀ (ńkwụ̀)  
 3sg tap -rV (PAST) palmtree drink OVS (palmtree)  
 ‘He tapped palmwine and drank (palmwine)’

In the structures above, the object of the V1 is also the object of the V2. The second object in parenthesis indicates that the second object is not required for the structure to converge in line with minimalist tenets. The language user knows that what was killed in (22) is also what is eaten. The same phenomenon applies to (23) and (24). That is, what is cooked is the



same that is eaten and what is tapped is the same thing as what is drunk. This shows that the concept of object sharing is operative even though invisible.

From the examples (12) – (24) above, it is shown that the Igbo language structures exhibit both object sharing phenomenon and multiple objects NP though the multiple object NP phenomenon occur mostly in the deep structure and sparingly in the surface structure. It is true that minimalism does not favour deep structure but TGG favours it. So the concept of multiple objects NP in SVCs is a phenomenon in the Igbo language.

### **Object deletion phenomenon**

Another issue of great importance in the analysis of SVC is what Stewart (1963) describes as *object deletion under identity*. He maintains that two transitive verbs show an object deletion under identity (i.e. one of the objects is deleted, ( normally that of V2) because it is identical to the object of V1)). Agbedor (1994:117) exemplifies this concept with the examples found in *Ewe*, a language spoken in Ghana.

25. *Kofi fo Ama wu*  
K. beat A. kill ‘Kofi beat Ama to death’

26. *Kofi fo Ama wu Ama*  
Kofi beat Ama kill NP

He maintains that the example (25) above is derived from (26) and the subsequent deletion of the second NP under identity with NP1. He opines that what comes to mind was to posit that there is a D-structure in which the two verbs in the SVC take an object NP either to their right or left depending on the type of language.

27. VP [V1beat [V2kill [NP Ama]]]

In his analysis of the above structure, Agbedor (1994) asserts thus:

Only the V2 directly theta-marks the NP. The V1 does not case-mark the NP because the adjacency condition is violated. One alternative is to move the NP to a position between the two verbs in the case of V1 directly theta-marks the NP. But how can we account for the theta-marking and case-marking properties of the V2, which is a transitive verb and therefore, has to assign case?

The same is the case for Igbo language. In the Igbo language for instance, consider sentence (28) below:

28. Ó sì-      rì              jì      rì-      é  
S/he cook –rV (PAST) yam eat OVS ‘S/he cooked yam and ate’

The implication is that what is cooked is the same thing that is eaten. The second object is deleted under the condition of identity. Sentence (28) could be rendered as (29) below:

29. Ó sì-            rì            jì    rì-    é    jì  
       S/he cook-rV (PAST) yam eat OVS    yam  
       S/he cook ed NP1 eat NP2 ‘S/he cooked and ate yam’

In the structure above, (29) shows the realisation of the NP2 which was deleted under the condition of identity in (28) as propounded by Stewart (1963). The V2 theta-marks the NP2 which is deleted at the S-structure under the condition of identity. The same NP1 which is the object of V1 is also the object of V2. Here there is no violation of adjacency condition as there is no movement of NP2 to V1. To account for the theta-marking in the sentences above, the V1 theta-marks the NP1 for *theme* [Thm] even as V2 theta-marks the NP2 for the same purpose. Since V1 theta-marks NP1 and V2 theta-marks NP2, the same applies to case-marking whereby the V1 case-marks NP2 for direct object. For the Igbo language the sentence (28) is the standard and no native speaker of the language will question the object of the V2 since the object is deduced from the object of the V1. Sentence (29) is only good for academic analysis as a proof of (28) and nothing further.

The whole sentence could be represented diagrammatically thus:

30.a [VP [V1 cook [NP1 yam [V2 eat [NP2 yam]]]]]]

b. [VP [V1cook [NP1 yam<sub>i</sub> [V2 eat [NP2 [e]<sub>i</sub> ]]]]]

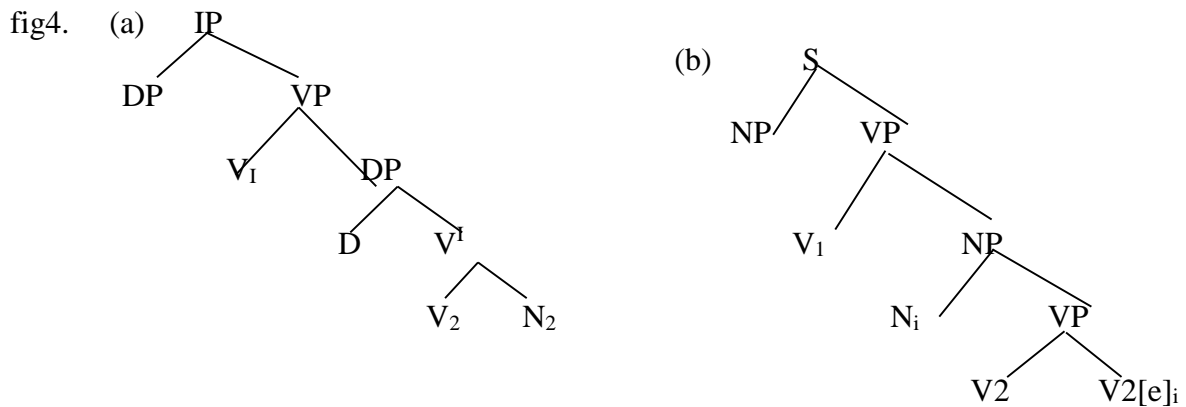


Figure 4 above depicts two different frameworks. While 4a depicts the format of minimalism in phrase marking, 4b depicts the framework of transformational generative grammar (TGG). From the tree diagrams above, one can see that (30b) and (fig.4b) derives from (30a) and (fig.4a) respectively from where the second object [e] gets deleted because it is identical with the first object. The Empty Category Category [e] is a spring board that points to the fact that something is deleted and the indexation link shows that what was deleted is the same as the antecedent which has the same indexation mark. The concept of trace operates in TGG where it shows what ought to be in a sentence structure but in minimalism, once the movement are

complete the structure converges at the PF and LF interfaces and all traces receive null spellout. So minimalism favours object deletion in Igbo. From the analysis above, (i.e examples 28 through 30) shows that the concept of object deletion is operative in the Igbo language.

### **Tense marking in Igbo SVCs**

As a rule, serial verbs cannot be marked independently for categories such as tense, aspect and mood. That is, all the verbs that make up the entire sentence structure obey the rule of the preceding verb tense. So if the V1 tense is in the past the subsequent verbs will also be in the past even if the past tense marker is not indicated. In Ewe, a West-African language spoken in Ghana (Agbedor 1994), we see this type of tense marking.

31. Kofi trə dzo kpoo  
Kofi turn (PERF) leave (PERF) quietly 'Kofi turned and left quietly'

In his analysis, Agbedor (1994) asserts that the two verbs in the construction appear in perfective forms but that both are understood to refer to the past as the English translation reveals.

Onuoha (2014) on her own, asserts that the verbs in SVCs in Igbo are marked with  $-rV$  suffix which according to her, is the marker of the simple past tense in Igbo. She maintains that this  $-rV$  suffix could be marked on both the V1 and the V2 in verb serialisation. She cites the example below.

32. Chima *ji-* ri mma *bè-* rè ányị ta- a  
Chima hold  $-rV$  (PAST) knife cut  $-rV$  (PAST) meat eat OVS  
'Chima used a knife to cut meat and ate.'
- b. Chima *ji* mma *bè-* rè ányị ta- a  
Chima hold knife cut  $-rV$  (PAST) meat eat OVS 'Chima used a knife to cut meat and ate'

In her analysis of the two sentences above, she states:

In the serial verb construction in example above, the V1 *ji* 'held' and V2 *bere* 'cut' appear with the  $-rV$  past tense suffix while the V3 takes the OVS, but in the SVC in (b), the V1 *ji* 'held' appears without the  $-rV$  suffix, while the V2 *bee* 'cut' appears with the suffix, and the V3 *taa* 'ate' takes the OVS but the two constructions receive past tense interpretations in the language.

But one thinks that the Igbo language cannot be pinned down when it comes to tense marking in the serial verb constructions. For instance, the same sentence used by Onuoha above could be rendered in this fashion:

33. Chima *ji* mma *bè* e ányị tá- á  
Chima hold knife cut (OVS) meat eat (OVS) 'Chima used a knife to cut meat and ate'

Here there is no –rV past tense marker suffix, yet the sentence has its interpretation rendered in the past. A native speaker of the language will judge the structure as one cast in the past tense. Unfortunately, the Igbo language does not have any overt morpheme for simple tense construction. Simple tense structure is seen from intuition rather than any grammatical rule.

Another issue of interest is how many constructions move from one level to another. See the constructions below.

34. Ó rì- rì sáchá /sá á éféré  
S/he eat –rV (PAST) wash (OVS) plate ‘S/he ate and washed the plate’
35. O lụ- rụ nwáanyì kọ rọ lá- á  
S/he marry- rV (Past) woman take- rV (Past) go OVS  
‘He married a wife and took her and left/ He married a wife and left with her’
36. O bjà- ra bú rú égō lá- wá  
S/he come-rV (Past) carry-rV (Past) money go (Continuative)  
‘S/he came and carried money and went his way’.
37. Ó gbù- rù sị- é rì é  
S/he kill-rV (Past) cook OVS eat OVS ‘S/he killed, cooked and ate’
38. O bjà- ra kwá rá ñgwónwó yá  
S/he come-rV (Past) pack-rV (Past) goods her/him  
‘S/he came and packed her/his belongings’
39. O bjà- ra kwá ñgwónwó yá  
S/he come-rV (Past) pack goods her/him ‘S/he came and packed her/his belongings’
40. O bjà- ra hụ anyí  
S/he come-rV (Past) see us ‘S/he came and saw us’
41. O bjà- ra zúrú/góró anyí áhjá  
S/he come-rV (Past) buy-rV (Past) we market ‘S/he came and bought (some) goods from us’
41. O bjà- ra zụ/góó anyí áhjá  
S/he come-rV (Past) buy we market ‘S/he came and bought (some) goods from us’

From the sentences above, one can rightly observe that the basic conclusion in analysing tense marking in the Igbo SVC is it is a MUST that the V1 be assigned the –rV suffix past tense marker. The V2 may or may not be assigned the –rV tense marker.

In (34) above, the V2 does not receive the –rV suffix yet the structure is interpreted as occurred in the past tense. In (35) the –rV suffixation of the V2 is a must since without it, the sentence will be ungrammatical. The same applies to sentence (36) where the V2 receives the –rV past tense and past continuative in the V3. Sentence (37) does not require any suffixation of V2 in the forms of –rV suffix. In (38) and (39), the sentences have alternate rendition of the same concept. The same applies to sentences (41) and (42). Based on that, the sentences can assign the –rV past tense marker to V2 as it is with (35) or be left without

the –rV past tense suffix as it is with (37). Both (38) and (39) make past tense meanings with or without the past tense markers on the V2. The same phenomenon is applicable to the sentence structures in (41) and (42). Sentence (40) requires the past tense marker only on the V1 and can never be assigned to V2.

The only basic thing is that the V1 must have the –rV past tense marker. For the past tense marker to spread to the V2 or V3 depends on the structure involved. Again the verb *ji* ‘use’ which incorporates preposition and instrumentation in its frame might not be a very good example in the analysis of the characteristics of SVC in the Igbo language. This is because, in the verb *ji*, the subject of the V1 is not the subject of V2 as our definition of SVC entails. This justifies the claim of double objects as enunciated by Sanusi and Umeozor (2015).

### **Negation in serial verb constructions**

Another phenomenon that is very crucial in the analysis of serialisation is the negation of SVC in languages. Agbedor (1994:117), for Ewe language, reports that the negative marker was a discontinuous element (me...o). He maintains that the negated constituent lies between the two elements as these examples depict.

40. a. *Me fle agbale na Ama*  
1sg buy book give Ama ‘I bought a book for Ama’
- b. *Nye me fle agbale na Ama o*  
1sg NEG buy book give Ama NEG ‘I did not buy a book for Ama’
- c. \**Nye me fle agbale me na Ama o*  
1sg NEG buy book NEG give A NEG
- d. \**Me fle agbale me na Ama o*  
1sg buy book NEG give A NEG

The structure (c) and (d) are ungrammatical because of the position of the negative markers. But a cursory look at the structures reveals that there are two negative markers in each of the sentences. This shows that the two negative markers are both in the structure one following the other in an ordered sequence, i.e. *me* followed by *o*.

In Esan language; a language spoken in the South-South Nigeria; Ejele (1995:263) reports that the negative markers in SVC occur before the first verb in the series. According to her, “both past and non-past negative forms one possible, no matter whether the related actions in the SVC are seen in the past or not”. She points out the lexeme *ii* as the non past negative marker as the example below indicates.

41. *Izéhí ii ré ékùyé lé ébáé khón*  
          V          V          V  
NEG use spoon eat food bellyful ‘Izehi does not use spoon to eat bellyful’

In the analysis of the sentence (45), she asserts that the whole SVC, excluding the subject, is negated. She maintains that if the marker is placed before any other verb with the exception of the first in the series the resultant sentence is ungrammatical.

- b. \* Izehi ré ékúyè ìí lé ébáé khón  
V V V  
? Izehi does not use spoon to eat bellyful.

In the Igbo language, a negative sentence is made when the suffix *ghi* is attached at the back of the base verb. If it is a simple past tense, the *ghi* suffix is attached to the verb root without the *-rV* past tense marker in Igbo. In the formation of any future sentence, a participle *a* or *e* is attached before the root verb after which the negative marker is attached at the suffix position.

One particular thing about negation in SVC in Igbo is that the *ghi* morpheme is attached on the first verb in the series and every other thing in the entire structure excluding the first subject is negated.

42. O bjà- ra rì- é lá- á  
3sg come-rV (Past) eat OVS go OVS 'S/he came, ate and left'
43. O bjà- ghi rì- é lá- á  
3sg come-rV (Past) NEG eat OVS go OVS 'S/he did not come, ate and left'

The sentence (43) could be interpreted to mean that s/he did not come; s/he did not eat and that s/he did not go. The implication of the sentence is that since s/he did not come, the issue of eating and leaving is left out of the matter. On the other hand, if the negation is removed from the first verb (V1), the negative marker *ghi* should only be applied to the subsequent verbs after a resumptive pronoun which is an anaphor of the subject of the entire sentence must have been applied.

44. Okèé bjà- ra rì- é lá- á  
Okee come-rV (PAST) eat OVS go OVS 'Okee came, ate and left'
- b. Okèé bjà- ra ò rì ghi lá á  
Okey come-rV (PAST) s/he eat NEG go OVS 'Okey came, s/he did not eat and left'
- c. Okèé bjà- ra rì- é ò lá- ghi  
Okee come-rV (PAST) eat OVS s/he go NEG 'Okee came, ate and s/he did not leave/go'

In (44b) the negative marker is asserted to the V2 and as a result, *O/O* which are the resumptive pronouns in Igbo has the same characteristics with the antecedent. In the sentences, the first part is positive whereas the second part is negated and thereby change the semantic input of the (44b) from (43) above. In (43), he did not come at all let alone eating anything, in (44b), he came but he did not eat anything and in (44c), he came and ate but he refused to go. The structure could still be varied if an additional resumptive pronoun is inserted to the verbs in series as this shows below:

- d. Okèé bjà- ra ò rì- ghì ò lá- ghì  
Okee come-rV (PAST) s/he eat NEG s/he go NEG  
'Okee came, he did not eat, he did not go/leave

So the position of the negative marker shows the semantic import and the nature of the SVC in the language. This nature varies with what obtains in other African languages like Ewe in Ghana or Esan in Nigeria.

### **Previous Analysis of Igbo SVCs by Various Scholars and Comparison**

From the sentence structures and analysis of some Igbo scholars as have been reviewed in this study so far (Emenanjo, 1978; Okorji & Mbagwu, 2008; Sanusi & Umeozor, 2015); the analysis of Onuoha (2014) seems to aligns what obtains in SVCs in other languages. She believes that the Igbo language qualifies to be analysed in line with SVCs phenomena. Others like Okorji & Mbagwu (2008), Emenanjo (1978), and Sanusi & Umeozor (2015); have one reason or the other to disagree with the phenomena of SVCs operating in Igbo. Sanusi & Umeozor (2015) are of the opinion that some verbs of the language incorporate different objects which according to them disqualify the concept of SVC as it relates to these verbs.

Okorji & Mbagwu (2008) do rather an exceptional analysis in their discussion of SVCs in Igbo. From their subtopic "The so-called Igbo SVCs," it is obvious that they do not savour the concept as it relates to Igbo language. Okorji & Mbagwu (2008) apply argument sharing principle to test the status of SVC in Igbo. They observe that some verb serialisation share the same subject NP argument, but do not share the object argument. Only one example in their data satisfies the argument hypothesis. Based on this observation, they claim that SVCs are coordinate structure in which the serialising verbs belong to different clauses that are joined by a conjunction.

In my view, if one instance of sentence structure violates the object sharing concept of SVCs and other structures obey it; it implies that object sharing SVC in Igbo is not found in all cases. The definition of SVCs by Emenanjo (1978); Okorji and Mbagwu (2008), and Sanusi and Umeozor (2015) seem incomprehensive and inappropriate. Igbo SVCs are realised without conjunction at the surface level as they claim. Let us take a look at some of their sentence structures (Okorji & Mbagwu 2008:391) examples (45a—c)

- 45) a. Obi si- ri nri ma ri- e  
Obi cook-PAST food and eat OVS 'Obi cooked and ate'
- b. Ha wee la-ru-o ma (wee) hụ ya  
they then get ALLAT-OVS and (then) see it 'Then they got home and saw it'
- c. Ada ga- ra ahia ma zụ- ọ uwe  
Ada go- rV PAST market and buy -OVS dress  
'Ada went to the market and bought dresses'

In their analysis of (45a-c) above they point to the fact that the so-called SVCs in Igbo are actually coordinate structures. They maintain that Igbo may hardly be said to have SVCs. My disagreement with their analysis stems from the fact that they insert the item (ma) which ordinarily should not be in the structure for it to be grammatical. For instance, the structure “Obi siri nri rie (Obi cooked food and ate) aligns well with the principle of SVCs in all ramifications. Secondly, the introduction of the item ‘ma’ does not only suggest conjunction as it is in the sentence structure but equally connotes additional or extra information of eventuality. For instance, example (45c) “Ada gara ahia ma zuo uwe (Ada went to the market and bought dresses) could be seen as “ Ada went to the market and even bought dresses. From the additional/ extra information conveyed by the introduction of ‘ma’, the sentence structure becomes ambiguous. The ambiguity emanates from the fact that the structure can connote surprise, disbelief and eventuality.

In Emenanjo (1978:201), he asserts that SVCs are used in Igbo as in other languages for expressing an enormously wide range of semantic notions. He maintains that Igbo language has only one preposition and as such, is used for expressing preposition in Igbo. He cites the examples below:

- a. O    jì mmà bè- e anū  
S/he use knife cut OVS meat ‘S/he cut up meat with a knife’.
- b. O    so  ugbo elū ga Legòs  
S/he follow boat up go Lagos ‘S/he travelled to Lagos by air’.
- c. O    so    nna ya    a-    ga ubi  
S/he follow father him/her Pref. go farm He goes to the farm in the company of his father.

In 1978, when Emenanjo analyses his sentence structures, he believes that the Igbo language has only one preposition. But this perspective has been overtaken by revelations from the recent researches in the Igbo preposition where it is discovered that Igbo language has well over twenty (20) lexical prepositions excluding the verb-incorporated prepositions. Also in the Igbo language, tone is equally used to differentiate verbs from prepositions as in the lexical items ‘bànyèrè (entered) ‘verb’ and bànyéré (about) ‘preposition’. Again, I disagree that SVCs are used to replace the shortfall of prepositions in Igbo.

In Sanusi & Umeozor (2015) they use what I termed preposition incorporated verb (ji) in almost all their analysis. I maintain that the preposition incorporated verbs will not give a clear picture of SVCs in Igbo as the verb ‘ji’ involves instrument that act on another object. This preposition incorporated verbs like ‘ji’ and ‘si’ are what Emenanjo, Sanusi & Umeozor and even Onuoha use in their various analyses of SVCs in pursuing some of their agenda. I am of the opinion that different Igbo verbs perform different functions based on the structures. Like our various examples suggest, SVCs could be used overtly and covertly to analyse different phenomena.



## **Conclusion**

The study takes a critical look into the phenomena of verb serialisation with a view to finding out its characteristics and working definitions. The concept of verb serialisation has been discussed extensively in the literature by many authors of different backgrounds using different languages. One sure finding in this study is that many African languages allow series of verbs to occur in a single sentence structure without any overt connector whatsoever. The Igbo language qualifies to be classified as an SVC language. Based on the data available in this study, the Igbo language aligns perfectly with the concept of serialisation.

It is equally important to assert that the phenomena of both object sharing and object deletion are well represented in the language. But the way languages realise these phenomena differ from one language to another. Igbo language also has its own peculiar way in its tense and negation markings. In the Igbo, every SVC incorporates a covert NP which is invisible at the S-structure. This covert phenomenon is captured using the concept of *Empty category Principle* (ECP) which co-indexes the first NP with the subsequent NPs in SVC structure. Also the verbs in SVC in Igbo are ordered according to occurrences of events which the SVCs depict. Another interesting thing is the peculiar process of SVC negation in the Igbo language. Finally, this study disagrees and departs sharply with the analysis of various Igbo scholars who argued that the Igbo language does not qualify to be classified as an SVC language.

In minimalism, three conditions must be satisfied for the structure to be grammatical. These are select, merge and agree. The moment a selection is made, the merging process comes in to arrange the structure and then the agreement if the structure is well-formed. Any structure that fails any of the three processes leads to ungrammaticality and the process aborts or terminates. Fortunately, this study satisfies the three conditions.

Note:

1. the terms verb serialization and serial verb construction are used interchangeably in this study as the same concept

2. OVS (Object Verb Suffix) is an affix that attaches to the verb root to enhance its semantic content and must be attached according to vowel harmony principle in the language. OVS is only removed from the verb root whenever there is a need for past tense marker or negation marker e.g. sie (cook) si-ri (cooked) not \*sieri or si-ghi (not cook) and not \*sieghi.

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