

Serial Verbs in Colloquial Arabic

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Introduction

Verb serialization in Arabic has been rarely and always very briefly discussed in the linguistic literature (see Denz, 1971; Jiha, 1964; Mitchell, 1978; Sieny, 1978; Versteegh, 1984). None of these scholars attempt to provide any evidence for, classification of, or analysis of serial verb constructions (SVCs henceforth) in any variety of Arabic. Rather, they tend to cite their "existence" as an example to support syntactic or historical arguments of some kind. For example, Versteegh (1984) states that "in most Arabic dialects we find a phenomenon of verbal construction that bears a striking resemblance to what is called 'verbal serialization' in pidginized languages" (PP. 99-100). Versteegh uses what he calls a serial-verb-like construction to support the view that Arabic dialects may have come about as a result of pidginized, creolized, and finally decreolized processes. Other scholars such as Jiha (1964) and Denz (1971) view these SVCs as having auxiliary or semi-auxiliary verbs that express various meanings. Therefore, a clear definition and classification for SVCs in Arabic have not yet come about. Indeed, most scholars who have dealt with this issue tend not to distinguish between SVCs and other surface-like asyndetic constructions such as coordination, subordination, and infinitival constructions.

Perhaps one reason for the lack of attention to SVCs is that they have been associated with the colloquial varieties of Arabic. Neither Modern Standard nor Classical Arabic seems to have serial verbs of any form. It is not surprising then that they (SVCs) have not received enough attention since most of the research, especially in the past, has been devoted to the description and analysis of Standard and/or Classical Arabic.

In this paper I will discuss serial verb constructions in one colloquial variety of Arabic only --Palestinian Arabic (referred to henceforth as colloquial Arabic or just Arabic). In particular, I will argue (1) for their existence as independent constructions, (2) provide a classification based

on some of the syntactic and semantic properties that these constructions have, and (3) discuss their distribution in this dialect. It is my belief, based on the data I collected from various dialects, that this analysis represents the status of SVCs in most colloquial varieties of Arabic.

Serial verbs in colloquial Arabic

Several descriptions of SVCs have demonstrated that there is no single universal criterion which can exclusively define them cross-linguistically. This can be seen in the works of Li and Thompson, 1973; Isaac, 1975; Crowley, 1987; Sebba, 1987, just to mention a few. However, SVCs seem to share some common characteristics that make them distinct from the rest of verbal constructions in verb serializing and non-serializing languages. For example, it is not likely to have two consecutive verbs separated by a coordination or subordination marker as SVCs in any language. In such cases they are usually considered coordinate and subordinate constructions, respectively. Both of these constructions are supposed to be syntactically and/or semantically different from SVCs.

In addition to sharing some cross-linguistic properties, some SVCs tend to have language-specific characteristics that distinguish them from other SVCs in other languages and from other constructions in the same language. Serial verbs in Arabic, like most SVCs, share some of the "universal" syntactic and semantic properties with other SVCs in other languages, and have their own "exclusive" properties. In this section, I will argue for their existence in colloquial Arabic and try to provide a set of criteria that will define them.

Examples (1) to (8) provide a set of SVCs in colloquial Arabic.^{1,2} (Each example is given with a morpheme-by-morpheme segmentation on the

¹The transcription used in this study is phonemic and the symbols used are mostly those of the International Phonetic Alphabet. Those that differ from the IPA are: Superscripted /^c/ indicates voiced pharyngeal fricative
A dot under /h/ indicates voiceless pharyngeal fricative
Double consonants indicate consonant length or gemination
/j/ indicates voiced palatal affricate
Underlining indicates pharyngealization.

² Imperative forms are recognized in this dialect by (1) verb-internal vocalic changes; (2) absence of the person marker for the second person masculine singular form; and (3) either dropping a radical from the root or adding the prefix /ʔi/, depending on the verb class, to indicate the imperative mood. /i/ in /ʔi/

following line followed by a morpheme-by-morpheme gloss on the third line and the English equivalent on the last line. Such detailed representation was redundant in some of the examples given later in text, and thus it was not provided. Note that 0 stands for zero morpheme.)

- (1) xud ?iʃrab lʔahwe
 0-ʔxd (root)-0 ?i-ʃrb (root)-0 l-ʔahwe
 imp-take-2sg imp-drink-2sg the-coffee
 Take the coffee and drink it!
- (2) ru:h ji:b ʔaxu:k min lja:mʕa
 0-ru:h-0 0-ji:b-0 ʔaxu-uk min l-ja:mʕa
 imp-go-2sg imp-get-2sg brother your from the university
 Go get your brother from the university!
- (3) ʕa:d ʔalli ʔinnu ʔiʃtara sayya:ra
 ʕa:d-0 ʔal-0-l-i ʔinnu ʔiʃtara-0 sayya:ra
 came back-3sg told-3sg-to-me that bought-3sg car
 He told me again that he bought a car.
- (4) ha:t ʔaʕʔi:ni likta:b
 0-ha:t-0 0-ʔaʕʔi-0:-ni l-ikta:b
 imp-give-2sg imp-give-2sg-me the book
 Give me the book!
- (5) ʔaju ra:h u saʔalu:ni ʔiza bididi ʔatjawwaz
 ʔaj-u ra:h-u saʔal-u:-ni ʔiza bidd-i ʔatjawwaz
 came-3pl went-3pl asked-3pl-me if wanted-1sg (to) marry
 They asked me if I wanted to get married.
- (6) taʕa:l ʔijri
 0-taʕa:l-0 ʔi-jri-0
 imp-come-2sg imp-run-2sg
 Come quickly/Come running!

changes in some verbs to /u/ as a result of vowel harmony. For sake of simplification, however, I will be using the imperative form instead of the root in the rest of the examples given in this paper.

- (7) ma^c kull ha ddira:sa, ?a:m rasab
ma^c kull ha ddira:sa, ?a:m-0 rasab-0
with all this study stood up-3sg failed-3sg
Despite all this work (studying), he failed
- (8) ma^c kull ha ʕʕarh, bi:ji bi?u:l ?innu miʕ fa:him
ma^c kull ha ʕʕarh, b-i:ji-0 b-?u:l-0 ?innu
with all this explanation(s) pres-come-3sg pres-say-3sg that
miʕ muhim
not understanding
Despite this (thorough) explanation, he still says that he does not
understand

All these examples have, as we will see later in the paper, serial verb constructions that consist of two or more verbs. Some of these constructions are in the imperative such as examples (1), (2), (4), and (6); some are in the perfect such as (3), (5), and (7); and example (8) is in the imperfect.

Common among all these examples are the following characteristics which apply to many SVCs in several languages:

1. Two or more verbs occur in the same clause that are asyndetically juxtaposed without any overt coordinate or subordinate markers in between.
2. All verbs in each string share the same subject.
3. All verbs in each string share the same tense and mood.
4. Actions in some constructions such as (6) (i.e., come running) are perceived as simultaneous and others such as (1) (i.e., take the coffee and drink it) are consecutive.
5. Negation is always marked on the first verb in the string and applies to the whole string. Thus, in negating examples (1) and (3), for example, we get

- (1)' (ma) ta:xudiʕ tiʕrab l?ahwe
ma ta-xud-0-ʕ ti-ʕrab-0 l-?ahwe
not imp-take-2sg-not imp-drink-2nd sg the-coffee
Don't take the coffee and drink it!

(3)' ma ʕadʕ ?alli ?innu ʕtara sayya:ra
ma ca:d-0-ʕ ?al-0-l-i ?innu ʕtara syya:ra
not come back-3sg-not tell-3sg-to-me that bought 3sg car
He did not tell me any more that he bought a car.

6. The two verbs are not separated by any intonational or clause boundary markers of any kind.
7. Each verb in the string can be a full verb on its own in an independent clause.
8. Each string of verbs in each sentence tends to express what seems to be a single event.

All these features indicate that these constructions are not different from the known SVCs found in verb serializing languages. However, to establish that they are indeed SVCs we need to distinguish them from other paratactic and hypotactic structures in Arabic that may look on the surface the same as these constructions. In what follows I will provide three syntactic and semantic arguments that will distinguish the constructions given in the above eight sentences from the paratactic structures. Further arguments will be given in a later section to distinguish them from hypotactic structures.

(i) Leftest Location

When a NP is moved to the beginning of a sentence in Arabic a resumptive attached pronoun is added to the transitive verb or an independent pronoun is inserted in the object position to replace the moved NP. Thus, in (9b) and (10b) where the NPs /likta:b/ "the book" and "Columbus" have been moved to the beginning of the sentence the pronouns /?iyya:/ "it" and /-ha/ also meaning "it" are added to replace the moved NPs. The choice of /?iyya:/ or /-ha/ is determined by the verb. Some verbs subcategorize for /?iyya:/ and others subcategorize for an attached pronoun such as /-ha/, /-hum/, /-u/, etc.

(9) a. ?aʕtj:ni likta:b
0-?aʕtj-0-ni l-ktaab
imp-give-2sg-me the book
Give me the book!

- b. likta:b, ?aʕti:ni ?iyya:
likta:b, 0-?aʕti-0-ni ?iyya:
the book, imp-give-2sg-me it
The book, give it to me!

- (10)a. ?ana baħib Columbus
?ana b-?aħib Columbus
I pres-like Columbus
I like Columbus.

- b. Columbus, ?ana baħibha
Columbus, ?ana b-aħib-ha
Columbus, I pres-like-it
Columbus, I like it.

Dropping the resumptive pronoun in either sentence results in ungrammatical sentence. Thus, both (9)' and (10)' are ungrammatical.

- *(9)' likta:b ?aʕti:ni
The book, give me

- *(10) Columbus, baħib
Columbus, I like.

Applying the same movement to SVCs in Arabic that look on the surface similar to coordinate structures, as is the case with (1), shows that they are, in fact, independent verbal constructions that are not and cannot be considered coordinate structures. In sentence (1) (repeated here for convenience as (1)'').

- (1)'' xud ?iʕrab l?ahwe

the NP /l?ahwe/ can be fronted and a resumptive pronoun should be added to the verb /?iʕrab/ "to drink". Thus, the sentence becomes

- (11) l?ahwe, xud ?iʕrabha

Adding the resumptive pronoun to the verb /xud/ "take", which is also a transitive verb in the same construction, results in an ungrammatical structure as is clear in (13).

***(13) lʔahwe, xudha ʔiʒrab**

By contrast, applying the movement to a coordinate structure that has the same verbs /xud/ and /ʔiʒrab/ results in ungrammatical construction if the resumptive pronoun is not attached to both verbs. Thus, sentences (14) and (15) are ungrammatical while (16) is grammatical.

***(14) lʔahwe, xud w iʒrabha**
The coffee, take and drink it

***(15) lʔahwe, xudha w iʒrab**
The coffee, take it and drink

(16) lʔahwe, xudha w iʒrabha
The coffee, take it and drink it

Comparing (16) with (11) shows that the two verbs in (11) act as one unitary verbal construction (i.e., one constituent) that takes one object, while the two verbs in (16) act as two independent verbal constructions where each takes its own object.

We conclude from this argument that serial verb constructions are not reduced coordinate structures. Rather they are independent constructions that differ in their syntactic structure from the coordinate ones though they may on the surface look alike.

(ii) Negation

As indicated before, it is only the first verb of the string in a SVC that carries the negation marker(s), and that the scope of negation extends to the whole string. This can be seen in sentences (1)' and (3)' given above. Adding negation markers to other verbs in the string results in ungrammatical structures. Thus, sentences (17) and (18) are not acceptable.

***(17) (ma) ta:xudʒ (ma) tiʒrabʒ lʔahwe**
ma ta:-xud-0-ʒ ma ti-ʒrab-0-ʒ l-ʔahwe
not imp-take-2sg-not not imp-drink-2sg-not the coffee

***(18) ma ʔadʒ ma ʔalli:ʒ ʔinnu ʒtara sayya:ra**
ma ʔad-0-ʒ ʔal-0-1-i-ʒ ʔinnu ʒtara-0
not came back-3sg-not told-3sg-to-me-not that bought-3sg
sayya:ra
car

By contrast, negating the first verb in a coordinate structure does not apply to all verbs in the sentence. Also, negating either verb in a coordinate structure or both verbs does not result in ungrammatical sentence. It does, however, result in a change in meaning. Thus, each of (19), (20), and (21) has a different meaning.

- (19) (ma) ta:xudʒ lʔahwe wtiʒrabha
Don't take the coffee and drink it!
- (20) xud lʔahwe w (ma) tiʒrabha:ʒ
Take the coffee and/but do not drink it!
- (21) (ma) ta:xudiʒ lʔahwe w (ma) tiʒrabha:ʒ
Don't take the coffee and don't drink it!

This outcome then confirms the conclusion reached in the previous argument that SVCs act as one unit and thus have one negation marking, but coordinate structures can have either one or many negation markings depending on the intended meaning. The fact that multiple negation markings are allowed indicated that verbs in coordinate constructions are independent of one another unlike those in SVCs.

(iii) Meaning

One of the traditional arguments that linguists cite in order to distinguish between SVCs and single-verb or coordinate constructions is the meaning difference created when we transform one construction into the other. This difference in meaning can be seen in each of the eight examples given above when we transform them into a single-verb or a coordinate construction. If we drop /xud/ in example (1), the meaning no longer indicates a consecutive act; if we drop /ru:h/ in (2), we drop the sense of purpose that the sentence conveys; if we drop /ʔa:d/ in (3), the sentence no longer conveys a repetitive act; if we drop /ha:t/ in (4), the act of requesting is no longer emphasized; if we drop /ra:hu ʔaju/ in (5), the sense of inception/instantaneity indicated by these verbs is gone, and so on.

Similarly, there is usually a semantic difference between SVCs and coordinate or subordinate constructions. For example, inserting the conjunct //w// meaning "and" after /ʔa:d/ in sentence (3) changes the meaning from "He told me again that he bought a car" to "He came back and told me that he bought a car." This change obviously provides strong

evidence which shows that the SVCs exemplified in the first eight sentences differ from those of coordinates structures. It argues for the existence of SVCs in colloquial Arabic as independent constructions of their own.

These are some of the syntactic and semantic arguments that can be given in support of the existence of SVCs in Arabic. In the following section I will attempt to provide a classification for these constructions and discuss their distribution in this dialect.

Serial verb types in Arabic

Again there is no single "universal" criterion that can be used to classify serial verbs cross-linguistically. Criteria for classification seem to differ from one language to another depending on the characteristics shared by the various subgroups of serial verbs in that language, and the theoretical approach/orientation of the linguist conducting the analysis. In general, classification of serial verbs tend to be based on either syntactic or semantic criteria or both. Sebba (1987) classifies SVs in Sranan according to the whether they are fixed or free, transitive or intransitive, and the type of complement they take. Issac (1975) provides a classification in West African languages based on the semantic notions conveyed by these verbs. Crowley (1987) divides serial verbs in Paamese into nuclear versus core layer serial verbs. Other scholars classify them according to the relationship they hold with their arguments, that is, whether both verbs in the construction have the same subject, switch subjects, or have multiple objects.

Serial verbs in Arabic are all fixed in V_1 position with the exception of the verb /?ijri/ meaning "run". Also, all the verbs are intransitive except for the verbs /ha:t/, meaning "give" and /xud/ meaning "take". The classification in this section will be based on some syntactic and semantic criteria that these SVs in Arabic share.

I. Verbs that function as adverbs

This group includes one verb only, /?ijri/ meaning "run". It is used in imperative constructions to mean "quickly" with the verbs /ru:h/ meaning "go," /taʕa:l/ meaning "come," and the verb /?irjaʕ/ meaning "come back". Examples (22) and (23) illustrate the use of this verb.

(22) ta^ca:l ?ijri
imp come 2sg imp run 2sg
Come quickly!

(23) ru:h ?ijri
imp go 2sg imp run 2sg
Go quickly/running!

Comparing these with Standard Arabic, we find that Standard Arabic uses the verbal noun /jaryan/ meaning "running," which in this context functions as an adverb of manner. It is also important to note that /?ijri/ maintains its categorical status as a verb. It is not a homophonous adverb to a verb. It conjugates in the SVC as provided in (6) according to the number and gender the way all verbs of its class do. It also carries the negation marker whose scope extends to all the string like all serial verbs do. This group of serial verbs is not productive in Arabic; it is limited to the three verbs mentioned above.

2. Serial verbs that express aspect

The verbs /ra:h/ "to go", /?aja/ "to come", /?a:m/ "to stand up", /?a^cad/ "to sit down", /^ca:d/ "to return", and /radd/ "to stop, return" are used in SVCs to express various aspects. For example, the verbs /ra:h/, /?aja/, and /?a:m/ can be used to express either instantaneous, inceptive, or ingressive aspect, depending on the verb that follows in the SVC. Sentence (5) expresses the inceptive aspect, and sentence (7) expresses the ingressive aspect. The verbs /^ca:d/ and /radd/ are used to express repetitive/frequentative aspect; they indicate that the act has been frequently occurring in the past. Sentence (3) exemplifies this category. Relevant to this point is the fact that aspectual role tends to interact with negation. When a sentence like (3) is negated the role of /^ca:d/ shifts from a frequentative aspect to a terminative one.

This type of serial verbs is very productive. It can be used in the past tense as sentences (3), (5), and (7) indicate, and in the imperfect as sentence (8) indicates. V₁ in this construction is always fixed but the verb occupying the position of V₂ varies.

It is important to note that the number of verbs included in this type of construction is not limited to two as it is generally the case with other types. They can be two, three, four, or even more. Examples (24a, b, and c) illustrates this phenomenon.

- (24) a. ra:h na:m
ra:h-0 na:m-0
went-3sg slept-3sg
He went to bed.
- b. ?aja ra:h na:m
came 3sg went sg slept 3sg
He went to bed.
- c. ?a:m ?aja ra:h na:m
stood up 3sg came 3sg went 3sg slept 3sg
He went to bed.

The first verb of these strings is the one that conveys the inceptive/instantaneous aspect. The rest, I think, are semantically empty. In other words, limiting the construction to one of the verbs /ra:h/, /?aja/, or /?a:m/, or incorporating more than one does not seem to add or alter the meaning of the sentence. Neither does it change the aspect.

3. Verbs used to express emphasis

I am using the term emphatic in this context for the lack of a better one to describe this type of construction. SVCs of this type consist of two or more serial verbs juxtaposed in one string to convey a sense of urgency intended by the speaker. The examples in (25) illustrate this phenomenon.

- (25)a. ru:h ji:b ?axu:k
0-ru:h-0 0-ji:b-0 ?axu-uk
imp-go-2sg imp-bring-2sg brother-your
Go get your brother!
- b. ru:h ?imʂi ji:b ?axu:k
0-ru:h-o ?i-mʂi-0 0-ji:b-0 ?axu-uk
imp-go-2sg imp-walk-2sg imp-bring-2sg brother-your
Go get your brother!

- c. ru:h ?imʕi ?ingrif ji:b ?axu:k
0-ru:h-0 ?i-mʕi-0 ?i-ngrif-0 ...
imp-go-2sg imp-walk-2sg imp-take-off-2sg imp bring 2sg...
Go get your brother!

The only difference between (25 a, b and c) that a person can think of is that of intensity. That is, the more verbs there are in the construction the more emphatic and urgent the act is. Syntactically, however, all the serial verbs in the string tend to make one constituent that cannot be interrupted by any insertions. Thus, inserting the prepositional phrase /^cala lmadrasa/ meaning "to school" after /ra:h/ is (25a) maintains the grammaticality of the sentence, but inserting it after /ru:h/ in (25 b or c) results in unacceptable construction. However, inserting it after /?imʕi/ in (25b) and after /?ingrif/ in (25c) does not yield ungrammatical construction. This test indicates that /ru:h ?imʕi/ in (25b) and /ru:h ?imʕi ?ingrif/ in (25c) are "unbreakable" and should be taken as one syntactic unit.

The verbs used in this construction are limited to motion verbs, the dative verb /ha:t/ "to give", and /xallig/ "to finish". Thus, it is not a productive set.

4. Consecutive verbs

The most natural way to read some serial verbs such as those in (1) is as consecutive. Arabic has at least two serial verbs /xud/ "to take" and /?irja^c/ "to return/come back" that tend, along with other free verbs, to form this construction. Sentences (26) and (27) exemplify this phenomenon.

- (26) ?irja^c ?uskun ma^cna
?i-rja^c-0 ?u-skun-0 ma^c-na
imp-come-back-2sg imp-live-2sg with-us
Come back and live with us!

- (27) xud qubb liflu:s
0-xud-0 0-qubb-0 1-flu:s
imp-take-2sg imp-keep-2sg the-money
Take the money and keep it!

As argued earlier through the leftest location, negation, and meaning, these constructions are syntactically different from coordinate structures despite the fact that they may look similar and convey similar meaning. This type is very productive in Arabic. Numerous free verbs can concatenate with either /xud/ or /ʔirjaʕ/ to form this construction. It is limited, however, to the imperative mood.

5. Serial verbs used to express purpose

Some SVCs can be read as expressing purpose. Examples (28) and (29) illustrate this reading.

(28) ru:h ʕala lmustaʕfa ʕu:f ʔibnak
 0-ru:h-0 ʕala l-mustaʕfa 0-ʕu:f-0 ʔibn-ak
 imp-go-2sg to the-hospital imp-see-2sg son your
 Go to the hospital to see your son!

(29) taʕa:l zu:rni fi lbe:t
 0-taʕa:l-0 0-zu:r-0-ni fi l-be:t
 imp-come-2sg imp-visit-2sg-me at the home
 Come (to) visit me at home!

The fixed serial verbs used in these examples are /ra:h/ "to go", /taʕa:l/ "to come" and /ʔirjaʕ/ "to come back". According to Sebba, there is a cross linguistic tendency to interpret complements following these verbs as expressing purpose. Data from Arabic seem to support this tendency.

The question remains as to whether these constructions are actually SVCs or subordinate ones. Some arguments can be given in support of the view that they are indeed SVCs. First, an overt subordinate marker such as /ʕaʕa:n/, which functions basically as infinitival "to" in English, tends to initiate a purpose clause when the verb in the upper clause indicates motion. This subordinate marker can be deleted without causing any changes in the meaning of the sentence. Examples in (30) illustrate this phenomenon.

(30)a. ruh-t ʕaʕa:n ʔaʕu:f Najim
 went-1sg (in order) to 1sg-see Najim
 I went to see Najim.

- b. ruht ?aʕu:f Najim
ruḥ-t ?a-ʕu:f Najim
went-1sg 1sg-see Najim
I went to see Najim

By contrast, this overt marker does not appear in SVCs. If an attempt is made to insert it in SVCs, the following verb changes to the subjunctive mood, regardless of what mood it had in the first place. This leads to the second argument, that verbs intended to express purpose are always in the subjunctive mood. They cannot have the same mood nor the same tense as that of the first verb in the upper clause. Third, it is possible in a subordinate clause such as (30 a and b) to negate either verb in the sentence. However, negating the verb in the upper clause operates over the verbs in the subordinate clause as well, but negating the verb in the subordinate clause does not cover all the verbs in the sentence. Thus, the meaning of the sentence changes according to which verb has been negated.

By contrast, negation markers in SVCs should be placed on the first verb in the string. The scope of negation extends to all the verbs in the string. Attempts to negate other verbs in the string result in ungrammatical sentences. Fourth, there is always a difference in meaning between the SVCs and subordinate structures though they may look similar on the surface.

To summarize, there are five types of SVCs in Arabic. (1) constructions in which serial verbs have been re-analyzed to function as adverbs; (2) verbs that express various aspects; (3) verbs that are used to express emphasis; (4) verbs viewed as conveying consecutive actions; and (5) verbs viewed as expressing purpose. SVs in all these types occupy V₁ position in the string with the exception of the first type where the order is free.

Conclusions

It has been shown that SVCs are common in colloquial Arabic. These constructions share many of the characteristics of SVCs in verb serializing languages, and have some of the characteristics that distinguish them from paratactic, hypotactic, and single-verb constructions in Arabic. They can be classified into the five categories indicated above.

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