Serial verb constructions in Mwotlap

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Mwotlap is an Austronesian language of the Oceanic branch, spoken by about 1800 speakers on Motalava, a small island of the Banks group, north of Vanuatu (François 2001, 2003). Contrary to many languages from the same area—e.g. Paama (Crowley 1987), Ambae (Hyslop 2001), Araki (François 2002)—, Mwotlap has almost no traces of serialisation between verb phrases (of the type *I'll PUSH you you'll FALL*).[1] The only productive case of verb serialisation is of a different pattern, with two or more verbs chained together within a single verb phrase (of the type *I'll PUSH FALL you*). A typical example of this serialising construction can be heard in a famous love song:[2]

(1)   [**lak   tēy   yoyoň   ēwē**]   no
        AOR:dance   hold   be.quiet   be.fine   me
        'Just dance with me calmly'

Simple though it may be, a sentence like (1) raises a number of issues. What are the relations, both syntactic and semantic, between the four verbs? How do they combine their lexical semantics, their Tense-Aspect-Mood values, their argument structures? How do such constructions compare with other serialising patterns cross-linguistically?

After situating Mwotlap SVCs in their syntactic context (§1), we will describe their structural properties (§2), paying special attention to the sharing of arguments (§3). We will then propose a functional classification of these serial verbs (§4), and end our reflection with a note on multi-verb serialisation (§5).

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[1] To be precise, Mwotlap does possess a type of pauseless parataxis that is reminiscent of the so-called 'Core-layer serialisation', such as *Give me some water I drink it* (François 2003: 188). However, it appears that this construction is limited to a specific TAM context (the second verb must be inflected as Aorist) and to a single semantic value (the expression of purpose). Consequently, this structure is probably better described as a case of paratactic subordination involving two distinct clauses, rather than a standard case of verb serialisation.

[2] The spelling conventions adopted for Mwotlap include the following: e = [ɛ]; $\bar{e}$ = [ɪ]; o = [ɔ]; $\bar{o}$ = [ʊ]; g = [ɣ]; b = [ᵐb]; d = [ⁿd]; q = [kpʷ]; $\bar{m}$ = [ŋmʷ]; $\bar{n}$ = [ŋ].

1   Clause structure and verb serialisation

1.1   A preliminary note on word classes

The inventory of word classes in Mwotlap makes it possible to distinguish between verbs and adjectives. For example, verbs cannot modify a noun directly, whereas adjectives can: compare *nētm̄ey gom*[adj] ('a sick child') and **nētm̄ey teñ*[vb] (**'a cry child'). And yet, adjectives and verbs behave exactly the same way outside noun phrases. For example, both categories require TAM markers in order to form a valid predicate phrase, without any copula:

(2a)   inti-k   me-*teñ*
         child-1sg   PRF-cry
         'My son is crying'

(2b)   inti-k   mo-*gom*
         child-1sg   PRF-sick
         'My son is sick'

Since the study of serial structures is not concerned with noun phrases, it will be legitimate, for our present purposes, to consider adjectives as forming a subclass of (intransitive, stative) verbs.

1.2   The structure of the clause

The standard order of constituents in Mwotlap is SV for intransitive and AVO for transitive clauses, which is typical of a nominative-accusative system. In the absence of any sort of case-marking, the syntactic function of the core arguments is indicated by their syntactic position. Verbs are either strictly intransitive or strictly transitive, a few being ambivalent (mainly of the S=A type). Mwotlap does not allow for double-object constructions.

Although TAM markers often consist of just a prefix, some of them are discontinuous, combining a prefix and a postclitic, like the Potential *te-… vēh* or the negator *et-… te*. This morphological property makes them a convenient tool to test the boundaries of the verb phrase, as they clearly show which constituents belong inside *vs* outside the VP. For instance, in (3) below, the position of *vēh* allows us to distinguish between two distributional word classes, which in English would correspond to the single category of 'adverbs' (*again* and *tomorrow*):

(3)   kōmyō   [TE-gen   *lok*   *se*   VĒH]   na-madap   *talōw*   le-mtap
         2du   POT₁-eat   back   again   POT₂   ART-pineapple   tomorrow   in-morning
         'You'll be able to eat pineapple once again tomorrow morning'

Reserving the term 'adverb' for those peripheral complements which always appear outside the VP (e.g. *talōw* 'tomorrow'), we propose the term 'adjunct' (Crowley 1982: 162) to designate those modifiers which belong inside the VP, and appear immediately after its head (e.g. *lok* 'back' and *se* 'again'); we'll come back to this notion below.

We now have enough information to state the canonical structure of the sentence in Mwotlap:

{ *subject* [*TAM₁*- **HEAD adjuncts** *TAM₂*]$_{\text{VP}}$ *object adverb/oblique* }

Note that the object phrase is always external to the VP, unless we are dealing with an incorporated object (see §2.1).

1.3 The nature of adjuncts, and the limits of SVCs

Rather than a lexical category, the term 'adjunct' designates a syntactic position in the clause—that is, any word that appears within a predicate phrase, immediately following its head. Crucially, this position of VP-internal modifier can be lexified by more than one word class. First, Mwotlap possesses a category of 'pure adjuncts', which cannot appear anywhere else in the sentence other than that position. These were illustrated in (3), with *lok* and *se*.

But in some cases, the adjunct slot can also be filled by a noun:

(4) Tigsas kē et-wot *vu* te, kē mo-wot *et*
  Jesus 3sg NEG₁-be.born spirit NEG₂ 3sg PRF-be.born person
  'Jesus was not born a spirit, he was born a man'

It is also common to find an adjective in the same position:

(5) Imam ma-hag *qaqa* ēwē l-ēm̄
  Dad PRF-sit stupid just in-house
  'Dad is just staying idle/idly at home'

And in many cases, the adjunct position is filled by a verb:

(6) nitog hohole *galgal*!
  PROH talk:REDUP lie:REDUP
  'Stop lying!'

Following the discussion in §1.1, the description of serial verb constructions will be concerned by sentences like (5) as well as (6).

It is also worth mentioning cases in which the adjunct slot is filled by a word that was formerly a verb, but has now become a pure adjunct:

(7) nok [tig *day*] bulsal mino
  1sg AOR:stand (*expect*) friend my
  'I'm (standing) waiting for my friend'

In a former stage of the language, when *day* could still behave as a verb in its own right, a sentence like (7) would have had to be described as a serial verb construction ('stand wait'), just like (6). But although it has retained certain features typical of verbs—such as a transitive argument structure—, the lexeme *day* is now restricted to this modifying position, as though it

had become a sort of applicative clitic. As it no longer satisfies the definition of a verb—that is, compatibility with the position of head in a verb phrase—, it is methodologically necessary to exclude such cases from our synchronic study of serial verbs. We will however come back to this issue in the conclusion.

2   Structural properties of Mwotlap SVCs

A serial verb construction can consist of two or more elements; the longest string attested is four verbs. We will start by examining the rules for 'simple' serial verbs (V_1+V_2), and will return to multi-verb serialisation in §5.

The formal properties of Mwotlap SVCs can be stated according to the typological criteria and terminology set out in the first chapter of this book. These are given in *Table 1*, and will be addressed separately in the following discussion.

Table 1 – *Main structural properties of Mwotlap SVCs*

contiguity V_1/V_2?	strict contiguity
wordhood V_1/V_2?	one prosodic word, two phonological words
symmetry V_1/V_2?	asymmetrical serial verbs (major + minor)
Tense-Aspect-Mood, negation	identical + single-marking
pluractionality (reduplication)	non-identical + independent marking
argument sharing constraints	fusion rules (2 structures merging into 1)

2.1   Contiguity

The two verbs forming an SVC must be strictly contiguous, that is, no element can intervene between them, whether this is an object or an oblique phrase. Even 'pure adjuncts', which are allowed in the VP, are not normally inserted between two serialised verbs. The only apparent exception to this rule is when the object of V_1 is incorporated. In this case, the object O_1 is suffixed to V_1, and therefore surfaces between the two verbs, as in:

(8)   nok   [**suwyeg-*qen***   **tēy**]   nu-sus
        1sg   AOR:cast-net   hold   ART-shoes
        'I go net-fishing with my shoes on'

This construction—which is very rare anyway—is easily explained if one realises that the first element in the SVC is not the transitive verb *suwyeg* 'cast', but an intransitive, compound verb of the form *suwyeg-qen* /cast-net/ 'to net-fish', with an incorporated object. A sentence like (8) is therefore no exception to the rule of strict contiguity between V_1 and V_2.

2.2   One or two words?

The two parts of an SVC are so close to each other that it is sometimes tempting to analyse the string V_1+V_2 as an instance of verb compounding. This brings up the issue of wordhood in SVCs: are we dealing with one or two words?

At first sight, several arguments may advocate a one-word analysis. Indeed, V_1 and V_2 are not only strictly contiguous, but they also form a single prosodic unit: e.g. *yow veteg* /jump leave/ will have only its final syllable stressed [ˌjɔwβɛˈtɛɣ] and no intonation break, like a single word. Semantically, the whole string V_1+V_2 often ends up being endowed with certain semantic features that can be assigned to neither of its components, as though it now formed a single unit: thus, *yow veteg* /jump leave$_{TR}$/ means 'escape from (s.o., s.th.)', without implying any real 'jumping' event; *dēm veteg* /think leave$_{TR}$/ is the usual way to translate 'give up (s.th.), forgive (s.o.)'. Yet, this is not sufficient evidence to conclude that we are dealing with a single word, as it is common for lexical units to consist of several words.

Another piece of evidence will ultimately prove SVCs to form distinct phonological words. Indeed, the phonotactic rules of Mwotlap make it possible to strictly identify the boundaries of the word. The only syllable pattern allowed in this language (François 2000) has the form CVC (with optional consonants), so that the phonotactic template of any word is #CVC|CVC…|CVC#. Consequently, clusters of two consonants are only allowed across syllable boundaries within a word, and never word-initially. There are two possible outcomes when a lexical root of the form C_1C_2V- has to be integrated in a sentence:

- if the root is in the position to begin a new syllable (typically after a word boundary), then the sequence #C_1C_2V- undergoes a vowel epenthesis, whereby a clone of V is inserted between the two consonants: e.g. /VTEG/ 'leave' → *nēk so veteg* 'you should leave it';

- conversely, if the same root is preceded by a vowel-final prefix, then the prefix + lexeme string forms a single word. The syllable boundary occurs between C_1 and C_2, with no need for epenthesis: e.g. /VTEG/ → *nēk te-pteg* 'you will leave it'.

In this pair of examples, the behaviour of the root /VTEG/ with regard to vowel epenthesis makes it clear when we are dealing with a single phonological word (form *te-pteg*: hence *te-* 'Future' is a prefix) or with two distinct words (form *so veteg*: hence *so* 'Prospective' is not a prefix). We can now apply the same phonological test to our serial verbs—provided the first verb ends in a vowel, and the second verb has an underlying CCV- root. If we consider the combination of V_1 /HŌ/ 'paddle, travel in canoe' with V_2 /VTEG/, the surface form we observe ('paddle away') is *hō veteg*, not *hō-pteg: V_1 and V_2 are thus separated by a word boundary, and cannot be said to form a single, compound word. As a conclusion, serial verbs in Mwotlap always remain distinct phonological words, whatever their degree of semantic or prosodic cohesion.

Finally, from the morphological point of view, examples (11a-b) below will show that root reduplication affects independently each element in a serial construction. This is also a strong argument in favour of the conclusion that Mwotlap SVCs fundamentally consist of separate

words.

2.3   Sharing verbal categories

If the serial verbs of Mwotlap were to be compared with other languages, they would probably stand at one end of the typological spectrum, that labeled 'prototypical serial verbs' in *Chapter 1*, and characterised by the highest degree of cohesion between its elements. Indeed, SVCs essentially behave the same as a single lexeme, with regard to almost all the semantic categories that may affect a verb phrase. Thus, all Tense-Aspect-Mood markers are obligatorily shared by V_1 and V_2, and they are marked only once:

(9)   kēy   [to-**yoñteg   vēglal**   vēh]   na-lñe
        3pl   POT$_1$-hear   know   POT$_2$ ART-voice:2sg
        'They might recognise your voice'

In (9), the Potential marker *te-… vēh* appears once, and is shared by the two verbs; to use the terms of *Chapter 1*, Mwotlap SVCs are characterised by 'single marking' of TAM.

The same observation is true for negative markers, which in this language belong to the TAM paradigm rather than combine with it. Elements of an SVC cannot be negated separately, even if, semantically speaking, only one verb (here V_2 *maymay*) falls under the scope of the negation:

(10)   kōyō   may   leg,   ba   [et-**leg**   **maymay**   qete]
         3du   COMPL   married   but   NEG$_1$-married   strong   NEG$_2$:COMPL
         'They're already married, but not fully married yet'

There seems to be only one semantic category that is assigned independently to each member of an SVC: this is pluractionality, which is morphologically coded by root reduplication (François 2004*b*). In the next example, one may contrast different combinations, according to whether V_1 refers to one 'stoning' event (*yim*) or to several (*yimyim*); and whether V_2 refers to one death (*mat*) or to several (*matmat*):

(11a)   no   [mi-**yim**   **matmat**]   ne-men
          1sg   PRF-stone   die:REDUP   ART-bird(s)
          'I stoned the birds (once) and killed them'

(11b)   kem   [mi-**yimyim**   **mat**]   ne-men
          1exc:pl   PRF-stone:REDUP   die   ART-bird(s)
          'We stoned the bird(s) and killed it/them outright'

Finally, another important issue deals with the sharing of argument structures in serial verbs: this will be the topic of §3.

2.4   Syntactic asymmetries of V_1/V_2

The properties of Mwotlap SVCs reviewed thus far tend to suggest we are dealing with two verbs V_1 and V_2 placed on the same syntactic level, so that it might be tempting to talk about a non-hierarchised, multi-headed structure. In fact, several arguments show that V_1 and V_2 have a distinct status, and that their combination remains asymmetrical.

First of all, V_1 and V_2 do not have the same inventory. If all verbs are attested in the V_1 slot, it is not true they can all function as V_2: such common verbs as *van* 'go', *vap* 'say', *yoñteg* 'feel' or *dēm* 'think' are attested only as V_1, and never as V_2. In other words, the inventory of verbs that can be serialised, however numerous, appears to constitute a (semi) closed list; the choice of V_2 is clearly not as free as it seems at first.

Among other elements that betray an asymmetry between V_1 and V_2, a handful of verbs show morphological differences according to their position. The verb 'know' has the form *ēglal* when used alone or as a first verb in a series, but becomes *vēglal* in the position of V_2, as in (9). The verb *sok* is reduplicated as *soksok* when used alone or as V_1, but as *sosok* when V_2; similarly, *tēy* 'hold' reduplicates as *tēytēy* if V_1, but *tētēy* if V_2, and so on. These 'SVC specific forms' are seen only in this adjunct position.

The difference between V_1 and V_2 is even more striking if we begin to consider semantics. Quite often, a verb lexeme will keep its proper meaning when it is used as V_1, but will receive a more abstract or figurative interpretation when used as a verb modifier. To take just a couple of examples, *tēy* normally means 'hold in o.'s hands' when in head position, but has a broader comitative meaning ('be or act *with* s.o./s.th.') when it acts as a verb modifier, as in (1) and (8). Similarly, *v(e)teg* as V_1 means 'lay (s.th.) down, take leave of (s.o.)'; but as V_2, its more abstract meaning 'away from (s.th./s.o.)' allows for figurative uses such as 'leave, forget, forgive, surpass…' (see §2.2).

All these arguments tend to confirm that the SVCs of Mwotlap, despite apparently forming a balanced string of two verbs V_1+V_2, illustrate in fact what the typological chapter of this book called 'asymmetrical serial verbs', whereby a 'minor verb' from a closed class (adjunct V_2) is being serialised to a 'major verb' from an open class (head V_1).

3   Sharing arguments in Mwotlap SVCs

3.1   Basic principles

In §2.2, we saw that the SVCs of Mwotlap are characterised by a strong internal cohesion, so that they necessarily share the same value in Tense-Aspect-Mood or in polarity. The issue of argument-sharing is much more complex, and deserves to be examined in detail. It will appear that Mwotlap challenges certain typological statements in this regard.

The principles of our analysis are as follows. While each member of an SVC is lexically endowed with its own underlying argument structure, when serialised they behave exactly like

a single verb: in particular, the SVC can have no more than one subject and one object. This raises the question of how the argument structures of the two verbs can conflate so as to form the argument structure of the whole 'macro-verb'. A systematic study (François, 2004*a*) has shown Mwotlap to follow strict rules in this regard: thus, (13) below will show how the combination of V_1 '*x* punch *y*' and V_2 '*y* cry' regularly results in a transitive macro-verb V_1+V_2 '*x* punch-cry *y*', with the subject of V_2 becoming the object of the serial verb V_1+V_2.

The results of this study can be stated, following a *subject-V-object* convention, with simple formulas of the type: { x-V_1-y + y-V_2 = x-[VP]-y }. These argument-fusion rules can in turn be grouped in a simple chart (*Table 2*). The two rows state whether V_1 is intransitive (*x-V_1*) or transitive (*x-V_1-y*); the eight columns not only show the transitivity value of V_2, but also the identity of arguments involved (*x*, *y*, *z*).[3]

Table 2 – *The eleven argument-fusion rules for Mwotlap SVCs*

	E-V_2	*x-V_2*	*y-V_2*	*x-V_2-y*	*z-V_2*	*x-V_2-z*	*z-V_2-y*	*y-V_2-z*
x-V_1	x-[VP]	x-[VP]	x-[VP]-y	x-[VP]-y				*
x-V_1-y	x-[VP]-y	x-[VP]-y	x-[VP]-y	x-[VP]-y	x-[VP]-z	x-[VP]-z	x-[VP]-z	*

Due to lack of space, we will not illustrate each of these combinations in detail,[4] and will only present the major observations with regard to argument sharing rules.

3.2   Subject sharing principles

As one would expect, it is common for two serialised verbs to share their subject:

(12)   Tita   [ta-**hag   dēyē**]   nēk   l-ēm̄
          Mum   FUT-sit   expect   2sg   in-house
          'Mum will stay at home waiting for you'

$$\rightarrow \ \{ \ x\text{-}V_1 + x\text{-}V_2\text{-}y \ = \ x\text{-}[VP]\text{-}y \ \}$$

However, subject sharing is not obligatory in Mwotlap. A clear example of this is the case of 'switch-function serial verbs', in which V_2's subject coincides with V_1's object:

(13)   Tali   [mi-**tit   tēntēn**]   Kevin
          T.   PRF-punch   cry:REDUP   K.
          'Tali made Kevin cry by punching him'

$$\rightarrow \ \{ \ x\text{-}V_1\text{-}y + y\text{-}V_2 \ = \ x\text{-}[VP]\text{-}y \ \}$$

But Mwotlap shows certain configurations that are typologically even more original than

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[3] In these formulas, *x* designates the subject of V_1; *y* is any second argument distinct from *x* (either V_1's object, V_2's subject or V_2's object); finally, *z* is any third argument distinct from *x* and *y* (either V_2's subject or object). The mention of *z* in a formula is only relevant if it contrasts with both *x* and *y*, and therefore, if it follows a transitive V_1; hence the gray boxes in the chart. The star means 'unattested'. As for the first column of the table, see §4.3.

[4] For those minor patterns which are not exemplified here, see François (2004*a*).

(13). One of these is a variant of what is known as 'cumulative subject' (see ex. (30) in the introductory chapter): if one subject semantically includes the other (in the same way as *we* includes *I*), then the subject of the whole SVC will correspond to the more inclusive of these two subjects. This case is best exemplified by sentences meaning 'accompany (s.o.)', where '(*x+y*)-go + *x*-take-*y*' becomes '(*x+y*)-[accompany]-*y*':

(14)   dō   [so   **tatal   tēy**]   no   le-tno   plēn?
         1inc:du   PROSP   walk   hold   1sg   LOC-place   plane
         'Will   you   accompany   me   to   the   airport?'
         (lit. Shall *the two of us* walk-and-take me to the airport?)

$$\rightarrow \{\ (x+y)\text{-}V_1\ +\ x\text{-}V_2\text{-}y\ =\ (x+y)\text{-}[VP]\text{-}y\ \}$$

Interestingly, this original construction has made its way into the Bislama pidgin spoken on Motalava: the equivalent of (14) would be *YUMITU karem MI i go long eapot?* The people of the neighbouring islands, whose Bislama would be slightly different here (*YU karem MI i go…*), are sometimes amused by this strange dual subject, directly calqued from Mwotlap.

The second configuration we would like to mention here is perhaps even more significant, because it contradicts the claim often made (e.g. Durie 1997: 291) that the elements of an SVC must share at least one argument. In Mwotlap, it is not unusual to serialise two verbs having no participant in common at all. This happens typically when V_1 refers to a single-participant action, and V_2 refers to its effect upon another participant. The output of this combination is a transitive macro-verb—as is made clear by (15) and the corresponding formula:

(15)   ige   susu   [ma-**gayka**   **matyak**]   no
         pl   small:REDUP   PRF-shout   be.awake   1sg
         'I was woken up by the kids shouting'

$$\rightarrow \{\ x\text{-}V_1 + y\text{-}V_2\ =\ x\text{-}[VP]\text{-}y\ \}$$

Note that in this type of sentence, both verbs are intransitive, as they individually refer to single-participant events: $\{x\text{-}V_1\}$ the kids were shouting in the backyard, $\{y\text{-}V_2\}$ I awoke. Yet the serialisation of these two intransitive verbs eventually forms a transitive macro-verb $\{x\text{-}[VP]\text{-}y\}$, as though the action now described were that of an agent ('the kids') upon a patient ('me').

Among other attested combinations, we can mention the following. Note that these examples, whatever the ambiguities of translation, all combine intransitive verbs.

(16)   ne-leñ   [mi-**yip**   **hal-yak**]   na-kat
         ART-wind   PRF-blow   fly-away   ART-cards
         'The wind blew the cards away'

(17)   nēk   [so   **en**   **mōkheg**]   nē-kle!
         2sg   PROSP   lie.down   take.rest   ART-back:2sg
         'You should lie down (so that) your back can rest!'

(18) nēk [mi-**tig** **mēlēmlēg**] na-lo den kemem
2sg PRF-stand black ART-sun from 1exc:pl
'Standing as you are, you're hiding the sun from us'
(lit. You're *standing dark* the sun from us)

Incidentally, all these examples (15) to (18) form a subcase of what will later be defined as 'causative serialisation' (§4.2; see *Table 4*). Its difference with mainstream causatives is the intransitive nature of V_1, semantically referring to a single-participant event.

3.3 Object sharing principles

Similar remarks can be made on the issue of object sharing. Of course, serialised verbs can share their object, as we saw in (9); but it can also happen that each verb possesses its own underlying object. Because Mwotlap does not allow for ditransitive constructions, only one of these two objects can be retained for the whole SVC, and this may result in syntactic conflicts.

The principle is that the last argument introduced by V_2 (*z*) overrules the object of V_1 (*y*); the latter disappears from the argument structure of the SVC, and can only be retrieved from the context. In (19), the object of V_1 *tow* (*n-eh* 'song') is only mentioned in the topic clause:

(19) nēk so tow n-eh en,
2sg PROSP compose ART-song ANA

… nēk [**tow** **tatag**] na-myōs nōnōm
2sg AOR:compose follow ART-desire your
'(if) you compose a song, you just compose following your fancy'

There is no place for the argument 'song' in the resulting serial structure; the only object retained is the patient of V_2 ('follow your fancy'):

you COMPOSE *song* + you FOLLOW *fancy* = you COMPOSE—FOLLOW *fancy*
that is: { x-V_1-*y* + x-V_2-*z* = x-[VP]-*z* }

An even rarer example of this sort of alchemy is provided by the next sentence:

(20) ige m̄ey a kēy so lep n-eh en,
(pl) REL SUBORD 3pl PROSP take ART-song ANA

… nok [**se** **lep**] kēy
1sg AOR:sing take 3pl
'Those who want to learn the song, I get them to *learn* it by *singing* it'

The pattern here is as follows:

I SING *song* + they LEARN *song* = I SING—LEARN them
that is: { x-V_1-*y* + z-V_2-*y* = x-[VP]-*z* }

What is perhaps most striking in all these cases of argument restructuring is their perfect regularity (see *Table 2*). And in fact, the tighter the syntactic constraints are, the more

efficiently they allow the speaker to forge new combinations, and the hearer to interpret them.

4 A functional classification of Mwotlap SVCs

The previous sections were essentially dedicated to the formal and structural properties of Mwotlap serial verbs; we will now undertake a brief semantic typology of these constructions. Interestingly, this functional classification will turn out to be strongly linked to the formal one, as the three major functional categories of serial verbs we recognise depend on whether the subject of V_2 is the same as V_1 ('concurrent' serialisation), whether it is another participant ('causative' serialisation), or a whole proposition ('event-argument' serialisation).

4.1 Concurrent serialisation

Despite the empirical diversity of serial constructions in Mwotlap, it is possible to identify a first major functional type: this is when V_1 and V_2 refer to two simultaneous facets of a single event, performed by the same subject. This semantic value, which we identify as 'concurrent serialisation', encompasses a variety of argument structures, with the only proviso that the subject must be the same for V_1 and for V_2 (x). The relevant patterns are listed in *Table 3*.

Table 3 – *The five formal subtypes of 'concurrent' serialisation*

	E-V_2	x-V_2	y-V_2	x-V_2-y	z-V_2	x-V_2-z	z-V_2-y	y-V_2-z
x-V_1	–	x-[VP]	–	x-[VP]-y				*
x-V_1-y	–	x-[VP]-y	–	x-[VP]-y	–	x-[VP]-z	–	*

An illustration of this functional type would be the following:

(21) kōyō [ma-**tatal** **kaka**] le-mtehal
      3du PRF-walk chat LOC-road
      'They were discussing while walking along the road'

See also (6) *hohole galgal* /talk lie/; (9) *yoñteg vēglal* /hear know/; (12) *hag dēyē* /sit expect/; (19) *tow tatag* /compose follow/. Whatever their formal and semantic diversity, all these sentences share one essential property: they show the same participant performing two actions (V_1 and V_2) at once. Quite originally, the same-subject serial verbs of Mwotlap always refer to concurrent, complementary facets of a single event, never to successive actions.[5]

Of course, nothing prevents the 'concurrent' type from being divided into some secondary functional subtypes, depending on the lexical nature of V_1 and/or of V_2. For example, the

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[5] The only apparent exception to this statement would be the frequent combination of the verb *van* 'go' with a second verb (e.g. *van wēl nu-suk* 'go buy some sugar'), which indeed has a sequential interpretation. In fact, this sequence of two verbs is not a standard case of SVC: first, because the verb following *van* belongs to the inventory of heads (V_1) rather than of adjuncts (V_2); second, this structure allows the sequence V–V' to be separated by a directional, which is strictly forbidden to genuine serial structures.

combination of any motion verb (V$_1$) with the adjunct *tēy* 'hold' (V$_2$) translates the notion of 'carry, bring':

(22)   Bōybōy   [mē-**hēw**   **tēy**]   me   na-mtig
        B.   PRF-descend   hold   hither   ART-coconut
        'Boyboy has brought the coconuts down'

More generally, V$_1$+*tēy* receives a comitative reading, as in (1) *lak tēy* /dance hold/ 'dance with (s.o.)', or in (8) *suwyeg-qen tēy* /cast-net hold/ 'go net-fishing with (my shoes on)'. Another kind of comitative—still a case of 'concurrent' serialisation—can be formed with V$_2$ *b(i)yiñ* 'help, join':

(23)   dō   [so   **lak**   **biyiñ**]   kēy?
        1inc:du   PROSP   dance   join   3pl
        'Shall we dance with them?'

   This broad category of 'concurrent serial verbs'—V$_1$ and V$_2$ being two facets of a single predication, with the same subject—also covers more abstract configurations, such as the comparative. This consists of the combination of a stative V$_1$ plus a verb we have already discussed (§2.2 and 2.4), *v(e)teg* 'put down, leave$_{TR}$, get away from, surpass':

(24)   kē   [nē-**mnay**   **veteg**]   nēk
        3sg   STAT-clever   leave   2sg
        'He's cleverer *than* you' (lit. he's clever he leaves you behind)

   It may seem surprising to group in a single functional category such diverse semantic values as simultaneous action (21), comitative (1, 23), and comparative (24). However, it must be clear that our present objective is not to classify Mwotlap serial verbs according to their translation equivalents in English. Rather, it is to illustrate how a single linguistic device—namely, the mere sequence of two verbs *x-V$_1$*… + *x-V$_2$*…—can be powerful enough to consistently encode a wide range of semantic relations, which in other languages would have been formally broken down into many distinct structures (adverbs, prepositions, gerunds or converbs, subordinate clauses, etc.).

4.2   Causative serialisation

A radically distinct configuration is when V$_2$ refers to the effect of V$_1$ upon a second participant. This serialising pattern is the only way to form causatives in Mwotlap. Here we are not dealing with simultaneous actions any more, but with a cause-effect relationship, which necessarily implies that V$_1$ comes before V$_2$ in time. Once again, this large functional category may encompass several formal structures (*Table 4*)—the only criterion being that V$_2$'s subject (*y* or *z*) be a participant distinct from V$_1$'s subject (*x*).

Table 4 – *The five formal subtypes of 'causative' serialisation*

	$E\text{-}V_2$	$x\text{-}V_2$	$y\text{-}V_2$	$x\text{-}V_2\text{-}y$	$z\text{-}V_2$	$x\text{-}V_2\text{-}z$	$z\text{-}V_2\text{-}y$	$y\text{-}V_2\text{-}z$
$x\text{-}V_1$	–	(x-[VP]-x)	x-[VP]-y	–				*
$x\text{-}V_1\text{-}y$	–	–	x-[VP]-y	–	x-[VP]-z	–	x-[VP]-z	*

The most widespread illustration of causative serialisation is the so-called 'switch-function' SVC, that is, { $x\text{-}V_1\text{-}y + y\text{-}V_2 = x\text{-}[VP]\text{-}y$ }. It can make use of two dynamic verbs, as we saw in (13) *tit teñteñ* /punch cry/; but most of the time, the second verb V_2 is a stative verb or an adjective, as in (11) *yim mat* /stone dead/.

The causative function is not restricted to this standard switch-function pattern. In §3.2, we saw how a cause-effect relationship could be expressed by a sequence of two intransitive verbs, the subject of V_2 being absent from the underlying structure of V_1; examples such as (16) *yip halyak* /blow fly.away/ may be described as 'low agency causative serialisation'. Finally, a sentence like (20) *se lep* /sing learn/, despite its structural originality, clearly belongs to the same category of causative serialisation.

4.3   Event-argument serialisation

The last major functional type that can be identified recalls the role played by English manner adverbs: a stative, intransitive verb V_2 constitutes a comment on the first verb V_1. The underlying subject of V_2 is not an individual participant, but the whole event (abbreviated *E-*) corresponding to V_1—more precisely, V_1 and its arguments. This definition corresponds to two formal subtypes (*Table 5*).

Table 5 – *The two formal subtypes of 'event-argument' serialisation*

	$E\text{-}V_2$	$x\text{-}V_2$	$y\text{-}V_2$	$x\text{-}V_2\text{-}y$	$z\text{-}V_2$	$x\text{-}V_2\text{-}z$	$z\text{-}V_2\text{-}y$	$y\text{-}V_2\text{-}z$
$x\text{-}V_1$	x-[VP]	–	–	–				*
$x\text{-}V_1\text{-}y$	x-[VP]-y	–	–	–	–	–	–	*

The first case was illustrated by (1) *lak yoyoñ* /dance quiet/ 'dance calmly'; (5) *hag qaqa* /sit stupid/ 'stay idly' or (10) *leg maymay* /married strong/ 'be fully married'. The second case involves a transitive V_1:

(25)   na-bago   [mi-**ñit**   **maymay**]   na-m̄alm̄al   en
       ART-shark   PRF-bite   strong   ART-girl   ANA
       'The shark bit viciously (*lit*. bit strong) the girl'

$$\rightarrow \{\ x\text{-}V_1\text{-}y + E\text{-}V_2 \ = \ x\text{-}[VP]\text{-}y\ \}$$

In this sentence, the subject of *maymay* ('be strong') is not the shark, let alone its victim; what is meant to be 'strong' is event V_1 itself, i.e. 'the shark's biting the girl'. Formally speaking,

one will notice that this sort of serialisation always leaves the argument structure of the head intact.

This construction explains why the lexicon of Mwotlap almost lacks manner adverbs (like Eng. *strongly*, *gently*…): this role is played by adjectives in the adjunct position, in the structure we call 'event-argument serialisation'.

5 Multi-verb serialisation

All the rules we have seen, whether formal or functional, have been illustrated by serial verbs with only two members. The last issue we would like to address concerns the multi-verb serialisation. How can the speaker calculate, say, the argument structure of an SVC with four elements? This problem is easily solved if one remembers that any macro-verb resulting from serialisation behaves exactly like a simple verb; it then becomes possible to describe any string of verbs starting from the head (V_1), moving rightwards, and recursively applying the rules defined for any pair of verbs:

$$\{[(V_1–V_2)–V_3]–V_4\}$$

We will illustrate this principle with two examples.

(26)　　kēy　[**lam̄**　　　**mat　veteg**]　hōw　　nō-lōmgep　　en
　　　　　3pl　AOR:beat　die　leave　down　ART-boy　　ANA
　　　　　'They got rid of the boy by beating him to death'

The first combination is a CAUSATIVE SVC, *lam̄ mat* /beat dead/ 'beat to death, kill':

{ *they*-beat-*boy* + *boy*-dead = *they*-(kill)-*boy* }

this macro-verb is then incorporated into a CONCURRENT SVC, *lam̄-mat veteg* /(kill) leave_TR/ 'get rid of (s.o.) by killing him', which forms a transitive 'super-macroverb':

{ *they*-(kill)-*boy* + *they*-leave-*boy* = *they*-(get.rid.of)-*boy* }

Finally, we can now fully analyse the complex example in the first pages of this chapter:

(1)　　[**lak**　　　**tēy**　　**yoyoñ**　　**ēwē**]　　no
　　　　AOR:dance　hold　be.quiet　be.fine　me
　　　　'Just dance with me calmly'

This string of four verbs must be analysed step by step. The intransitive verb V_1 'dance' and the transitive V_2 'hold' together form a case of CONCURRENT SVC; the result is a transitive verb with a comitative reading:

{ *you*-dance + *you*-hold-*me* = *you*-(dance.with)-*me* }

In a second stage, this macro-verb is embedded in two successive EVENT-ARGUMENT SVCs, which leave its argument structure intact:

{ *you*-(dance.with)-*me* + *it*-is.quiet = *you*-(dance.calmly.with)-*me* }

{ *you*-(dance.calmly.with)-*me* + *it*-is.fine = *you*-(just.dance.calmly.with)-*me* }

The pronoun *no* in (1) is both the object of V_2 'hold' and the object of the whole serial verb construction, which ultimately behaves as a single verb.

The general tendency, as illustrated in this example, is for Event-argument SVCs to occur towards the end of the VP—that is, they form the final steps in the chronology of multi-verb serialisation. The two other types of SVCs are typically met at the beginning of a serial string, with both orders attested equally: either Causative embedded in Concurrent (26), or the reverse.

6   Conclusion

Verb serialisation is perhaps one of the domains of Mwotlap grammar which are the most productive and subject to historical change. Certain unattested combinations may one day come to light, while other sequences will eventually disappear; some verbs acquire novel properties according to their position as a head or an 'adjunct'; some lexemes even progressively change their categorial status and specialise in the function of modifier, either grammaticalising as a valency-increasing applicative, or simply becoming some sort of adverb, a new building block for phraseological innovation. But paradoxically, although this evolution derives intricately from the formal and functional properties of verb serialisation, methodological concerns make it difficult to integrate them into the description of 'serial verbs' strictly speaking (§1.3).

Language typology tends to focus more on 'universal' word classes such as verbs, at the risk of leaving certain language-specific categories undescribed, like the one we called 'adjuncts' in Mwotlap. And yet, studying this rich class of verb modifiers, many of which originally come from verbs in former SVC patterns, would logically constitute the next step in the description of Mwotlap verb serialisation.

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