Losing verbhood

The dynamics of complex predicates in Lemerig (Vanuatu)

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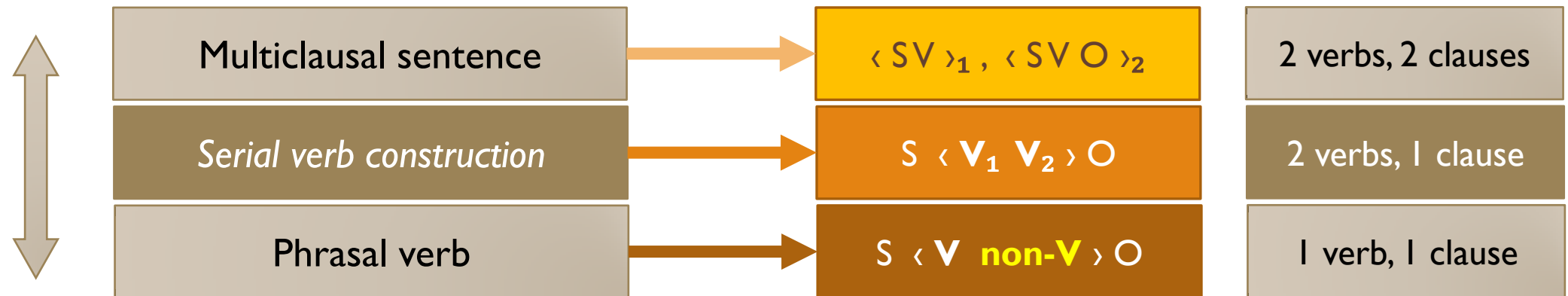[1] LATTICE – CNRS, ENS-PSL, USN / Paris

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[3] ANR-DFG project *ComPLETE* (2022-2025)

Complex
Predicates
in **L**anguages
Emergence
Typology
Evolution

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DFG

Lattice

ENS

cnrs

Exploring the limits of Complex predicates

- Oceanic languages of Vanuatu have *verbal complex predicates*
  - serial verb constructions (SVC) — Crowley 1987, 2002; François 2004; Krauße 2021…
  - But SVCs are sandwiched between two limits

Multiclausal sentence	‹ S V ›$_1$, ‹ S V O ›$_2$	2 verbs, 2 clauses
Serial verb construction	S ‹ V$_1$ V$_2$ › O	2 verbs, 1 clause
Phrasal verb	S ‹ V **non-V** › O	1 verb, 1 clause

Complex **Predicates** in **Languages** **Emergence** **Typology** **Evolution**

This talk will explore the **lower** limit of complex predicates

- What happens when a **verb** in a serial pattern ceases to be a verb ~ loses its *"verbhood"*?
- Such a construction is not a *serial verb* any more… but still a (borderline) *complex predicate*

Lemerig

- 500 Oceanic languages
  - 140 in Vanuatu
    - All reported to have SVCs
  - Banks islands, 15 languages

- Focus on one language:
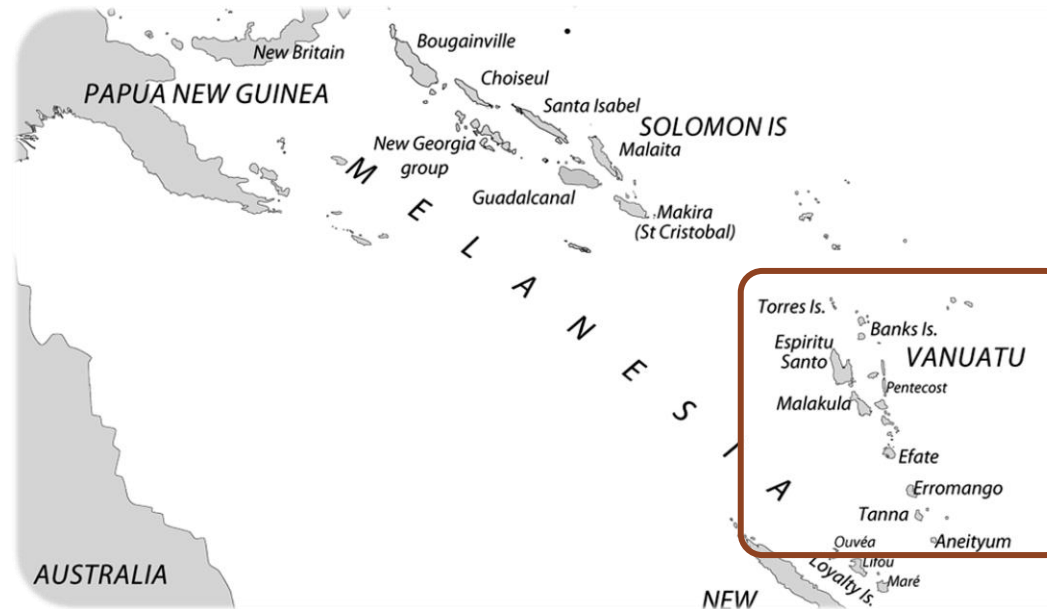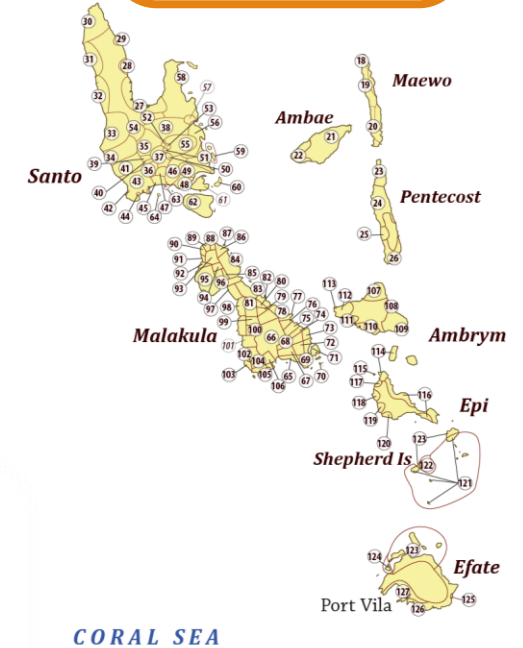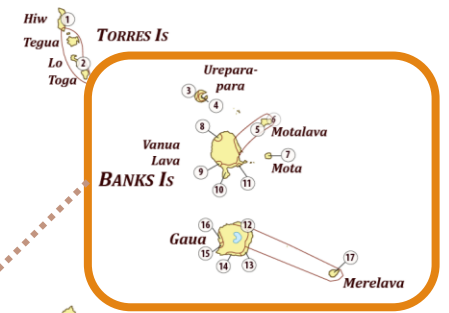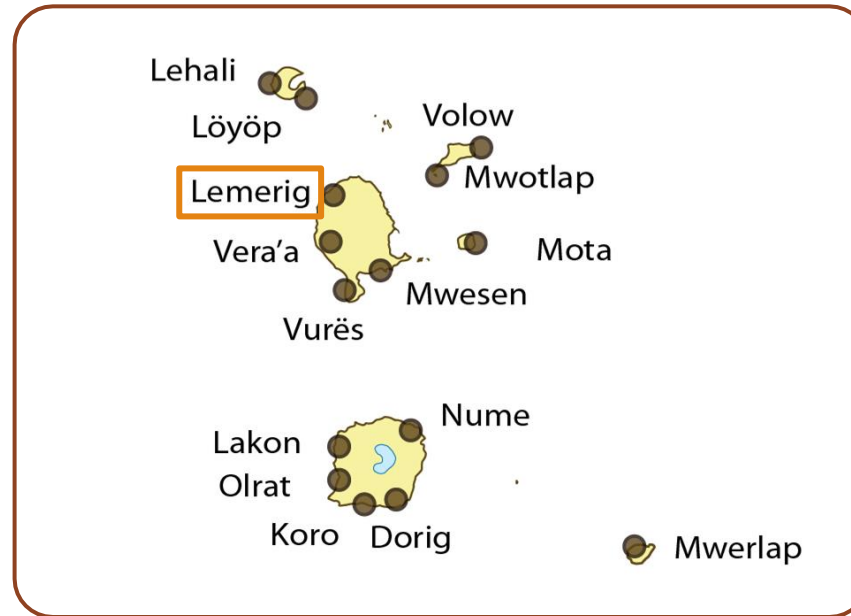 - **Lemerig**
    - 2 speakers

Taitus   Aiso

  - Corpus: 14,000 words + 89 pages of notes

Lehali
Löyöp   Volow
Lemerig   Mwotlap
Vera'a   Mota
               Mwesen
Vurës
               Nume
Lakon
Olrat
Koro   Dorig   Mwerlap

Hiw
Tegua   TORRES IS
Lo
Toga
        Urepara-para
        3   6   Motalava
Vanua   4   5
Lava   9   Mota
BANKS IS 10   11
        16 12
Gaua   15   17
        14 13   Merelava

Santo   Maewo
                     Ambae
                     Pentecost
Malakula   Ambrym
                     Epi
Shepherd Is
                     Efate
Port Vila

PAPUA NEW GUINEA
New Britain   Bougainville
               Choiseul
               Santa Isabel
New Georgia   SOLOMON IS
group   Malaita
Guadalcanal
               Makira
               (St Cristobal)

Torres Is.
        Banks Is.
Espiritu   VANUATU
Santo   Pentecost
Malakula
        Efate
        Erromango
Tanna
Ouvéa   Aneityum
AUSTRALIA
Loyalty Is.
NEW   Lifou
       Maré

Erromango

Tanna

Aneityu

CORAL SEA

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The verbal clause in Lemerig

- Structure of the clause

(1) *Në*   ⟨*m='ev*   *'i*⟩   *n=pānāv.*
     1SG   PRET1=**cut**   PRET2   ART=pineapple
     'I've been cutting a pineapple.'

$$S \; \langle TAM_1 = V \; (TAM_2) \rangle \; O$$

- The V slot can be expanded with a second verb

(2) *Kimi*   ⟨*'et*   *qēl*⟩   *row*   *lē=naw.*
     2PL   **see**   **go.down**   DIR:out   LOC=sea
     'Guys, look down towards the ocean.'

(3) *Në*   ⟨*m=pu'*   *revrev*⟩.
     1SG   PRF=**sit**   **write**
     'I'm sitting writing.'

Verb serialisation in Lemerig

- The two verbs behave together like a single verb:

  ◦ They have a single set of arguments

  $$S \ \langle \text{TAM}_1 = V_1 \ V_2 \ (\text{TAM}_2) \rangle \ O$$

  (4) Ti   ⟨m='ev   m̄ö'⟩   n=gaga.
        3SG   PFT=**cut** **be.broken**   ART=rope
        'He's cut the rope apart.'

  ◦ They encode TAM (+*polarity*) only once for the whole {V_1+V_2} sequence

  (5) N=ga   ⟨ē=mān   marmar   m̄äs'ä⟩   näk.
        ART=kava   NEG.POT$_1$=**intoxicate** **be.strong** NEG.POT$_2$ 2SG
        'The kava [drink] won't be able to affect you strongly.'

- Single TAMP, single argument structure:

  ◦ {V_1V_2} behaves like a "**macroverb**"   (François 2004, on Mwotlap)

Verb serialisation in Lemerig

- Second element V_2 is a **verb** because it can also occur in the V_1 slot:

(6) Kimi ⟨m=**ʼār** **qē'**⟩ n=ok?
2PL PFT=**chop** **finish** ART=canoe
'Are you done making your canoes?'

(7) Kaka pän e ⟨m=**qē'**⟩ ēgēn.
story ASSOC DEF PFT=**finish** now
'This is how the story ends.'

(8) Në ⟨k=**ʼär** **'ēnēnē**⟩ n=ʼārpē-k 'i.
1SG AO:1SG=stand (be.)**straight** ART=body-1SG HORT
'Let me straighten my body.' [liter. '*stand* my body *straight*.']

(9) N=nānār e ⟨ge=**'ēnēnē**⟩.
ART=k.o.tree DEF STAT=(be.)**straight**
'The tree was *upright*.'

$$S \ \langle \text{TAM}_1 = V_1 \ V_2 \ (\text{TAM}_2) \rangle \ O$$

Adjectives form a distinct word class, but they behave like verbs in predicate phrases

These *Serial verb constructions* fit the **ComPLETE** project's definition of **verbal complex predicates**:
"a monoclausal construction with a single set of argument positions, consisting of at least two verbs or 'verb-like' items"

A defective kind of verb?

■ But certain "V_2" components never occur in the V_1 slot:

(10)   *N-nānār*   *e,*   *në*   ⟨*m=ˈār*   **le'**   *ˈi*⟩   *lē=nor.*
    ART-k.o.tree   TOP   1SG   PRET$_1$=**chop**   **broken**   PRET$_2$ LOC=yesterday
    'That tree, I chopped it apart yesterday.'

$$S \;\; \langle TAM_1 = V_1 \; V_2^{\,??} \; (TAM_2)\rangle \; O$$

(10')   **N-nānār*   *e*   ⟨*m=**le'*** ⟩.
     ART-k.o.tree   TOP   PRET$_1$=**broken**
     *'The tree was apart.'

- Lexemes with 'verb-like' semantics… but defective "verbs" that only occur in V_2 slot
- Reported for most Vanuatu languages (Rangelov 2022)
- Given various labels: *adjuncts, coverbs, adverbs…*
- We call them **postverbs** (François 2011)
- Lemerig has ≈40 attested postverbs
  cf. ≈100 in neighbouring Mwotlap

(11)   *Kumru*   ⟨*ge=**pu'***   ***gër***⟩   *gasel*   *muk.*
    2DU   STAT=**sit**   **impeding**   knife   my
    'You are *sitting on* my knife.' (lit. sit impeding)

(11')   **Kumru*   ⟨*ge=**gër***⟩   *gasel*   *muk.*
     2DU   STAT=**impeding**   knife   my
     * 'You are *impeding access to* my knife.'

Postverbal constructions: Synchrony

- Strictly speaking, postverbs are a word class distinct from verbs

  → postverbal constructions are not "verbal CPs"

  ○ But they are still **Complex Predicates**

  ○ Predicate phrase made of ≥ 2 lexical elements

  ○ **Argument structure** can be determined not just by V head,
    but by {V+postV} complex predicate

> **S** ⟨TAM$_1$= **V$_1$ postV** (TAM$_2$)⟩ **O**

(11) *Kumru* ⟨*ge=***pu'** **gër**⟩ *gasel muk.*
2DU STAT=**sit** **impeding** knife my
'You are *sitting on* my knife.' (lit. sit impeding)

postV **gër** adds one argument to the valency

≈ applicative morpheme

(similar to preposition, but Verb-adjacent)

  ○ Postverb constructions follow the same template as SVCs

  ○ PVC constitutes a *macroverb*, sharing TAM & negation, arguments…

Postverbal constructions: Synchrony

- Postverb constructions are exactly parallel with Serial constructions…
  except the second element is not a verb – at least not synchronically / not in our corpus.

  ◦ Sometimes ambiguous whether we're dealing with verb or postverb:

(4)   *Ti*   ⟨*m=ʼev   m̄öʼ*⟩   *n=gaga.*
      3SG   PFT=**cut**   **be.broken**   ART=rope
      'He's cut the rope apart.'

(10) *N-nānār*   *e,*   *në*   ⟨*m=ʼār*   *leʼ*   *ʼi*⟩   *lē=nor.*
      ART-k.o.tree   TOP   1SG   PRET₁=**chop**   **broken**   PRET₂   LOC=yesterday
      'That tree, I chopped it apart yesterday.'

  ◦ Now, we know that *leʼ* [lɛʔ] is cognate with Araki *lar̄e*   < *late, which is still a verb:

Araki   ⟨*Nam=lar̄e*⟩   *sari-ku.*
           1SG:REA=**break**   leg-1SG
           'I broke my leg.'

m̄öʼ is synchronically a verb;
but *leʼ* is not (→ postverb).

➤ (4) is an SVC, but not (10)

Diachronic hypothesis:
leʼ is a former verb,
that has lost its verbhood.

Postverbal constructions: Diachrony

- Historically, many postverbs reflect earlier **verbs** that specialised in the postverbal slot.
  - Their verbal origin can be reconstructed through **language comparison**

A sample

(etyma in pr-N Vanuatu)

FORM	MEANING AS POSTVERB	ETYMON	GLOSS OF FORMER V
rāk	'away, off'	*raga	'to lift, remove'
ʻas	'continually, on and on'	*taso	'to dash'
leʼ	'[cut+] in half'	*late	'to snap'
wor	'[cut+] lengthwise, apart'	*wora	'to split, divide'
sur	'[go] down along'	*suri	'to follow along'
waliög	'[go] round, in circle'	*walioɣi	'circular'
paʼ	'[go] inwards; hidden'	*bata	'hidden, secret'
ʼāʼāg	'[go] along, following'	*tataɣa	'to follow'
levga	'[go] past'	*levoɣao	'to cross over'
varge	'[hold] tight'	*varaɣai	'to strengthen, tighten'
ris	'[turn] around'	*risi	'to change direction'

Postverbal constructions: Diachrony

- The shift {Verb → Postverb} is sometimes ongoing

    ◦ Still a verb, but rarer as V_1 than as V_2

    ◦ Semantic change as V_2

  ◦ e.g. *'ö* 'hold':   corpus has 3 tokens as V_1, vs. 15 tokens as V_2

(12)   *N='am̄an*   *'āwān*   ⟨*m='ö'*⟩   *n=sāvnekiri.*
     ART=man   other   PFT=hold   ART=something
     'The other man was holding something.'

Literal meaning as V_1 = 'hold'

(13)   *Ērge*   *'am̄an*   ⟨*māl*   **van**   **'ö'**⟩   *n=li'*   *e.*
     HUM:PL   man   IAM   **go**   **hold**   ART=firewood   DEF
     'The men have been *carrying* the firewood.'

Meaning as V_2 = 'holding' ?
→ encodes *caused accompanied motion*
'carry', 'bring' (Schnell 2022)

(14)   *N=ge*   *na,*   *gät*   ⟨*ē=***tek**   **'ö'**   *vālākreg*   *m̄äs'ä*⟩.
     ART=thing   that   1IN:PL   NEG$_1$=**talk**   **hold**   be.random   NEG.POT$_2$
     'That topic, you can't just talk about it freely.'

Abstract meaning:
Grammaticalised as applicative
'talk ***about*** s.th.'

Postverbal constructions: Diachrony

○ e.g. **qē'** 'finish': corpus has 26 tokens as V_1, vs. 60 tokens as V_2

(15) *Kaka* *pän* *e* ⟨*m=qē'*⟩ *ēgēn.*
story   ASSOC   DEF   PFT=**finish**   now
'This is how the story ends.'

(16) *Kimi* ⟨*m='ār* *qē'*⟩ *n=ok?*
2PL   PFT=**chop**   **finish**   ART=canoe
'Are you done making your canoes?'

Phasal aspect 'finish doing'

Grammaticalised as a **quantifier**

'all' / 'entirely'

(17) *N=ok* *mōgō-r* *nē* ⟨*m=rër* *qē'*⟩.
ART=canoe   POSS-3PL   DEM2   PFT=sink   **finish/all**
'*All of their canoes* sank [to the bottom of the sea].'

(18) *N=qä'ä-n* *e* ⟨*wënwën* *qē'*⟩ *mi* *n=wes* *rār.*
ART=head-3SG   DEF   be.full   **finish/all**   with   ART=flower   Erythrina
'His head was *entirely* covered in red flowers.'

Are they still the same word?
- If yes, then (17-18) = serial verbs
- But if **verb** 'finish' ≠ **postverb** 'all' then (17-18) are postverbal cstr[ns]

Conclusion

- Historical trend for <V$_1$**V$_2$**> serial verbs to evolve into <V **postverb**>
  - When the shift is completed, it can often be reconstructed through language comparison
  - When it's still in progress, often we can already see signs of ↑ **autonomy of V$_2$**:
    - V$_2$ acquires new meaning(s),   often towards a more abstract / more grammatical use
    - V$_2$ becomes more frequent   → lives a life of its own

- When the same form exists as V$_1$ and V$_2$, sometimes the **semantic distance** is so big that we can legitimately wonder *if they are still the same lexeme*
    - **Heterosemy** (Lichtenberk 1991), a frequent issue with complex predicates [cf. auxiliaries]
    - Speakers do not need to know if X is a *postverb*, or a *verb* used *postverbally*, to use it appropriately

- Vanuatu: The postverb slot is essential to understanding the internal dynamics of VCPs.
  - That slot is the locus where **lexical verbs** routinely evolve into something else:

        L-verb   →   G-verb   →   grammatical morpheme

Varean ge lowo mē kimi

Thanks for your attention

Kiitos !

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