

Vietnamese Serial Verb Constructions: Toward Demystifying Verb-Formation Constructions

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Abstract—This paper reviews existing definitions of serial verb constructions (SVCs) and highlights the divergent approaches adopted by linguists in conceptualizing and identifying SVCs across languages. Grounded in Vietnamese grammar—particularly its topic-comment theory—and informed by native speakers’ cognitive frameworks, the study establishes SVC properties that resonate with the internal logic of the Vietnamese language. By aligning cross-linguistic theoretical models with indigenous grammatical intuition, the paper clarifies how Vietnamese speakers distinguish SVCs, both conceptually and functionally. Drawing upon a set of eight proposed properties, the paper categorizes Vietnamese serial verb constructions into two distinct types: non-lexicalized SVCs and lexicalized SVCs. It further demystifies the differences between SVCs and other superficially similar but structurally distinct constructions, including non-lexical autonomous verbal constructions, lexicalized verbal constructions, verb-verb predicate-argument constructions, causative-resultative constructions, and motion verb-directional preposition constructions.

Index Terms—serial verb constructions, verb-verb predicate-argument constructions, causative-resultative constructions, motion verb-directional preposition constructions, fixed verb-verb constructions

I. INTRODUCTION

Vietnamese is a linguistically complex language. Originating from the logographic writing system of Chinese, the language later adopted the Latin alphabet through French colonial influence, causing its grammatical structure to be shaped by the subject-verb-object (SVO) syntax typical of Western languages. However, the language is an analytic, uninflected, isolating, and topic-oriented one and conceptualized within a topic-comment framework. This intricate linguistic background often hinders cross-linguistic conceptual transfer, particularly when the topic-comment framework makes the language conceptualized hierarchically rather than linearly. By analyzing the definitions and analytic frameworks of linguistics around the world, this study establishes, as one prominent example, the features of serial verb constructions (SVCs) based on the hierarchical topic-oriented Vietnamese to demystify the language's fixed verb-verb constructions. Typological studies across diverse languages have proposed analytic frameworks for SVCs, yet these may not adequately capture the unique properties of Vietnamese. Furthermore, Vietnamese is rarely treated as an independent system in SVC-related research; instead, it is frequently grouped with languages such as Cantonese (Aikhenvald, 2018), Mandarin (Lovestrand & Ross, 2021), Mon-Khmer (Bisang, 1995; Aikhenvald, 2018), or White-Hmong (Jarkey, 2010). This paper aims to establish the specific properties of Vietnamese SVCs by reviewing global definitions and analytic frameworks. Through this process, it repositions Vietnamese within a hierarchical topic-oriented model, thereby demystifying the nature of fixed verb-verb constructions in the language.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Definitions and Problems of Defining SVCs

(a). Definitions of SVCs

Like other grammatical terms, the term “serial verb construction” was coined first by Stewart (1963) when the linguist dealt with the Kwa language Akan and then was extended gradually to cover other languages (Haspelmath, 2016, p. 292). In general, an SVC is a sequence of two or more juxtaposed verbs combined to act together as a syntactic unit in the same clause and be conceptualized as a single event (e.g., Lord, 1993; Bisang, 1995; Durie, 1997; Foley & Olson, 1985; Sebba, 1987; Aikhenvald & Dixon, 2006; Crowley, 1987; Durie, 1997), and Bril and Ozanne-Rivierre (2004) define “serial verbs” or “complex predicates” as broad terms that cover a great variety of structural types, even among closely related languages. As a result, the first objective was to come up with fine-grained definitions and criteria. Schultze-Berndt (2000) clarifies that verbal construction needs to be excluded as an SVC if the construction is made up of two distinct word classes. Foley and Olson (1985), Sebba (1987), Joseph and Zwicky (1990), Lefebvre (1991), Durie (1997), Aikhenvald and Dixon (2006), and Lovestrand and Ross (2021), among others, have shared the SVC definition of a traditional descriptive category normally reserved for constructions in which at least two verbs occur in the same clause with no morphological marker linking the verbs or indicating that one is subordinate to the other. The definition has four main points, comprised of (1). all components in an SVC are verbs that combine to form a

syntactic unit; (2). an SVC is conceptualized as a single event; (3). no word belonging to different word classes can interrupt the constructions; and finally, (4). there are many types of SVC constructions.

(b). *Problems of Defining Serial Verb Constructions*

Though there is a mostly clear definition of serial verb constructions, in detail and interpretation, linguists have not reached a consensus, nor have they reached a contradiction in defining it. Regarding the concept of “a syntactic unit,” Aikhenvald (2018, p. 49) believes the syntactic unit in an SVC is a subject-predicate integrated into the SVC. In her conceptualization, Aikhenvald (2018) presents the subject-predicate example *xem tôi nhảy* (“you look, I jump”), illustrating how the SVC in this mono-clausal sentence allows the object of the first verb to function as the agent or transitive subject of the second verb, thereby demonstrating a switch-function serial verb construction. On the contrary, Haspelmath (2016) challenges the notion, stating that “any verbs taking other verbs as complements should be allowed as SVCs” (Ross, 2020, p. 230). Haspelmath goes on to define an SVC as “a serial verb construction as a mono-clausal construction consisting of multiple independent verbs with no element linking them and with no predicate-argument relation between the verbs” (Haspelmath, 2016, p. 296). However, Haspelmath (2016) then excludes not only verb-verb constructions, in which a verb, the second one, is the complement of the first verb, as in *muốn biết* (“want know”) in the Vietnamese sentence *Anh muốn biết việc đó thì cứ đi hỏi anh ta* (“You want to know the story, don’t you? Go ask him.”) but also causative serial verb constructions. The verb construction *đá ngã* (“kick, fall”) in the Vietnamese sentence *Anh ta đá ngã cái ghế* (“He kicked the chair down.”) is considered an SVC by Cleary-Kemp (2015), where the construction describes a single event, such as where the chair is caused to fall by the kicking action, or by Aikhenvald (2018) when it is a cause-effect or attainment SVC, involving a transitive verb followed by a verb expressing the outcome or result of the action, creating a switch-function serialization pattern of SVCs. Commenting on Haspelmath’s (2016) definition, Aikhenvald (2018, p. 18) believes the definition “arbitrarily excludes serialization of complement-clause taking predicates and causative serial verb constructions”.

Analogously, lexicalization is an issue polarizing linguist. Haspelmath (2016, p. 296) emphasizes that “a serial verb construction must be a productive schematic such that the meaning of a concrete construct can be determined based on the construction of the meanings of its parts and the construction meaning.” The affirmation is shared by Cleary-Kemp (2015), Bril and Ozanne-Rieverre (2004), and Lovstrand and Ross (2021). According to these linguists, lexicalized expressions, which have become fixed idiomatic phrases with meanings not transparently derived from their parts, do not meet the criteria of SVCs and thus fall outside the definition of SVCs. In contrast, Durie (1997) and Aikhenvald (2018) believe that “SVCs have sometimes been regarded as particularly prone to lexicalization and non-compositionality”.

Such contradictions are making the concept of SVCs a labyrinth. Remarking on this issue, Đông (2014, p. 715) stated that the culture and the specific way of conceptualizing the situations of each culture affect the way to determine the unique situation expressed by an SVC. Thus, with native speakers of a language, some combinations of two or more verbs can be culturally seen as a unique situation and labelled as SVC, but the lexical and syntactic structures of the combinations reject the label. Ross (2020), referring to Pawley (1987) and Enfield (2002), attests that “the use of SVCs corresponds to cultural constraints, emphasizing the relevance of subjective perspectives in the use of SVCs, rather than assuming an objective status of ‘events in reality’” (p. 231). Simply put, Haspelmath (2016) observes, “It is probably also true that the precise boundaries of SVCs are still little known” (p. 297). Lovstrand (2021) and Foley (1985) concur. In fact, Foley (1985) goes even further: “Are there any universal defining properties of serial verb constructions? Probably not ...” (p. 107).

Furthermore, the ways to define the concept of SVCs are also different from one linguist to another. Defina (2016) supposes that the definitions for the phenomenon have been shifted towards identifying SVCs by resemblance to a prototype rather than by a list of strict necessary and sufficient conditions due to increasing evidence for variation among SVCs throughout the world. Haspelmath (2016) suggests, instead of lamenting the lack of agreement, linguists should feel free to simply advance a definition and then work with it” (p. 293).

B. *Vietnamese Topic-Comment Theory*

Vietnamese is not only a complicated language, but the grammar used to syntactically analyze the language is also complicated. While subject-predicate analysis is still taught in schools, analyzing sentence structure under the topic-comment theory suggested by Hạo (1991, 2004) and Lan (1991, 2002) can solve many more issues (Hạo, 1991, 2004; Côn, 2009). Côn (2009) observed that analyzing sentences under the subject-predicate theory solves only up to 25% of the issues, while the topic-comment theory can deal with at least 64% of the issues that arise. In this particular study, the author applied the Vietnamese topic-comment theory to syntactically analyze sentences using tree diagrams.

As Vietnamese is a hierarchical topic-oriented language (Hạo, 1991, 2004; Côn, 2009), the topic is what the informer focuses on in the information, and the comment is the information given that is related to the topic. Hạo (2004) proposed that “when making a sentence, speakers/writers produce a topic and then mention something relating to such a theme or in the scope of such a topic” (p. 151), and “a comment is something that speakers believe that listeners have not yet known” (p. 69). After that, the comment is divided into minor topics (mT2 for abbreviation in the tree diagram) and minor comments (mC2 for abbreviation in the tree diagram); then, the minor topics are divided into sub-minor topics (mT3 for abbreviation in the tree diagram) and sub-minor comments (mC3 for abbreviation in the tree diagram)

and continue to the last word. This Vietnamese grammar analysis is useful, especially when analyzing Vietnamese causative-resultative structures with an unaccusative verb in the structure.

Thus, the Vietnamese topic–comment theory is hierarchical rather than linear. Analyzed under the theory, for example, the sentence *Anh xem tôi nhảy* has *xem tôi nhảy* as the comment of the topic *Anh*; then, **tôi nhảy** is the minor C2 of the minor T2, with *tôi* being the subminor T3 and *nhảy* the subminor C3. The sentence, therefore, is not monoclausal but biclausal or multiclausal.

III. DISCUSSION

A. Properties of Vietnamese SVCs

Based on the definition given, a Vietnamese SVC possesses eight properties: (a). fixed verb-verb combination, (b). the meaning, (c). lexical autonomy, (d). syntactic structure, (e). shared argument(s), (f). negation, (g). translation into non-verbal serialization languages, and (h). intonation break or pause.

(a). Fixed Verb-Verb Combinations

This property implies that all components (usually two, but sometimes four) in an SVC must be verbs, and no linking words or one or more words of other word classes can interfere with the constructions (except for certain lexicalized SVCs, discussed later), and the order of the components is unchangeable. For example:

1. *ăn ngủ* (“eat” and “sleep”) is an SCV in *Cô ấy ăn ngủ ở đây cả tháng rồi* (“She has lived here a month.”).
2. *ca hát nhảy múa* (“sing” and “dance”) is a four-word SVC in *Bọn chúng ca hát nhảy múa suốt ngày* (“They have been doing the musical activities all day long.”). Remarkably, the four-verb SVC can be the combination of two two-verb SVCs, as in *Bọn chúng chỉ ca hát, chứ không nhảy múa* (“They are singing only, not dancing.”).
3. *ăn và ngủ* (“eat and sleep”) is not an SCV in *Cô ấy ăn và ngủ rồi* (“She already ate and slept”) when a linking word interferes with the two verbs.
4. *gảy đàn thổi sáo* (“play the stringed musical instruments and the flute”) is not an SCV when nouns interfere with the structure, even though the phrase refers to a single action of playing musical instruments in *Những gã tài hoa thì gảy đàn thổi sáo cùng nhau* (The talented guys have played the musical instruments together.).

(b). Lexical Meaning

In Vietnamese, the property implies both compositionality (Haspelmath, 2016; Cleary-Kemp, 2015; Bril & Ozanne-Rieverre, 2004; Lovestrang & Ross, 2021) and non-compositionality (Duire, 1997; Aikhenvald, 2018) and divides Vietnamese SVCs into two types of SVCs, consisting of both lexicalized and non-lexicalized SVCs.

(c). Lexical Autonomy

Bril and Ozanne-Rivierre (2004) believe that “lexical autonomy is a prerequisite for serialization, excluding nonautonomous co-verbs and nonfinite forms, as well as co-lexicalized compounds” (p. 3). The concept mentions the idea that a word's spelling and meaning can be retrieved independently of its form. Lovestrang (2021) emphasizes “The principle that a verb in serialization must also be able to occur on its own in a main clause is generally interpreted as referring to the form of the verb only, allowing a significant shift in meaning” (p. 19). Therefore, this property implies that each component of an SVC must be able to occur on its own right with its relatable lexical meaning in another construction. On the other hand, after analyzing SVCs in Japanese and Mandarin, Shibatani (2009), argues that “only one of the serialized verbs can function as an independent predicate and that the other verbs in the series do not have the lexical autonomy of an independent verb” (p. 260). Shibatani also remarks on a phenomenon that is found in Japanese and Mandarin SVCs when, sometimes, two verbs come to act together and provide a new vocabulary, thus lacking their lexical autonomy. In Japanese, when the verb 書/*kaku* (“to write”) is combined with the verb 出/*dasu* (“to publish”), it becomes the SVC 書き出す/*kakidasu* (“to start to write”). Then, the verb 出/*dasu* (“to publish”) has no lexical autonomy of an independent verb when it appears on its own right with a different lexical meaning. Thus, the linguist concludes, by stating “Serial verbs do not have the lexical autonomy of independent verbs” (p. 277).

In Vietnamese, a great number of verb-verb compounds have at least one component that lacks its lexical meaning, especially when the verb comes from Chinese. For example, the verb-verb construction *tập trung* (“to muster”) has the verb *tập* from the Chinese 集/*ji*, which means “to gather,” and *trung* from the Chinese 中/*zhōng*, meaning “to be at the center; to muster into an area,” to form a fixed verb construction. These verbs, however, are unable to occur independently in any structure with a relatable meaning. Also, when the verb-verb construction *tập trung* has the lexicalized meaning “to focus” in the sentence *Chúng ta cần tập trung vào vấn đề chính* (“We should focus on the main point”), the construction also does not meet the criteria to be an SVC, as these verbs lack their lexical autonomy to meet the criteria of SVCs.

(d). Syntactic Structure

Analyzed with topic-comment theory, Vietnamese SVCs take a single slot on the analysis tree diagram regardless of how many verbs are in a construction.

(e). Shared Arguments

The property asks all components of a Vietnamese SVC to share arguments in the clause. Based on the topic-comment theory, the more important shared argument is the topic of the clause.

(f). Negation

As suggested by Aikhenvald (2018), Ross et al. (2015), Ross (2020), and Lovstrand and Ross (2021), when a Vietnamese SVC is negated, all components in the construction are simultaneously negated, polarizing the clause containing the SVC.

(g). Translation Into Non-Verbal Serialization Languages

A serial verb construction may be translated with one single verb into a non-serializing language, such as English or Portuguese (Durie, 1997; Bril & Ozanne-Rivierre, 2004; Aikhenvald et al., 2006, 2018), or an English verb plus an adverbial to modify the verb, which suggests that “an SVC represents a single event” (Cleary-Kemp, 2015, p. 120). Vietnamese is an isolating language; the number of words is not high, at just below 40,000, including compounds of two or more words. However, verbs in Vietnamese are polysemous, which means one word can have many different meanings. For instance, the word “*đánh*” has 27 senses (Vietnam Institute of Linguistics, 2018, pp. 259-261). Therefore, when an SVC with the verb *đánh* is translated into English or other non-serialization languages, besides translating the main verb, an adverb or adverbial phrase should be added to modify the verb. For example, the verb *đánh* (to cause) in *đánh vỡ* (to break), *đánh rơi* (to drop), and so on, all have the sense of “carelessly” or “accidentally,” as in “He accidentally broke the vase,” but the verb *đánh* (no tantamount sense in English in the cases) in *đánh cắp* (to steal), *đánh cướp* (to rob), *đánh lộn* (to fight), and so on, has the sense of “intentionally,” as in “*Chúng đánh cắp tiền của tôi*” (“They stole my money”). Here, the sense of “intentionally” is encoded into the verb “to steal.” Put simply, in the case that two Vietnamese verbs standing next to one are translated into English with two verbs, it is not likely an SVC. In the sentence *Mẹ ngồi ru con đong đưa võng buồn* (“The mom sits, lulling her child and gently swinging the sad hammock”), *ngồi ru* is translated into English with two verbs, “sits” and “lulling,” proving that *ngồi ru* is not an SVC in Vietnamese.

(h). No Intonation Break

This prosodic property suggests an SVC sounds like a mono-verbal clause, without intonation breaks or pause markers occurring between the components of an SVC (Aikhenvald, 2018, p. 27; Bril & Ozanne-Rivierre, 2004, p. 3; Cleary-Kemp, 2015, p. 101). The way to pronounce *ngồi ru* in the sentence *Mẹ ngồi ru con đong đưa võng buồn* (The mom sits, lulling her child and gently swinging the sad hammock) with a pause or prolonging the sound *ngồi* excludes the construction from SVCs.

B. Vietnamese SVCs and Other Non-SVC Constructions

To demystify Vietnamese verb-formation constructions, which are included in SVCs and which are not, this section discusses first Vietnamese SVCs with two types, non-lexicalized SVCs and lexicalized SVCs, and then other non-SVC constructions, which violate certain properties of Vietnamese SVCs to be excluded from SVCs.

*(a). Vietnamese SVCs**1. Non-Lexicalized SVCs*

Non-lexicalized SVCs refer to SVCs in which the lexical meaning of the components is compositional and transparently derived from the lexical meaning of the individual verbs. Lovstrand and Ross (2021), Bril and Ozanne-Rivierre (2004), Cleary-Kemp (2015), and Haspelmath (2016) concur with this idea. For example, the constructions *đi ngủ* (“go” and “sleep”; “to go to bed”) in Example 1, *đi bơi* (“go” and “swim”; “to go swimming”) in Example 2, *đánh chặn* (“fight” and “block”; “to block”) in Example 3, *ăn trộm* (“earn” and “steal”; “to steal”) and *ăn cướp* (“earn” and “rob”; “to rob”) in Example 4, and *đánh đập* (“punch” and “beat”; “to beat”) in Example 5 below are non-lexicalized SVCs in Vietnamese.

Ex. 1. *Mười giờ rồi, đi ngủ thôi các con.* (“Ten o’clock. Go to bed, kids.”)

Ex. 2. *Giờ này thì anh ta đi bơi rồi.* (“He had already gone swimming at this time.”)

Ex. 3. *Bộ đội ta đã đánh chặn đường rút lui của quân địch.* (“Our troops blocked the enemy’s retreat route.”)

Ex. 4. *Đám đông tụ tập chỉ để ăn trộm, ăn cướp mà thôi.* (“That group gathered only to steal and to rob.”)

Ex. 5. *Hắn đã đánh đập thẳng bẻ một cách dã man.* (“He brutally beat the boy.”)

However, with Vietnamese asymmetrical constructions, especially with the verb *đi* (“to go”), such as *đi ngủ* and *đi bơi*, the relevant contexts usually decide the property of the construction to include or exclude the constructions from SVCs when the wh-movement test is applied to display that the motion verb *đi* is used with its concrete meaning, such as in the following conversation:

Ex. 6. *Bọn trẻ đi đâu rồi?* (“Where have the kids gone?”)

Ex. 7. *Bọn nó đi bơi hết rồi.* (“They have all gone swimming.”)

2. Lexicalized SVCs

Lexicalized SVCs are the SVCs in which the meaning of the SVC has undergone the process of lexicalization. In linguistics, lexicalization refers to the process where a concept or word is given a lexical form and becomes part of a language's lexicon. Aikhenvald and Muysken (2010) posit that semantic and pragmatic constraints on verb combinations may result in semantic non-compositionality of SVCs and add that the meaning of the whole of an SVC is not equal to the sum of the meanings of the components in the SVC, and none of the components can be substituted with another verb. Lovstrand (2021) observes, "In the majority of the literature, the concept of serialization includes those cases where the serial verbs would indisputably be said to have a different meaning from the homophonous verb form used on its own" (p. 19). Therefore, when combining to act together, an SVC will have a meaning almost different from the lexical meaning of the two source verbs.

Very often, verbs within a serial verb construction can form an idiomatic collocation (Aikhenvald, 2018). A tendency to become lexicalized and form hard-to-parse idiomatic combinations is a feature of symmetrical serial verb constructions (Aikhenvald, 2018). In Vietnamese, the main difference between non-lexicalized SVCs and lexicalized SVCs lies in the way that the activities mentioned by the verbs are to occur or not. With non-lexicalized SVCs, the activities mentioned by the verbs occur in the sense of the SVCs; in contrast, the activities mentioned by the verbs in lexicalized SVCs do not appear; only the semantic properties of the verbs are transferred to the action in the sense of the SVCs.

Vietnamese people have a habit of using metaphors to highlight the dynamic meaning transitions of their language and possess profound associative creativity in language (Tôn, 2008; Hà, 2011). This sometimes reveals the intricate conceptual framework behind a common Vietnamese word (Hà, 2011). Therefore, lexicalization can be seen as a characteristic of Vietnamese SVCs. This type of SVC is the most common in Vietnamese. In the sentences in the following examples below, the verb-verb constructions *leo lên* ("climb" and "up"; "to reach a higher position"), *nuốt trôi* ("swallow" and "drift"; "to digest, to accept"), *ca hát nhảy múa* ("sing" and "dance"; "to perform musical entertainment), *làm ăn* ("work" and "get"; "to do business"), and *giết chết* ("kill" and "die"; "to destroy") are SVCs.

Ex. 8. *Anh ta leo lên vị trí Giám đốc rất nhanh.* ("He rose to the position of director very quickly.")

Ex. 9. *Anh ta khó lòng nuốt trôi quyết định của Ban Giám đốc.* ("He found it hard to digest the board's decision.")

Ex. 10. *Cuối cùng, Ban Giám đốc bỏ qua những sai phạm của anh ta.* ("In the end, the Board of Directors overlooked his misconduct.")

Ex. 11. *Bọn nó suốt ngày ca hát nhảy múa chứ chẳng chịu làm ăn gì.* ("They spent all day singing and dancing instead of doing any real work.")

Ex. 12. *Sự thật giết chết những ước mơ lãng mạn của tôi.* ("The truth killed my romantic dreams.")

Curiously, in Example 12, the actions of *giết* ("kill") and *chết* ("die") do not happen, leaving the construction *giết chết* ("to kill") to be conceptualized metaphorically as "to destroy." The construction then takes a syntactic slot on the tree diagram, as illustrated in Figure 1 below (compared to Figure 2 with *bắn chết* in a causative-resultative construction below, where the syntactic slot of mT2 takes only one word as the predicate).

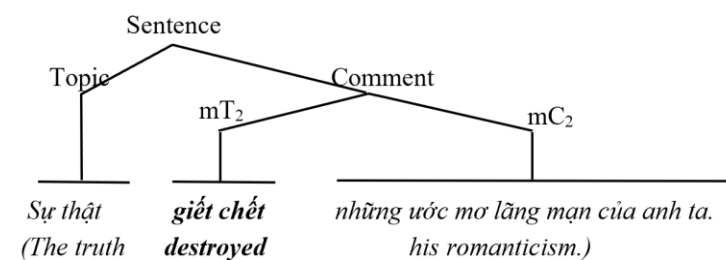


Figure 1. Syntactic Analyzing Example 12 With *Giết Chết* ("To Destroy") as an SVC

Also, in Examples 8 and 10, the verbal constructions *leo lên* ("to advance" or "to get promoted to") and *bỏ qua* ("to ignore" or "to overlook") undergo a process of grammaticalization and lexicalization (Aikhenvald & Dixon, 2006; Aikhenvald, 2018) to change the prepositions *lên* ("up") and *qua* ("pass") to verbs and then lexicalize these verbal constructions to SVCs. Similarly, the phenomenon can be found with *rơi vào* ("to fall into" or "to encounter") in Example 13, *bước vào* ("to step into" or "to enter") in Example 14, *thoát khỏi* ("to escape" or "to overcome") in Example 15, and *đứng lên* ("to stand up" or "to rise") in Example 16.

Ex. 13. *Anh ta rơi vào tình huống rất khó khăn.* ("He **encountered** a difficult situation.")

Ex. 14. *Cô ấy bước vào một giai đoạn mới của cuộc đời.* ("She **entered** a new phase of her life.")

Ex. 15. *Cô ấy thoát khỏi nỗi sợ hãi.* ("She **overcame** the fear.")

Ex. 16. *Cô ấy đứng lên đấu tranh cho quyền lợi của mình.* ("She **rose** to fight for her rights.")

The phenomenon reflects a common tendency towards grammaticalization of the minor verb within asymmetrical constructions with different languages, such as Cantonese (Matthew, 2006) or Tetun Dili, an Austronesian language spoken on the island of Timor (Hajek, 2006). In Vietnamese, this phenomenon is understood as cases of polysemy or homonymy (Đông, 2014; Hoa, 2016) and occurs when the predicate arguments are abstract. Asymmetrical constructions, nevertheless, are not strictly fixed verb-verb constructions in Vietnamese like the symmetrical type of SVCs. In the above examples, adverbs can be used to interfere with these SVCs, as these SVCs can be translated into

English with two words instead of one. In the author's opinion, when an adverb interferes with the construction of SVCs, destroying the fixedness of the SVCs, the construction is not included in the SVCs, and the core verb of the construction is used metaphorically, with the preposition plus its argument turning out to be the predicate argument.

(b). Non-SVC Constructions

1. Non-Lexical Autonomy Verbal Constructions

Such a type of verb-formation construction exists in a large part of the Vietnamese language, usually with the term “verb compounds.” This type of verb formation is excluded from the SVCs by the property of lexical autonomy when one or more verbs in the construction is unable to independently occur on its own right in another sentence structure. In the following examples, the constructions *phấn đấu* (“to strive”), *tập trung* (“to focus”), and *đề cử* (“to nominate”) are the non-lexical autonomy verbal constructions.

Ex. 17. *Anh ta đã phấn đấu nhiều năm và tập trung toàn bộ năng lực của mình cho công việc.* (“He has strived for many years and dedicated all his efforts to the work.”)

Ex. 18. *Ban Giám đốc đề cử vào vị trí anh ta mong muốn.* (“The Board of Directors nominated him for the position he had been aspiring to.”)

In Vietnamese, a significant number of verb-verb compounds have at least one component that lacks its lexical meaning, especially when the verb comes from Chinese. These verbs, however, are unable to occur independently in any structure with a relatable meaning.

2. Lexicalized Verbal Constructions

Lexicalized verbal constructions largely relate to the constructions in which the components are real Vietnamese, not borrowed from Chinese. These constructions are considered verbs in the sentence structure, taking a single syntactic slot; however, at least one component of the construction is in a different word class; that is, it is not a verb. For example, *câu nhàu* (“to grumble” or “to nag”) and *tán tỉnh* (“to flirt”) in Examples 19 and 20 below.

Ex. 19. *Vợ tôi suốt ngày cứ câu nhàu chuyện tiền bạc.* (“My wife keeps nagging about money all day.”)

Ex. 20. *Anh ta cứ theo tán tỉnh con bé đó suốt ngày.* (“He keeps chasing after that girl all the time.”)

In Exercise 19, both *câu* and *nhàu* are not verbs in the sense of the construction; however, the construction is lexicalized into a verb when these words act together in the construction. In Example 20, the verb *tán* has its lexical autonomy, but the verb *tình* is unable to occur independently in another structure with the relatable meaning. These constructions, therefore, are excluded from the SVCs by the property of “fixed verb-verb combinations”.

3. Verb-Verb Predicate Argument Constructions

This type of verb-formation construction also takes a single syntactic unit in the sentence analysis tree diagram. However, such a single syntactic unit can be divided into minor T2 and minor C2 when the relation of the two verbs is a predicate-argument relation involving a hierarchical structure where the predicate governs its arguments, and the arguments depend on the predicate for their interpretation. This means that the V2 in the construction is not independent but syntactically and semantically dependent (Haspelmath, 2016). In Vietnamese, the type of verb-verb predicate argument construction relates chiefly to the verbs *muốn* (“to want”) and *định* (“to intend”), as in Examples 21 and 22 below.

Ex. 21. *Anh muốn biết thì cứ đi hỏi hắn ta.* (“If you want to know the issue, go ask him!”)

Ex. 22. *Anh định la à, thì cứ la lên đi.* (“You want to scream out, don’t you? Go ahead!”)

4. Causative-Resultative Constructions

Aikhenvald and Dixon (2006) and Aikhenvald (2018) believe cause-effect or cause-result constructions are SVCs when the constructions “refer to a sequence of interconnected actions” (Aikhenvald, 2018, p. 2) and “the second verb clearly states the successful outcome of the [first verb] action” (Aikhenvald, 2018, p. 181). However, in Vietnamese, the causative-resultative construction *giết chết* (“kill” or “die”; “to kill”) or *bắn chết* (“shoot” or “die”) in the sentence *Anh ta bắn chết hai con hổ* (“He killed two tigers”) is classified as an SVC for different reasons.

(1). Shared Arguments

The two verbs take their own, and different, subjects; Verb 1 takes the subject of the sentence as its own subject, while Verb 2 takes the subject of Verb 1 as its own subject.

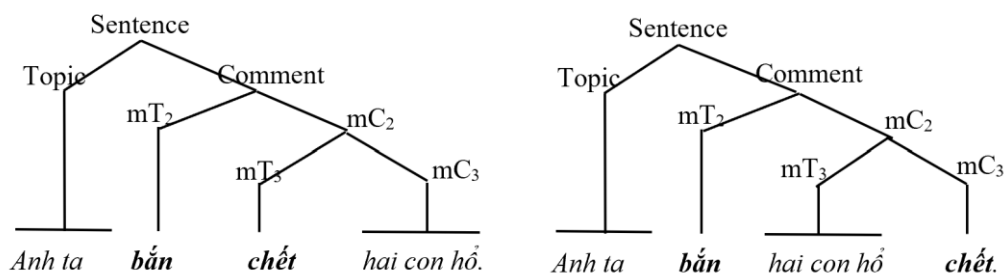
(2). The Resultative Unaccusative Verbs

In Vietnamese, where causative verbs do not encode the semantic property of “result,” a complement with a verb is used to show the result of the causative verb. Such a verb belongs to the resultative unaccusative verbs mentioning the motion, space, and state of the object when being affected by the causative verb. On the other hand, Vietnamese unaccusative verbs, different from other SVO languages, can occur either in front of or behind their subjects, as in Examples 20 and 21 below.

Ex. 23. *Anh ta bắn chết hai con hổ.* (“He shot two tigers dead.”)

Ex. 24. *Anh ta bắn hai con hổ chết.* (“He shot two tigers dead.”)

In Exercises 23 and 24, both *chết hai con hổ* and *hai con hổ chết* are the comment, or predicate arguments, of the topic *bắn* under the topic–comment theory. Hao (1991, 2004) names structures such as *chết hai con hổ* as “a sentence without a topic” (p. 173). In Figures 2a and 2b, these “sentences without topic” take the verb *bắn* (“to shoot”) as their topics. Therefore, the fixedness of the construction does not exist, so it cannot be accepted as an SVC. Figures 2a and 2b, below, apply the topic–comment theory to analyze the sentences of Examples 23 and 24, above, to illustrate the issue.



Figures 2a. and 2b. Syntactic Analysis of Examples 23 and 24 With “bắn” as the Syntactic Unit

5. Motion Verb-Directional Preposition Constructions

The motion verb-directional preposition constructions are common in studies relating to Vietnamese SVCs. This type consists of Verb 1 referring to the motion action and the preposition referring to the direction of Verb 1, as in Examples 25 to 28 below.

Ex. 25. *Những đứa bé bò ngang qua sàn nhà.* (“The babies crawled across the floor.”)

Ex. 26. *Họ leo lên núi.* (“They climbed up the mountain.”)

Ex. 27. *Tôi nhảy lên xe buýt.* (“I hopped on the bus.”)

Ex. 28. *Tôi rơi vào một cái hố.* (“I fell into a hole.”)

This type of verbal construction is considered SVCs in not a few Vietnamese studies; the constructions, however, violate many properties of SVCs to be included in the concept of SVCs. First, the components in the constructions consist of a verb and a preposition. Many Vietnamese linguists consider *ngang* (“across”), *lên* (“up”), *vào* (“into”), and so on, to be verbs, not prepositions, when these words can take the position of a verb in the sentence structure, such as *Chim về tổ* (“Birds return to their nest”), *Tàu về Hà Nội* (“The train returns to Hanoi”), and *Rắn vào hang* (“Snakes enter their cave”). However, these structures are just the simplified forms of *Chim bay về tổ* (Birds fly back to their nest), *Tàu chạy về Hà Nội* (“The train runs back to Hanoi”), and *Rắn bò vào hang* (“Snakes crawl into the cave”) when the verb manner of each sentence is presupposed (Lai, 1977, 1981, 1989). Also, these constructions accept an adverb to interfere and modify the verb, not the construction as a whole. Furthermore, when these constructions are supposedly translated into English, a non-serialized language, two words are used in English rather than one word, as the SVC property of translation requires.

Moreover, the prosodic property of SVCs also excludes such constructions when there is a short pause between the motion verb and the phrase that follows when the sentence is pronounced naturally. Thus, the type of motion verb-directional preposition constructions is hard to consider a type of Vietnamese SVCs.

IV. CONCLUSION

Reviewing the literature relating to the definitions as well as the inconsistency in the definitions, based on the native speakers' conceptualization of Vietnamese, this paper strives to introduce properties for the concept of Vietnamese SVCs to clarify the issue. Establishing eight properties of the SVCs, consisting of (a). fixed verb-verb combinations, (b). lexical meaning, (c). lexical autonomy, (d). syntactic structure, (e). shared arguments, (f). negation, (g). translation into non-serialization languages, and (h). no intonation break, the paper explores two types of Vietnamese SVCs, of which one is non-lexicalized SVCs in which the lexical meaning of the verbs in the construction is compositional and the activity mentioned by the verbs in the construction is transparent to the meaning of the verbs, and one is lexicalized SVCs in which the meaning of the constructions is lexicalized metaphorically or figuratively and the activity mentioned by the constructions is not transparent to the lexical meaning of the verbs, but just transferred by some properties of the semantic fields of the verbs. In addition, the paper demystifies the differences between Vietnamese SCVs and non-SVC constructions. The non-SVC constructions are (a). non-lexical autonomy verbal constructions, abundant in Vietnamese, which violate the SVC properties when at least one verb in the construction lacks its lexical autonomy to occur independently in other sentence structures, (b). lexicalized verbal construction, of which at least one word in the construction is not a verb to be included in SVCs, (c). verb-verb predicate argument constructions, of which the second component in the constructions is the argument of the first component, (d). causative-resultative constructions, these constructions are non-fixed verb-verb constructions when the resultative unaccusative verb, plus its subject, is the argument of the predicate, which is the causative verb in the constructions, and (e). motion verb-directional preposition constructions; this sort of construction is also a non-fixed verbal construction when the second word in the “supposed”

construction is a preposition rather than a verb, and the construction accepts an adverb to interfere with the construction to modify the first component only.

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