

ASPECTS OF THE PHONOLOGY OF ESAN SERIAL VERB CONSTRUCTIONS

Abstract

Contemporary treatments of the serial verb construction provide a broader base for identifying them. In light of these current approaches, this study identifies symmetrical and asymmetrical serial verbs constructions in the Esan language and some phonological characteristics which may be peculiar to them. These characteristics are identified on the basis of existing empirical studies on the phonology of the language. Data for the study were obtained from both primary and secondary sources. Serial verbs constructions were extracted from manual recordings of utterances of Esan native speakers domiciled in some speech areas of the language. Data from previous works on Esan serial verb constructions were also examined. Available data shows that Esan features both symmetrical and asymmetrical types of serial verbs constructions. Findings show that these constructs may also be trisyllabic in the language and not only bisyllabic as claimed in earlier studies. Tonal changes on Esan serial verbs constructions include the raising of initial Low tone to a High in the declarative, interrogative and imperative moods. The study improves on earlier efforts on the study of Esan serial verbs construction and complements earlier basis for recognizing this structural type in the language. The study would enhance the documentation of Esan.

Introduction

The grammatical feature called ‘Serial Verb Constructions’ (SVCs), has attracted the attention of Linguists in recent times. This interest in SVCs may not be unconnected with what Dixon (2006) refers to as its “...robust grammatical construction type” and the fact that it “...carries a considerable functional and semantic load.” Aikhaenvald (2006) defines an SVC typologically as “...a sequence of verbs which act together as a single predicate, without any overt marker of coordination, subordination or syntactic dependency of any other sort...” According to Yuka (2014), studies of the languages of West Africa, especially those of the Kwa family (Bamgbose 1974, Williamson 1965 and 1989, Ndimele 1996, Kari 1975b and 2000, Yuka 2008 among others) have identified the prominent peculiarity of conflated sentences as a trait of languages that exhibit verb serialization. A serial verb construction has generally been understood to be “...a type of construction in which two or more verbs are strung together without an overt connecting morpheme.” (Ndimele 1996:127). The verbs are not linked by a conjunction thereby “...sharing a common surface subject, one or more common aspectual/tense/polarity markers (Williamson, 1989:30). Bodomo (2004; 2006) analyse SVCs as complex predicates which undergo syntactic operations as a single unit, while Kambon et al (2015) suggest that they contain non verbal elements which may not be overlooked in the consideration of their structure. This study investigates serial verbs constructions in Esan language. It identifies and examines aspects of the phonology of this group of verbs in the language. The first part of the work is a re-identification of SVCs in the language within contemporary treatments while in the second part, an identification of segmental and prosodic features, which these structures exhibit in the language, are presented. In a prior attempt at examining Esan SVCs, Ejele (1994) describes them as a string consisting of verbs that occur next to each other without an overt connector and with a common subject. The work also states that the meaning of an Esan SVC is not usually a direct function of the meanings of the constituent verbs. The present study of Esan SVCs is conducted in light of contemporary cross-linguistic typological studies.

Esan is spoken by the people commonly known as the Ishans. The speakers call themselves ‘Esan’. The predominant speech area is located in Southern Nigeria. The population of the native speakers of the language is put at 587,858 (2006 National Population Commission). The language has a proposed orthography (Okojie and Ejele, 1987) which has been critiqued and

reviewed (Ikoyo-Eweto. 2013). Esan is a member of the North Central branch of Edoid along with Edo(Bini), and Ora-Emai-Iuleha. The Edoid group is of the New Benue Congo of the Niger Congo Phylum.

1. Composition of serial verb constructions

Recent cross-linguistic typological studies of SVCs attest that they occur in about one-third of the languages of the world. Aikhenvald's (2006) definition of a serial verb construction typologically as "...a sequence of verbs which act together as a single predicate, without any overt marker of coordination, subordination or syntactic dependency of any sort...", presents the construct as a single event. He states further that an SVC is monoclausal, possessing identical intonational properties as those of a monoverbal clause, with the constituent verbs having just one tense, aspect and polarity value and sharing case and other arguments. In his words, "Each component of an SVC must be able to occur on its own and may or may not share transitivity values."

Current treatments separate them into two basic typologies of asymmetrical and symmetrical. Dixon (2006) describes the asymmetrical variety as composed of a major member, which is the head of the SVC, is determined by the meaning of the minor member, which member may increase the valency of the major verb in a causative construction or reduce it in a passive type construction. He describes the symmetrical variety as composed of verbs with equal status from an unrestricted class, neither of which may be regarded as the head of the SVC. Studies show that nearly all languages with SVCs feature both varieties, with the asymmetrical generally outnumbering the symmetrical. The grammatical properties and parameters for identifying an SVC are highlighted as follows.

- There is no mark of linkage or subordination between the verbs that comprise an SVC.
- Each verb in an SVC has the potential of the sole verb in a clause but their meanings must be relatable when used in an SVC.
- The SVC functions like a single predicate as it features one intonation group and in most cases, no pause is possible in the middle. This feature also affects tense, aspect, evidentiality, modality, mood, negation and markers of subordination and questioning.
- An SVC generally has its transitivity value.
- All the verbs in an SVC almost always share at least one argument. In some languages, if the component verbs are all transitive, they share the same objects.
- The 'switch function' phenomenon also occurs in some SVCs. This is a situation where an argument is in subject function for one verb and in non-subject function for the other. Typically, the O argument of the first verb is S argument for the second verb.
- The verbs in an SVC may make up one word and become like an idiom (lexicalized) or may remain separate words.
- The components of an SVC may be contiguous or non-contiguous. In the contiguous type, no morpheme may occur between the constituent verbs whereas in the non-contiguous type, an object NP may intrude between the verbs which constitute the SVC.

2. Esan serial verb constructions

The following is a collection of Esan Serial Verb Constructions from field work conducted for the purpose of this study. Available data are presented in two tables. Table 1 comprises the

assymetrical typology while table 2 contains the symmetrical. Some features exhibited by Esan SVCs are also indicated in the data.

(1) a. Assymetrical Esan SVCs

s/n	Esan sentence	SVC in citation	constituent order	lexical status
i.	ò dé mú ólè he fall catch him 'he came across him unexpectedly.'	dè mú 'to encounter unexpectedly'	contiguous	idiomatic/lexicalized
ii.	ò sán rá òlòghò he jumped cross flood 'he crossed over the flood'	sà nrá 'to overcome (challenge)'	contiguous	idiomatic/lexicalized
iii.	ò né wílí á he run loss pst. 'he escaped'	né wílíá 'to escape'	contiguous	Idiomatic/lexicalized
iv.	ò ré kpá ìmè he use support me 'he helped me'	rè kpá 'to help'	contiguous	lexicalized
v.	ò ré húmwún ólè he use forgive him 'he forgave him'	rè húmwún 'to forgive'	contiguous	lexicalized
vi.	ò né íkpòn tán he take clothes spread 'he spread clothes'	nè tán 'to spread'	non-contiguous	lexicalized
vii.	ò riè só he take shout He screamed	riè só to scream	contiguous	lexicalized
viii.	ò só tíé ìmè he shout call me 'he called me loudly'	sò tíé 'to call loudly'	contiguous	lexicalized
ix.	mù ómò rè carry child come 'bring the child'	mùn ré to bring	non-contiguous	lexicalized
x.	ò dé gwòghò he fall break 'he had a bad fall'	dè gwóghó 'to have a bad fall'	contiguous	lexicalized

(1) b. Symetrical Esan SVCs

s/n	Esan sentence	SVC in citation	constituent order	lexical status
i.	ìmè dé mudìà I fall stand 'though I fell,I'm standing'	dè mùdjà 'survive dangerous occurrence'	contiguous	idiomatic/ lexicalized
ii.	ò gbé émwìn lè he kill something eat 'he got a bonus'	gbè lé to get lucky	non-contiguous	Idiomatic/ lexicalized
iii.	ómò rié éyèn yèn child take breast suck 'the child suckled breast'	rjè yén to suckle 'to be pampered'	Non-contiguous	Idiomatic/ lexicalized
iv.	ò rié ótién lè 'he take cherry eat' 'he has eaten up the cherry'	riè lé 'to eat up'	non-contiguous	lexicalized
v.	ò rié áyòn dá he take wine drink 'he drank up the wine'	riè dá 'to drink up'	non contiguous	lexicalized
vi.	òfùré rié èwù yó òfùré take dress wear 'òfùré has dressed up'	riè yó 'to dress up'	non contiguous	lexicalized
vii.	ò né isòn lé he defecate feces eat 'he ate his feces'	nè lé to fall into disrepute/disgrace	non contiguous	idiomatic /lexicalized
viii.	ò dígùè túé ìmè he kneel greet me 'he greeted me in bended knee'	dìgwè twé 'to genuflect in greeting'	contiguous	lexicalized
ix.	ò ré èlò gbèrá ólè he use eye pass over him 'he ignored her	rè èlò gbèrá 'ignore/overlook'	non contiguous	idiomatic
x.	ijohni rié gbèrá John take pass 'John passed by briskly'	riè gbèrá pass by briskly/ to surpass	contiguous	idiomatic/ lexicalized

3. A Phonology of Esan Serial Verb Constructions

A phonological examination of SVCs in Esan requires a fore knowledge of basic features of its phonology. These are presented as follows.

3.1 Previous relevant works on Esan sound system

The existing phonemic inventory for Esan from previous works provide that Esan phonemic system comprises twenty-five consonant phonemes, seven oral and five nasal vowels which contrast with their oral counterparts (Ejele 1982, Osiruemu 2010). The vowel segments include [i, e, ε, u, o, ɔ, a, ɪ, ʌ, ʊ, ẽ, ỹ] while the consonants are given as [p, b, t, d, f, v, s, z, k, g, kp, gb, h, β, x, ɣ, ʃ, ʈ, dʒ, m, n, l, w, j, r]

Esan tonal system

As a tone language, Esan features tonal contrasts on lexical items. This occurrence refers to the fact that a change in tonal configuration of a word results in a simultaneous change in meaning without a change in its segmental constitution. This occurrence is illustrated as follows.

- (2) a. Tonal contrasts in Esan
- | | | | |
|------|----------|--------|----|
| i. | / éfɛ / | ‘rat’ | HL |
| ii. | / èfɛ / | ‘edge’ | LL |
| iii. | / ɔkpá / | ‘one’ | LH |
| iv. | / ɔkpà / | ‘cock’ | LL |

Previous studies on Esan tonal system identify two level (high, low) and the falling contour tone at the systematic phonetic level of representation as illustrated below.

- (2) b.
- | | | |
|------|----------|----------|
| i. | / àmè / | ‘water’ |
| ii. | / únù | ‘mouth’ |
| iii. | / àbâ / | ‘father’ |
| iv. | / óxwô / | ‘woman’ |

Esan syllable structure.

Following Osiruemu (2007), of the possible syllable structures across languages, Esan features two : the V syllable type comprising only a vowel segment and the CV or CCV syllable type comprising one or more consonants and a vowel segment. The CCV structural type is rare and usually occurs as a result of the glide formation process which the language features. Esan words in the following illustrations are separated into syllables (.) as shown below.

- (2) c.
- | Esan word | | syllable type |
|---------------|---------|---------------|
| i. òn | ‘drink’ | V |
| ii. ú.kpòn | ‘cloth’ | V . CV |
| iii. á.bhì.lì | ‘oil’ | V . CV. CV |

3.2 Phonological features of Esan SVCs

Esan serial verbs constructions are indicated for two phonological behaviours of syllable structure, and tonal patterning. Observations from available data are presented as follows.

Syllable structure

Previous treatments of the SVC describes it as mainly constituted of two monosyllabic verb stems which result in a bisyllabic structure featuring a V_1V_2 constituent structure (Osiruemu 2005). The present study deviates from this treatment of Esan SVCs. Available data showed that a serial verbs construction in Esan may also comprise bisyllabic verb stems and may result in trisyllabic structures (see...). Esan SVCs composed of two monosyllabic verbs would bear a CVCV or a CVCCV structure, while that composed of a monosyllabic and a bisyllabic verb would feature a CVCVCV structure (see Tables I, II).

Tonal patterning of Esan SVCs

Tone is identified as a pitch phenomenon. Pitch is the perception of frequency of vibration of the vocal chords per second. Egbokhare (2004) explains that "... a high frequency of vocal chords vibration is perceived as high pitch" while "... a low frequency of vibration is perceived as low pitch." Research shows that pitch is present in voiced segments only and is continually changing in speech depending on the changes in voice production. The melodic pattern of speech is therefore a result of fluctuation in pitch. When this speech melody results in a change in meaning of a word, it is called "tone". Thus a tone language is "... a language having lexically significant, contrastive but relative pitch on each syllable." (Pike, 1948). This definition refers to the occurrence in most African languages where the different pitch levels contrast, causing a change in meaning of words.

Monosyllabic and bisyllabic verbs in Esan bear a L and a LH tonal pattern respectively, at the underlying level of representation. This condition accounts for an all L tonal pattern in SVCs made up of monosyllabic verbs, while SVCs composed of a monosyllabic and a bisyllabic verb bear a LLH pattern underlingly. Four grammatical moods-declarative, interrogative, command, continuous - were captured in the identification of tonal modifications on Esan SVCs as follows.

Bisyllabic SVCs - An Esan SVC constituted of two monosyllabic verbs is bisyllabic and features a LL tonal pattern underlingly. It undergoes tonal modifications in sentences as follows.

In declaratives – In statements, Esan bisyllabic SVCs of both the contiguous and non contiguous variety, feature a HL pattern, except where it takes an object. In the latter case, it bears an al H tone pattern.

(3) a.	Contiguous	Non contiguous	Surface tone pattern
i.	ò <u>nén</u> <u>lè</u> 'he is disgraced'	ò <u>nén</u> <u>ìsòn</u> <u>lè</u> 'he ate his feces'	HL
ii.	ò <u>rjé</u> <u>sò</u> 'he screamed'		HL
iii.	ò <u>gbé</u> <u>lè</u> 'he got a bonus'	ò <u>gbé</u> <u>émwìn</u> <u>lè</u> 'he got a bonus'	HL
iv.	ómò <u>ryé</u> <u>yèn</u> 'the child suckled'	ómò <u>rjé</u> <u>éyèn</u> <u>yèn</u> 'the child suckled breast'	HL
v.	ò <u>dé</u> <u>mú</u> <u>ólèn</u> 'he took him by surprise'		H

In interrogatives – In questions, an Esan bisyllabic SVC acquires a final HL (falling contour) followed by the characteristic final question extra H tone (Ejele 2004). The exception is in when it takes a direct object, in which case, an all H pattern is realized.

(3) b.	Contiguous	Non contiguous	Surface tone pattern
i.	ò nén lê é 'did he get disgraced?'	ò nén ìsòn lê é 'did he eat his feces'	H HL
ii.	ò rjé sô ó 'did he scream?'		H HL
iii.	ò gbé lê é 'did he get a bonus?'	ó gbé émwìn lê é	H HL
iv.	ò rjé yê én 'did he get pampered'	ómò rjé éyèn yê én 'did the child suckle breast'	H HL
v.	ò dé múr ólê én 'did he take him by surprise?'		H

In imperatives – Both the contiguous and non-contiguous bisyllabic Esan SVC features an all H tone pattern, with or without an object.

(3) c.	contiguous	non contiguous	surface tone pattern
i.	nén lé! '(you) be disgraced!'	nén ìsòn lé! 'eat(your) feaces!'	H
ii.	rjé só! '(you) scream!'		H
iii.	gbé lé! '(you) get a bonus!'	gbé émwìn lé!	H
iv.	ryé yén! '(you) get pampered!'	rjé éyèn yén '(you) suckle breast!'	H
v.	dé múr ólèn! '(you) take him by surprise!'		H

In habitual constructions – All the constituents of a habitual continuous sentence including the bisyllabic SVC features an all H tone pattern in Esan.

(3) d.	contiguous	non contiguous	surface tone pattern
i.	mí ómó nén lé 'the child gets disgraced'	mí ómó nén ísón lé 'the child eats his feaces'	H
ii.	mí ómó rjé só 'the child screams'		H
iii.	mí ómó gbé lé 'the child gets a bonus'	mí ómó gbé émwín lé	H
iv.	mí ómó ryé yén 'the child gets pampered!'	mí ómó rjé éyèn yén 'the child suckles breast'	H
v.	mí ó dé múr ólèn 'he takes him by surprise'		H

In continuous structures- In continuous sentences, the bisyllabic Esan SVC retains its underlying all L tonal pattern, barring when the contiguous typology takes an object. In the latter case, an all high pattern is featured.

(3) e.	contiguous	non contiguous	surface tone pattern
i.	ò á nèn lè	ó á nè ìsòn lè	L
	'he is being disgraced' 'he is eating his feces'		
ii.	ò á rjè sò		L
	'he is screaming'		
iii.	ò á gbè lè	ó á gbè èmwìn lè	L
	'he is getting a bonus'		
iv.	ò á ryè yèn	ómò á rjè èyén yèn	L
	'he is being pampered' 'the child is suckling breast'		
v.	ò á dé múr ólèn		H
	'he is taking him by surprise'		

Trisyllabic SVCs – An Esan SVC constituted of one monosyllabic and one bisyllabic verb stem is trisyllabic and bears a LLH tonal pattern underlying. It undergoes tonal modifications in sentences as follows.

In declaratives – Trisyllabic SVCs of both the contiguous and non-contiguous variety in Esan feature a HL tone pattern, even when it takes an object .

(4) a.	contiguous	non contiguous	surface tone pattern
i.	ò dé gwòghò		HL
	'he had a bad fall'		
ii.	ò dé mǔrdjà		HL
	'he survived a fall'		
iii.		ò ré èlò gbèrà ólè	HL
		'he ignored him'	

In interrogatives – the trisyllabic SVC, like its bisyllabic counterpart, is characterized by a final falling (contour) tone followed by the extra rising question tone. When this SVC type takes an object, the final tone is a H rather than a falling contour.

(4) b.	contiguous	non contiguous	surface tone pattern
i.	ò dé gwóghô ó?		H HL
	'did he have a bad fall?'		
ii.	ò dé mǔrdjà á?		H L HL
	'did he survive a fall?'		
iii.		ò ré èlò gbèrà ólê é?	H L H
		'did he ignore him'	

In imperatives – the trisyllabic Esan SVC features an all H tone pattern like its bisyllabic counterpart.

(4)	c.	contiguous	non contiguous	surface tone pattern
	i.	dé gwóghó!		H
		‘(you) have a bad fall!’		
	ii.	dé múrdjá!		H
		‘(you) survive a fall!’		
	iii.		ré éló gbérá ólè!	H
			‘(you) ignore him!’	

In habitual structures – trisyllabic Esan SVCs feature a H L and an all H tone pattern.

(4)	d.	contiguous	non contiguous	surface tone pattern
	i.	mó dé gwòghò		HL
		‘he falls badly’		
	ii.	mó dé múrdjá		H
		‘he survives a fall’		
	iii.		mó ré éló gbérá ólè	HL
			‘he ignores him’	

Continuous structures – Esan trisyllabic SVCs also feature tonal patterns similar to those of the habitual counterpart, barring when it takes a subject and acquires an initial H tone.

(4)	e.	contiguous	non contiguous	surface tone pattern
	i.	ò á dé gwòghò		HL
		‘he is having a bad fall’		
	ii.	ò á dé múrdjá		H
		‘he is surviving a fall’		
	iii.		ò á rè èló gbérá ólè	LHL
			‘he is ignoring him’	

Conclusion

This study has examined serial verb constructions (SVC) in the Esan language. Its focus was on some phonological characteristics of this group of verbs in the language, which is a member of a sub branch of the Proto- Edoid group. Contemporary treatment of this grammatical structure separates them into the asymmetrical and symmetrical types. The contiguous and non -contiguous varieties which may cut across these two main groups of SVCs are also indicated.

Available data showed that Esan language features the symmetrical and asymmetrical types of serial verbs construction . This present study also faults earlier treatments of this structural type in Esan. In this regard, this study shows that an Esan SVC may also be trisyllabic as it may be constituted of a monosyllabic and a bisyllabic verb stem and not only of two monosyllabic verb stems as stated in earlier studies. An examination of tonal patterning on these structures in the

language, showed that all initial low tones of the majority of SVCs, irrespective of typological boundaries, are raised to a high. In imperatives, both bisyllabic and trisyllabic Esan SVCs bear an all high tone pattern.

This study is a contribution to the study of serial verbs construction in the Edoid group of languages. It would enhance studies on the grammar as well as the documentation of the Esan language.

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