CHAPTER 4

Valency-Increasing SVCs and Grammaticalization

4.1 The Phenomenon of Valency-Increasing SVCs

4.1.1 Adposition or Verbs?

The valency-increasing function of serialization is achieved by introducing a second verb into the core of the clause—a verb that shares at least one core argument with the other verb, but that brings with it another core argument. It is not the valency of either verb that is increased by this process, but the valency of the entire clause.

Many authors have observed that, in such a situation, one component of the event may be evaluated as the ‘main event’ and the rest as the ‘circumstances’ (Givón (1975); Lord (1973)). Lord (1973, p. 293) gives an example:

Because location is generally considered to be less significant than other aspects of events, in the serial construction the Locative verb phrase is not as important as the other verb semantically (the meaning of the sentence is clear…)\(^1\)

The verb that is less semantically prominent and that marks the circumstances, may lose certain semantic and syntactic characteristics, and be reanalysed as an adposition. Instead of being expressed by a series of two verbs, the event would now be expressed by one verb and one adposition. While the verb that undergoes the change to adposition is semantically depleted, the one that retains its verbal status may become more complex.

There has been considerable debate concerning this issue. In a language that employs serialization, should a morpheme that is homophonous with a verb and that serves to introduce the circumstances of an event into the

\(^1\) This distinction between the ‘main event’ or ‘more semantically prominent’ verb, on the one hand, and the ‘circumstances’ or ‘less semantically prominent’ verb on the other, overlaps with but is not identical to the distinction between ‘major’ and ‘minor’ verbs drawn by Aikhenvald (2006b, p. 22). This latter distinction relates to whether a verb is from an open class (a ‘major’ verb) or a closed class (a ‘minor’ verb). In many cases, where there is a distinction between the ‘main event’ and the ‘circumstances’ in a serial verb construction, the verb that marks the main event would be a ‘major’ verb, and the one that marks the circumstances would be a ‘minor’ verb.
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The difference is an important one. If it is a verb in a serial construction, then it is introducing an argument that is part of the core, even though an argument fulfilling a similar role in another language may not appear as a core argument. If it is an adposition, on the other hand, it may introduce either a core argument, which is part of the logical structure of the predicate (e.g. an inner locative), or a peripheral argument, which is not (e.g. an outer locative, a time phrase, etc.).

The term ‘coverb’ has been widely employed to refer to morphemes that are homophonous with a verb in the language concerned (or at least in some stage of the history of that language), but that seem to fulfil a function similar to that of an adposition in many other languages. This term has been used in studies of Chinese, and also adopted by linguists and teachers working elsewhere, particularly on Southeast Asian languages and some African languages. Other terms, for example ‘Verbid’ (Ansre, 1966), ‘Prepositional-Verb’ (Pawley, 1973, pp. 142–147), and ‘Verbal-Preposition’ (Durie, 1988), have also been coined. In some cases it is not completely clear whether the use of terms such as these is meant to identify a new word class, separate from both verbs and adpositions, or simply designed to avoid any clear commitment regarding what part of speech these words really belong to.

Some linguists, notably Li and Thompson (1973, 1974a) and Clark (1978, 1979a), have argued that all ‘coverbs’ in the languages they describe should, in fact, simply be regarded as derived prepositions. The reason why the term ‘preposition’, rather than the more general ‘adposition’, is used in the discussion of this issue by these and many other authors is twofold. Firstly, the syntactic typology of the verb serializing languages they have investigated—for example Mandarin, Vietnamese, Thai, Khmer, White Hmong and Niger-Congo African languages—is one in which the verb generally precedes the direct object. An adposition that develops from such a verb would, consequently, also precede its object; hence the term ‘preposition’. In a serializing language in which the object precedes the verb (such as Tibeto-Burman languages like Lahu and Lisu, or many of the languages of Papua New Guinea), on the other hand, an erstwhile verb might, presumably, develop into a postposition. However, the development of verbs into postpositions is not, in fact, widely attested, and this is

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2 In studies of Chinese, the term ‘coverb’ has often been used for such morphemes not only when they do have a corresponding verb in the modern language, but also in cases where the corresponding verb is no longer used as a verb (e.g. bă ‘Archaic Chinese ‘take’) (Li & Thompson, 1973, p. 257).