CHAPTER 5

Superficially Similar Constructions

There are a considerable number of constructions in White Hmong which superficially resemble serial verb constructions, but which are not regarded as involving verb serialization for a variety of reasons. In this section these constructions are described, and the reasons why they do not qualify as serial verb constructions are briefly reviewed.

5.1 Elaborate Expressions

Elaborate expressions are an aesthetic device, generally involving four components, and found in many of the languages of Southeast Asia, including Thai (Haas, 1964, pp. xvii–xviii), Lahu (Matisoff, 1973, pp. 81–86, 297–301), and Burmese (Wheatley, 1990, p. 850). These expressions utilise devices such as repetition and similarity of sound and meaning, making the language sound more beautiful and balanced, and less abrupt. Some types of elaborate expressions in White Hmong are similar to Cotemporal SVCs, particularly those that portray cotemporal actions. Both the similarities and the differences are worthy of note.

In White Hmong, elaborate expressions are referred to as *lus ua txwm* (word make pair) ‘paired words’. Johns and Strecker (1982, p. 162) explain:

> Paired words typically occur in four-part expressions in which the first and third parts are related in some way and the second and fourth parts are related in some way.

They illustrate this with the examples below, in which the first and third words are identical, while the second and fourth are semantically similar in the first case, and almost synonymous in the second:

(1) $\text{khwv iab khwv daw}$
    
    toil be.bitter toil be.salty
    
    ‘arduous toil’

(2) $\text{kav teb kav chaw}$
    
    rule land rule place
    
    ‘rule a country’
In example (1), each half of the expression is composed of a noun modified by an intransitive stative verb (NVNV), the whole expression thus functioning as a noun phrase, with the pattern ABAC. In (2), each half comprises a transitive verb followed by a noun (VNVN), and the whole functions as a predicate, again with the pattern ABAC. Mortensen (2003: 17–22) illustrates a wide variety of other possible types of elaborate expression in White Hmong, including those in which each half is made up of noun plus noun, intransitive verb plus noun, verb plus verb, etc., along with the additional patterns ABCB and ABCD.

It is elaborate expressions like example (2) above that are most similar to Cotemporal SVCs. In terms of arrangement of components, they are identical to Cotemporal SVCs with transitive verbs: the first and third elements are transitive verbs and the second and fourth are NPs in O function in relation to those verbs. Semantically, like Cotemporal SVCs, they convey a strong sense of two parts of one whole—two related aspects of one event or situation.

As a result, elaborate expressions of this type tend most commonly to be treated by speakers as belonging to a single clause, rather than two separate clauses, as shown in the following examples:

(3)  
\[ \text{txij thau m ns m us kw m txuj kawm ci ta g...} \]  
\( \text{since time 3SG go study skill study art finish} \)  
\( \text{‘Since he finished learning the art [of magic]...’ (DNH 29:20)} \)

(4)  
\[ \text{yuav-tsum noj mov haus dej} \]  
\( \text{should eat rice drink water} \)  
\( \text{‘should eat and drink’} \)

(5)  
\[ \text{tsis muaj plaub muaj ntug...} \]  
\( \text{NEG have dispute have litigation} \)  
\( \text{‘don’t have legal disputes...’ (DNH 118:19)} \)

Each of the examples above shows a different operator with scope over the entire elaborate expression: the aspectual operator tag ‘finish’ in (3), the core modal operator yuav tsum ‘should’ in (4), and the negative tsis ‘not’ in (5). The elaborate expressions in these examples are clearly being treated as belonging to a single clause.

However, elaborate expressions can also involve a much looser form of juncture, namely juxtaposed clauses (see §5.2 below), in which each junct can be modified independently by operators at all levels. Examples (6) and (7) show that both juncture possibilities can and do occur with the same expression: