Croatian serial verbs compared with subjunctives and infinitives
A formal analysis

Tomislav Socanac (socanac.1@osu.edu)
Brian D. Joseph (joseph.1@osu.edu)

1. Introduction

Croatian (Cr) contains multi-verb constructions of the type exemplified in (1), featuring two imperative verbs which function as a single unit.

(1) a. Odi / Idi kupi novine!
go2sg.imp.perf go2sg.imp.imperf. buy2sg.imp. newspapers
‘Go buy newspapers!’

b. Dodi vidi ovu sliku!
come2sg.imp.perf. see2sg.imp. this picture
‘Come see this picture.’

Similar constructions can also be found in other Slavic languages such as Russian (2), Balkan languages such as Modern Greek (3), as well as in English (4).

(2) Idi uči uroki!
go2sg.imp study2sg.imp spells
‘Go study spells!’

(3) Ela pes mu!
come2sg.imp. say.2sg.imp me.gen
‘Come tell me!’

(4) a. Come see this!
b. Go get me a Coke!

We argue that Cr constructions such as those in (1) fall within the broader cross-linguistic typology of Serial Verb Constructions (SVC). SVCs are typically described as constructions consisting of two (or more) verbs, which together function as a single syntactic, semantic and prosodic unit (Aikhenvald 2006, 2018).

2. Cross-linguistic properties of SVCs

SVCs have been observed in a number of typologically diverse languages, most prominently in the isolating languages of West Africa (such as Igbo [5]) and South-East Asia (such as Tetun Dili [6] and Taba [7]).

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1 Example provided by Alina Israeli via Seelangs.
(5) **Ó ti-gbù-rù nwóké áhù.** (Igbo; Lord 1975: 28)
he beat-kill-past man that ‘He beat that man to death.’

(6) **Tuda bola mai.** (Tetun Dili; Hajek 2006: 243)
throw ball come ‘Throw the ball over here.’

(7) **n-babas welik n-mot do** (Taba; Bowden 2001: 297)
3sg.-bite pig 3sg.-die real.
‘It bit the pig dead.’

There is no precise cross-linguistic definition that applies to all SVCs, but SVCs have been shown to exhibit (more or less consistently) a number of properties that distinguish them from other multi-verb constructions across languages. The most widely observed among these properties are listed below (Zwicky 1990, Comrie 1995, Aikhenvald 2018):

(i) SVCs consist of two (or more) inflected verbs without any syntactic link or marker of dependency between them;
(ii) each verb contained within an SVC can also function as the sole verb in the clause;
(iii) SVCs function as a single predicate and thus denote a single event;
(iv) SVCs occur within a single clause (i.e. mono-clausal structure);
(v) verbs within an SVC share at least one core argument;
(vi) SVCs can inflect across tenses and other grammatical categories.

Cr constructions of the type exemplified in (1) will be shown to exhibit the bulk of the properties in (i-vi), thus justifying the use of the SVC label in this language as well.

3. **SVCs vs coordinate clauses in Cr:**

Firstly, the verbs contained within a Cr SVC can also function as the sole predicate within the clause (in accordance with the SVC criterion in [ii]):

(8) **Odi kupi novine.**
go2sg.imp buy2sg.imp newspapers
‘Go buy newspapers.’

(9) a. **Odi van.**
go2sg.imp outside
b. **Kupi novine.**
buy2sg.imp newspapers

The SVC-type clause in (8) also seems to satisfy the criterion given in (i), i.e. no syntactic link between verbs within an SVC. Nevertheless, it could be argued that (8) is in fact syntactically equivalent to the coordinate clause (CC) in (10), the only difference being that the coordinator *i ‘and’* is silent in the former case and phonetically realized in the latter.

(10) **Odi i kupi novine.**
go2sg.imp and buy2sg.imp newspapers
‘Go and buy newspapers.’
Nevertheless, we show that (8) and (10) constitute different types of clauses (despite their surface similarity): (10) exhibits properties typical of CCs, i.e. bi-clausal structure and bi-eventive interpretation, whereas (8) exhibits the characteristics typical of SVCs, i.e. mono-clausal structure and single event interpretation.

3.1 Open vs closed verb set

Both verbs within Cr CCs have an equal status and are drawn from an unbounded lexical verb set. Each of them functions as the predicate of its clause.

(11) Odi/ požuri/ uzmi novce i kupi novine.
go2sg.imp hurry-up2sg.imp take2sg.imp money and buy2sg.imp newspapers

In the case of Cr SVCs, the first verb is drawn from a bounded and very restricted set involving only verbs of motion. The second verb is drawn from an unbounded set and functions as the lexical head of the construction.

(12) Odi/ *požuri/ *uzmi novce kupi novine.
go2sg.imp hurry-up2sg.imp take2sg.imp money buy2sg.imp newspapers

‘Go/hurry up/take the money (and) buy newspapers.’

Most SVCs across languages are asymmetric in this sense, containing one ‘major’ component, i.e. a verb drawn from an unrestricted verb set, and one ‘minor’ component, chosen from a closed subset of verbs (Aikhenvald 2018).

3.2 Single vs double event interpretation

Cr SVCs also correspond to the SVC criterion in (iii), i.e. the verbs contained within a Cr SVC compose a single predicate and denote a single event. One indication of this is the ban on the use of separate temporal markers in Cr SVCs (13a), which is allowed in CCs (13b):

(13) a. * Odi sad završi zadaču poslije.
go2sg.imp now finish2sg.imp homework later

b. Odi sad i završi zadaču poslije.
go2sg.imp now and finish2sg.imp homework later

‘Go now and finish your homework later.’

3.3 Subject control

Cr SVCs can only feature one (pro) subject, appearing either in singular (14a) or in plural (14b); CCs are compatible with two separate subjects (15):

(14) a. Odi kupi / * kupite novine.
go2sg.imp buy2sg.imp buy2pl.imp newspapers

b. Odite kupite / * kupi novine.
go2pl.imp buy2pl.imp buy2sg.imp newspapers

(15) Odi i kupi / kupite novine.
go2sg.imp and buy2sg.imp buy2pl.imp newspapers
3.4 Clitic climbing

Clitic climbing from the lower to the higher verb (which typically only occurs in mono-clausal environments) is allowed in Cr SVCs (16) and disallowed in CCs (17):

(16) \textit{Odi mi kupi novine.}
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{go2sg.imp to-me-cl buy2sg.imp to-me-cl newspapers}
\end{itemize}

(17) a. \textit{Odi i kupi mi novine.}
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{go2sg.imp and buy2sg.imp to-me-cl. Newspapers}
\end{itemize}

(16-17) thus show us that Cr SVCs, unlike CCs, constitute mono-clausal structures (SVC criterion in [iv]).

4. Parallels between SVCs and other anaphoric clause structures in Cr: Formal analysis

The anaphoric properties observed in Cr SVCs in §3 are largely shared by infinitives (Inf) (18b) and control subjunctives (C-subj) (18c) (the latter being more typical of Serbian).

(18) a. \textit{Odi kupi novine.}
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{go2sg.imp buy2sg.imp newspapers [SVC]}
\end{itemize}

b. \textit{Odi kupiti novine.}
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{go2sg.imp buy-inf newspapers [Inf]}
\end{itemize}

c. \textit{Odi da kupiš novine.}
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{go2sg.imp subj. buy2.sg newspapers [C-Subj]}
\end{itemize}

All of these clauses are compatible with a single subject only (as shown by the use of indices in [19]).

(19) a. \textit{Odi_{i} kupi_{i} novine.}
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{go2sg.imp buy2sg.imp newspapers [SVC]}
\end{itemize}

b. \textit{Odi_{i} kupiti_{i} novine.}
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{go2sg.imp buy-inf newspapers [Inf]}
\end{itemize}

c. \textit{Odi_{i} da kupiš_{i}/ * kupite_{j} novine.}
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{go2sg.imp subj. buy2.sg buy2.pl newspapers [C-Subj]}
\end{itemize}

d. \textit{Ivan_{i} mora_{i} / počinje_{i} raditi_{i}^{\prime},}
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{Ivan must3sg. begin3sg. work-inf. [Inf]}
\end{itemize}

e. \textit{Ivan_{i} mora_{i} / počinje_{i} da radi_{i} / * rade_{j},}
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{Ivan must3sg. begin3sg. subj work3sg. work3pl. [C-Subj]}
\end{itemize}

Clauses such as those in (20) are also incompatible with separate spatio-temporal marking:

(20) a. \textit{jučer je Ivan morao/počeo raditi sutra.}
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{yesterday is Ivan had-to began work-inf tomorrow [Inf]}
\end{itemize}

b. * \textit{jučer je Ivan morao/počeo da radi sutra.}
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{yesterday is Ivan had-to began subj work3sg. tomorrow [C-SUBJ]}
\end{itemize}
These data (among others) show us that Cr Inf and C-subj pattern with SVCs in that they involve a mono-clausal structure and denote a single event. From a formal standpoint, they thus constitute a single CP domain.

While the second verb, i.e. the lexical head of the SVC, is inserted under the thematic V-head, the first verb (i.e. the verb of motion) is inserted under an aspectual head which we label Asp-Inceptive. We use the inceptive label because the main function of the first verb within a Cr SVC (in addition to denoting a sense of motion) is to denote temporal proximity/immediacy of the action. In effect, the action expressed by the SVC must be proximate to the utterance time, which also differentiates SVCs (23a-b) from simple imperatives (23c), which are not as proximate with respect to the utterance time:

(23)  
a. * _Odi_ kupi _knjigu_ _odmah_.  
go2sg.imp buy2sg.imp book immediately  
‘Go buy newspapers immediately.’

b.  
* _Odi_ kupi _knjigu_ _sutra_ / _sljedeći_ _tjedan_.  
go2sg.imp buy2sg.imp book tomorrow next week  
‘Go buy newspapers tomorrow/next week.’

vs.

c.  
_Kupi_ _knjigu_ _sutra_ / _sljedeći_ _tjedan_.  
buy2sg.imp book tomorrow next week  
‘Buy the book tomorrow/next week.'
5. Conclusion

Cr SVCs were shown to share the bulk of the properties observed with their cross-linguistic counterparts. Most significantly, they denote a single event from a semantic standpoint and project a mono-clausal structure from a syntactic standpoint. In this sense, they pattern with some other anaphoric control structures found in Cr, i.e. Inf and C-subj. All of these clauses project a single CP structure.

References