

# On the underlying structure of Virgin Islands Dutch Creole serial verb constructions<sup>7</sup>

A corpus study into the syntax of Virgin Islands Dutch serial verbs

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## KEYWORDS

syntaxis  
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## ABSTRACT

Research on creoles as typologically (non-)distinct from non-creoles has revealed that they typically share a clustering of structural features (Daval-Markussen, 2013; Blasi, Michaelis & Haspelmath, 2017). One such feature is the serial verb construction (SVC). In (1), from Virgin Islands Dutch Creole (VIDC), lexical verb *flig* combines with serial verb *lo*, yielding a meaning best translated as ‘fly away’.

1) Am ha flig lo  
3.sg PST fly go  
"S/he flew away."

Despite considerable research interest in SVCs in creoles and good documentation of VIDC, little research has been done on the underlying structure of SVCs and less still on the structure of VIDC SVCs. With regard to the latter, I consider two possible structures; one of ‘serialized’ VPs and one of serialized IPs/clauses (Muysken & Veenstra, 2007). I explain that these hypotheses are inadequately described and operationalized in literature and devise my own principled interpretation and methodology. Specifically, I propose finding material heading phrases bigger than VPs between the two verbs in an SVC constitutes evidence for an analysis of VIDC SVCs as IP-/clause-serializing. Then, I bring this diagnostic to bear on VIDC SVCs manually extracted from the NEHOL corpus (Van Sluijs, 2014). Statistical analysis suggests an analysis of VIDC as VP-serializing, although my findings are consistent with both hypotheses.

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## 1. Introduction

Creolistics stands out as a branch of linguistics that concerns itself with relatively young contact languages that emerged under singular and, sometimes, well-

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<sup>7</sup> Several words of thanks are due: I owe many thanks to dr. Cefas van Rossem (Meertens Instituut) for kindly sharing his knowledge on and enthusiasm for VIDC, along with his files documenting the spoken and written language which constituted the main sources of data for this corpus study. My thanks also go out to Romy van Drie (UU) and Liesje van der Linden (UU) for helping me set up the corpus used in this study and proofreading a draft of this article for publication. Finally, I would like to thank Marjo van Koppen and Roberta D’Alessandro for the inspiring elective course and their supervision of the research reported here. Of course, all errors in the corpus and its analysis are my sole responsibility.

documented circumstances. As the birth of creoles can often be pinpointed with temporal accuracy unparalleled elsewhere in the study of natural languages, they offer unique case studies of language emergence and development. Though it is an increasingly popular field of inquiry, consensus has yet to be reached on the typological status of creoles as (un)exceptional. This debate centres on the question of whether or not, due to their origins in language contact, they are typologically distinct from non-creoles. Proponents of the Creole Exceptionalism hypothesis (e.g. McWhorter, 2018) argue that, because of the break in transmission of L1 competence and reduced pidgin stage that creoles thus necessarily go through, they are a distinct subset of natural languages. Critics of this hypothesis (Aboh & DeGraff, 2017) hold that any typological distinctness is due to the younger stage at which creoles are studied and that there is no break in transmission. Regardless of one's stance towards this hypothesis, several computational studies have demonstrated that there seems to be a clustering of structural features typical of creoles (Daval-Markussen, 2013; Blasi, Michaelis & Haspelmath, 2017).

In the present study, I focus on one structural feature shared by many (but not all) creoles: the serial verb construction (henceforth SVC) (see McWhorter (1992) for an overview of (non-)creoles that have SVCs). One creole that has SVCs is Dutch-based Virgin Islands Dutch Creole (henceforth VIDC). To my knowledge, most, if not all, previous studies on SVCs in VIDC focus on describing their surface characteristics. Due to the wealth of available VIDC data, it is somewhat surprising that the VIDC SVC has not been the object of any in-depth structural analysis. This is where my corpus study comes in: by examining SVCs manually extracted from the NEHOL (Van Sluijs, 2014) database, I go beyond the extant descriptive analyses and ask what the underlying structure is to the VIDC SVCs. The possibilities I consider are that VIDC is a language that 'serializes' clauses or VPs. Based on principled predictions, I examine the hypotheses against the empirical domain of the corpus and conclude that the findings are in line with both due to the implicational hierarchy in which the hypothetical language-types are ordered. Statistical analysis, however, points in the direction of an analysis of VIDC as VP-serializing.

This article is structured as follows: in section 2, I offer a general description of SVCs in general and give an overview of what is already known of the construction in VIDC. Here, I also elaborate on what my research question and hypotheses are based on. Section 3 goes on to give relevant sociolinguistic information on VIDC and to describe the corpus used in this study. In section 4, I hold the hypotheses to the light of my analysis of the SVCs in this corpus and some data from external sources. Section 5 concludes.

## **2. Serial verb constructions**

### **2.1. A general overview of SVCs**

An SVC is a grammatical construction of two verbs close to each other without being connected, all the while entering into complex syntactic and semantic relations. As Muysken and Veenstra (2007) explain, several attempts have been made

to come to a more formal definition of SVCs. For the purposes of the present study, I restrict myself to the criteria they list. An SVC consists of two verbs that have:

- i. only one grammatical subject;
- ii. at most one grammatical object;
- iii. one specification for tense/aspect:
  - often only on the first verb;
  - sometimes on both verbs, but agreeing in the specification given;
  - sometimes only on the second verb;
- iv. only one possible negator;
- v. no intervening coordinating conjunction;
- vi. no intervening subordinating conjunction;
- vii. no intervening pause.

Although this description of SVCs may seem familiar to the auxiliary-verb combination of perhaps more familiar, Western languages, there are differences. The most significant of these is the fact that the verbs in an SVC are both base-merged in VO positions, whereas auxiliaries are base-merged in a functional position like IO.

Rather than being set in stone, these descriptive criteria paint a picture of the generic SVC, as exceptions to some of them have been found: Ewe allows the verbs in its SVCs to be differentially marked for aspect (Ameka (2006), cited in Sabino (2012)), in clear contradiction to criterium (iii) above. Furthermore, VIDC exhibits SVCs with more than two verbs (Sabino, 2012).

Sabino (2012) describes a first distinction in SVCs between symmetrical and asymmetrical SVCs. In a symmetrical SVC, the two verbs are both lexical or 'major' verbs restricted only in that they cannot be copulas, existentials or stative verbs (Aikhenvald (2006), cited in Sabino (2012)). In asymmetrical SVCs, one of the verbs is more or less lexically restricted per language and is considered the 'minor' or serial verb (SV) of the construction. The other verb of the pair is typically unrestricted and can come from any class of verbs like copulas, but also lexical verbs. Cross-linguistically, these SVs come from similar semantic classes and seem to contribute similar meanings to their respective SVCs across languages (see McWhorter (1992) and Muysken & Veenstra (2007) for overviews of typical SVs, their meanings and their distribution across languages).

A second dichotomy in SVCs across languages is that between those consisting of serialized IPs and those consisting of serialized VPs (mentioned in Muysken & Veenstra (2007) and in turn ascribed to Ayówalé (1988) cited therein)<sup>1</sup>. Some crucial aspects of this dichotomy are not made explicit. For one, it is not spelled

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<sup>1</sup> In an earlier version of their chapter (Muysken & Veenstra, 1994), they mention the dichotomy concerns clause-serializing languages as opposed to VP-serializing languages. It is unclear to me why they change their terminology. In addition, in their 2007 chapter they use clause-serialization and IP-serialization (and terms derived thereof) interchangeably. In the remainder of this paper, I refer to clause-serializing and VP-serializing languages and remain agnostic as to the exact intended definition of the clause in Muysken and Veenstra's terms.

out specifically what is meant by serialization of clauses or VPs. I consider the following definition as functional. I take VP-serialization to mean that the SV VP takes another VP as its complement, as in figure 1 below.

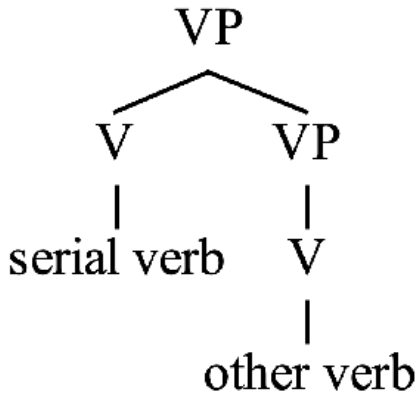


Figure 1. Underlying structure of an SVC in a VP-serializing language

Clause-serialization, then, would mean that the VP instead takes a clausal complement which dominates the VP containing the other verb, as in figure 2.

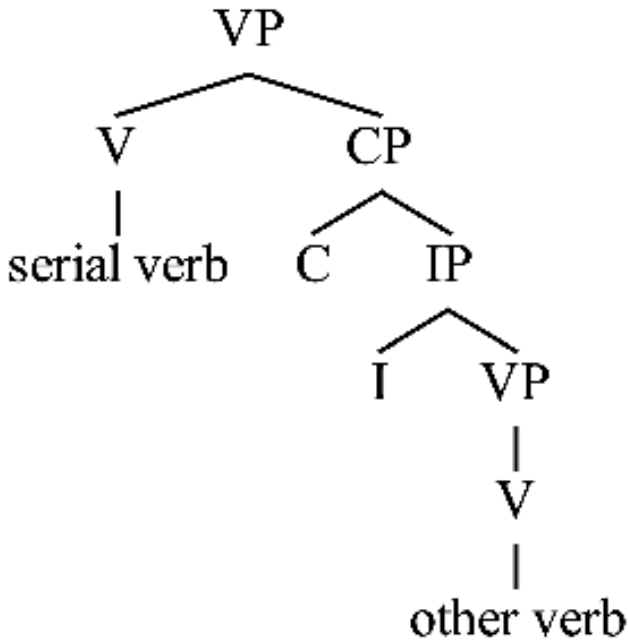


Figure 2. Underlying structure of an SVC in a clause-serializing language

What is also not made explicit is on what grounds the distinction between one type of languages and the other is made. According to the authors, the categories are on an implicational hierarchy: languages that serialize clauses also have structures with serialized VPs, whereas the inverse does not hold. However, they only mention that clause-serializing languages exhibit "*relatively more independence between the different subevents denoted by the separate verbs and free lexical selection*" and that phrase-serialization is marked by "*relatively less independence or thematic restructuring and a limited set of participating verbs*". Obviously, a diagnostic containing *relatively* begs for a more principled alternative, as any difference between the categorization of preconceived clause- or phrase-serializing languages and new data to the contrary can gratuitously be explained away through the vagueness inherent to the definitions on which the categorization is based. In other words: any categorization of languages based on these descriptions borders on being unfalsifiable. Thankfully, an alternative diagnostic is possible given the conceptualization of the two structures as described above: uncontroversially taking clauses and VPs to be different maximal domains, one would expect material to potentially be found between the verbs in the SVC. More specifically, in case the SVC in question consists of serialized clauses one should be able to find material indicative of structures larger than VPs, such as structurally high adverbial phrases, negation and TMA (Tense/Mood/Aspect) markers, between the verbs in the SVC.

### 3. Serial verbs in VIDC

In VIDC "*not much has been done on serial verb constructions*" (J. H. McWhorter, personal communication, March 2019) and this is reflected in the literature. Sabino (2012) provides by far the most extensive account of VIDC SVCs, giving an overview of VIDC SVs and their semantic and lexical properties. It is important to note here that not all sources list the same SVs and sometimes, sources are in direct contradiction (e.g. Muysken and Veenstra (1994) say VIDC lacks a TAKE SV, whereas Sabino (2012) lists it as one of its SVs). In this study, I restrict myself to the VIDC SVs *lo* (GO) and *ko* (COME), as they are the SVs all prior literature seems to agree can function as SVs in VIDC. Furthermore, as Muysken and Veenstra (1994) explain, these belong to the most frequently observed SVs from a cross-linguistic perspective.

As SVs, *lo* and *ko* can function as both minor and major verbs in the SVC. As minor SVs, they convey a directional and/or purposive meaning. As major verbs, they retain their full lexical meaning. This can be seen in the examples below, taken from Sabino (2012) (glosses, translations, boldface (for SVCs) and underlining (for relevant SVs) original).

- 2) Am O **lo** kri di duksak mais **ko** **gi** di hunduhan  
 3.sg PST DIRA/PURP get the sack corn come give the rooster  
 "S/he went away and got/to get the sack of corn and returned and gave/to give it to the rooster."

- 3) Am ha **flig lo**  
 3.sg PST fly go  
 "S/he flew away."

In (2), *lo* is a minor SV in the SVC *lo kri*, imparting directional/purposive meaning to the constructing. In (3), it is a major SV in the SVC *flig lo*. Partly synonymous with the other verb in the SVC (*flig*), they jointly convey a manner of departure.

In (4), *ko* functions as a minor SV in the SVC *ko ko tre*. This is an example of a multiverb (i.e. containing more than two verbs) SVC, where both *kos* express a minor SV meaning: directionality and purpose respectively. In (5), *ko* functions as a major SV.

- 4) ...am nu kan **ko ko** tre di gut it...  
 ...3.sg now can DIRT PURP dig 3.sg thing out...  
 "...S/he could now come in order to remove the thing..."
- 5) Nit en kopu am na kan **kri kom** it...  
 Not a/one penny 3.sg NEG can get come out  
 "Not a/one penny could fall out..."

Sabino's detailed description on trajectories of grammaticalization and lexicalization processes that *lo* and *ko* and their respective SVCs are part of notwithstanding, what little literature on VIDC SVCs exists does not go into detail on the underlying structure of serialized verbs in the language (Van Sluijs, 2017; Sabino, 2012; McWhorter, 1992). Muyskens and Veenstra (1994, 2007), for instance, give an overview of several creoles as divided over their clause-serializing and VP-serializing categories. Though the authors do mention VIDC in their article, it is not among the languages categorized. The research question of this study then straightforwardly presents itself: what is the underlying structure of the SVC in VIDC? Based on the proposed dichotomy described above, the two possible hypotheses are the following:

- I. The underlying structure of the SVC in VIDC is one of clause-serialization
- II. The underlying structure of the SVC in VIDC is one of VP-serialization

If hypothesis (I) is true, one would expect to be able to find material in between the verbs in the VIDC SVCs indicative of clausal structure. If hypothesis (II) is true, one would not expect to be able to find such material. However, if this is what one finds, a hard conclusion cannot be drawn because such data would be in line with both hypotheses.

The next section provides relevant sociolinguistic information on VIDC and the corpus used in the study.

## 4. The present study

### 4.1. Virgin Islands Dutch Creole

The creole under consideration in this study is VIDC, sometimes referred to as Negerhollands (Negro-Dutch), though this name has fallen into disfavour due to its pejorative connotations. VIDC is a contact language that emerged at the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century on the US Virgin Islands (then the Danish Antilles). It most likely emerged on Dutch plantations on St. Thomas as a result of contact between slaves from different parts of West Africa and European colonists. The African slaves spoke mostly Gbe languages which formed the substrate of the contact language (Sabino, 2012). Though the islands were under Danish control at the time, the Dutch settlers vastly outnumbered all other European populations, which resulted in the mainly Dutch-lexifier influence on VIDC. Other European languages spoken on the islands include Danish, English and Spanish.

Robbert van Sluijs (2017) reports it was spoken by the majority of the Afro-Caribbean population in the area. Also, it appears to have been spoken by children locally born to the colonists. Already at the end of the eighteenth century, it was an object of study and described in grammars (Van Rossem, 2017). The language died with the last speaker, a descendant of the original slave population of the Virgin Islands, in the twentieth century. Nowadays, it is studied mostly through written sources consisting in large part of products of Moravian missions to the area to spread the Christian faith to the slaves, such as (translations of) letters dictated or written by slaves and missionaries, translations of passages of the Bible and reports of and (language) manuals for the mission. Some VIDC data survived in the form of (translations of) transcriptions of spoken conversations and folktales. There are also some audio recordings of the last speakers of the language.

The mainly textual heritage of the language available today has sparked the creation of the NEHOL database; a digitally available database of digitized documents containing VIDC texts based on originally spoken and written data (Van Sluijs, 2014). This database formed the foundation for Van Rossem's (2017) dissertation and a subset of it, along with (a subset of) his personal VIDC files, form the empirical body of this study.

### 4.2. The present corpus

For the purposes of the present study, a corpus of instances of *lo* and *ko* in the available files in the NEHOL database and related sources was made manually. Due to the lack of standardization in VIDC spelling, different orthographic variants of these verbs were entered into the corpus (e.g. *lo(o)(p)* and *ko(o)(m)* respectively), along with a reference to the source material they originated from and a translation if provided. After this first course-grained search for SVs, two human annotators considered each instance of these potential SVs and determined (based on temporo-aspectual information, clausal structure, translations and original glosses if provided) whether the verbs found in this way occurred in an SVC in the sentence. In case of doubt; if this doubt was resolved after careful deliberation, a justification (i.e. a source with decisive information) was added for the user's consideration. In cases where the doubt was not resolved, the most conservative

choice was made (i.e. it was classified as whatever it could be other than an SV). Finally, information was added about any material intervening between the two verbs in the SVCs found in this way.

In total, thirty-six SVCs were extracted from twenty-seven files of varying contents and sizes. In the following section, I present a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the relevant SVCs found in this way and show what they can tell us about the underlying structure of VIDC SVCs.

## 5. Results

Of the thirty-six SVCs extracted, thirty-two consisted of an SV immediately following or preceding the other verb in the construction, that is, with no material in between the two. The remaining four can be found below. Per SVC, I give original glosses and translations if provided. If not provided, I give my own and mention this in discussing the SVCs.

- 6) Mi ka ki kom lo ko (Nelson, 1936)  
 1.sg PFV see come DURA come  
 "I have seen him coming."

(6) is analyzed as containing the SVC *kom ko*, meaning 'come here'. Between the verbs in the SVC, we find the aspectual marker *lo*, glossed (by me) as DURA. This would be an interesting SVC, as we find a TMA marker (which are usually found higher up in the structure of the clause than the VP) between the two verbs, which would suggest more than VP-structure being present. However, looking at the (original) translation, I find there is reason for doubt. It is unclear where the third person singular object *him* in the translation comes from, given the sentence as it was found in the file. As becomes clear from the gloss, no word of morpheme indicates an object in the sentence, which contradicts the translation. This would suggest that either the translation or the gloss is faulty. I think the gloss is wrong, based on an incorrect transcription. Recall that the original Nelson (1936) files are handwritten and transcribed for digital storage in the NEHOL corpus. Indeed, digital copies of the original files reveal a striking similarity between the author's handwritten letters *h/k* and *a/o* respectively. It is thus not a stretch to assume that the VIDC third person singular masculine pronoun *ham* was mistaken for *kom* and transcribed as such. According to this analysis, the original sentence would be like (7), with no SVC present in the first place, as *lo* would be analysed as an aspectual marker to *ko*. For these reasons of unreliability, I dismiss this datum.

- 7) Mi ka ki ham lo ko  
 1.sg PFV see 3.sg DURA come  
 "I have seen him coming."

Nothing seems wrong, however, about the SVCs in (8) and (9). In (8) (my gloss, original translation), we find the SVC *stier lop*, with intervening object *mi*, roughly meaning 'send me away'. In (9) (my gloss, original translation), which is found twice in the dataset due to recurrence in the files, we find the SVC *bring kom*, again with an intervening object, *die*, roughly meaning 'bring that here'. In both SVCs,



we find material between the verbs. The most straightforward analysis of these objects is one in which they are VP-internal. Whether they are internal to the VP projected by the first or the second verb, this means this material is not indicative of structure larger than VPs. Additionally, this finding is consistent with findings by Sabino (2012), who gives more examples of VIDC SVCs with intervening objects in the form of pronominals, independent demonstratives and full NPs, as shown in (10), where *di difman* intervenes.

- 8) **Stier** mi **lop** na ju Plantaj (Kingo, 1770)  
 send 1.sg go to 2.POSS plantation  
 "Send me to your plantation."
- 9) Mi no a **bring** die **kom**? (Oldendorp, 1777)  
 1.sg NEG PST bring that come  
 "Hab ich es nicht gebracht?"  
 ("Haven't I brought it?")
- 10) DΛ polisman a skreu: **brinj** di difman **ko**  
 The policeman PST scream: bring the thiefman come  
 "The policeman screamed: 'bring the thief here'"

These are the only SVCs in the corpus with material between the two verbs. All seem serializations of at least VPs, though more structure cannot be inferred from these data points since we do not find unequivocal evidence of bigger structure between the verbs. Hence, no categorial conclusion can be drawn from these data about the underlying structure of VIDC SVCs. Recall that clause-serialization and VP-serialization are on an implicational hierarchy: any language that allows the former allows the latter, but not *vice versa*. This means that any evidence in favour of VP-serialization is consistent with both analyses of the language in question, as the possible SVCs in VP-serializing languages are a proper subset of the ones possible in clause-serializing languages. Therefore, the current data cannot tell us with absolute certainty to which of the two types VIDC belongs and I conclude that the current data are ultimately consistent with both hypotheses. However, the present results render plausible an analysis along the lines of a VP-serialization-type language because of the absence of evidence of clause-serialization: in an extensive corpus of twenty-seven files (some of which of lengths of over thirty-five pages), only thirty-six SVCs were found, none of which show any overt reflexes of serialization of anything bigger than VPs. In addition, not having found any of the material hypothesized to be possible in between two clause-serialized verbs does not mean such material does not occur in VIDC: of the thirty-six SVCs found twenty-two occur with verbal negation, modal or aspectual modification (as in example (9)). All of this material precedes the SVC. A (rudimentary) chi-squared test using the numbers in table 1 (with zero values transformed to one) tells us that this is a significant result ( $\chi^2 = 38.35$ ,  $df. = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ ), adding to the plausibility of VIDC being a VP-serializing language and lending support to hypothesis (II).

Table 1  
 Observed and chance distributions of structurally higher material (N = 22) in-between and surrounding (preceding/following) verbs in SVCs

	NEHOL	Chance
In-between	1	11
Surrounding	22	11

I leave the reader with two final notes based on Sabino's (2012) data. She reports aspectual markers in between the two verbs of an SVC. In (11), copied from her, we find that, in fact, an aspectual marker is possible between the two verbs of the SVC.

- 11) ki am lo kuri lo lo.  
 see 3.sg PROG run PROG go  
 "See him/her running away."

However, she also mentions that this marker is "copied onto the second verb", not specifying what this process of copying entails, but implying that the aspectual marker originates as a marker on the first verb and only then is placed in between the two verbs. At present, I do not know the exact mechanics and structure underlying this copying of aspectual markers and am thus hesitant to flag this as definitive proof of structure greater than VPs in VIDC SVCs.

Finally, Sabino also mentions so-called 'switch-function' SVCs. In the switch-function SVC in (12) (again taken from Sabino (2012)), two readings are possible, among them one in which the object of one verb (in this case the first one) is the subject of the other verb (in this case the second one).

- 12) so dan am a rup tekoma ko...  
 so then 3.sg PST call Tekoma come...  
 "So then s/he called Tekoma to come..."  
 "So then s/he called Tekoma and Tekoma came..."

This means that under one reading, we find an (understood) object-subject between the two verbs of the SVC. This raises the question of what position *tekoma* occupies in the structure of the sentence. Given that subjects are conceived of as being in [Spec, IP], this could suggest structure bigger than a VP in the serialized verb-constituent, suggesting clause-serialization. Even if this 'lower' subject is in the object position of the 'higher' verb, this would require the assumption that *tekoma* moved there, presumably through or from the subject position of the lower verb-constituent. This construction bears similarities to ECM constructions like *I see him walk*, in which a matrix clause object originates from an embedded subject position. An important difference is that in ECM constructions, the embedded clause is non-finite, whereas the serialized constituent in (12), based on the translation provided, can be interpreted as finite.<sup>2</sup> However, it is unclear at

<sup>2</sup> At first glance, the finiteness of the second verb in the SVC appears to be in contradiction with the gloss, which does not indicate any marking for finiteness on the second

present what structure is behind this switch-function SVC. These two final points could be promising objects of future research.

## 6. Conclusion

Based on existing literature on SVCs and VIDC, I posed the research question as to what the underlying structure of the VIDC SVC looks like. Taking the existing hypotheses of clause- and VP-serialization and formulating a principled diagnostic to check the two against, I have conducted a corpus study based on the NEHOL database and similar, related sources. Though categorial evidence in favour of one or the other hypothesis is not found, statistical results can serve only to make probable an analysis of VIDC as VP-serializing and, hopefully, spark future research into this question. ■

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verb. Recall, however, that SVCs may be marked as a whole by one specification for tense/aspect. The translated finiteness of the second verb in the English translation may thus be due to the past tense morpheme a preceding rup. An anonymous reviewer rightly points out that, if the second verb were itself syntactically finite, this would imply clausal structure of the serialized constituent, since the lower verb would have to check its phi-features at some functional projection. This would constitute an argument for hypothesis (I), since the relevant functional projection would have to be in between the two verbs of the SVC. However, VIDC does not exhibit verbal inflection other than through of morphemes like (k)a (found in many examples presented throughout the article, including (12)) and, since none are found marking the second verb ko in (12), I conclude it is not syntactically marked for finiteness in a way that would be conclusive of hypothesis (I). This does raise the question of how exactly the shared specification of tense/aspect marking in SVCs such as in (12) works, that is: is it necessarily only the first verb that is finite if the SVC as a whole is marked for tense/aspect or can the second verb too be finite if it is part of an SVC marked as a whole for tense/aspect as in (12)? Should the latter option be possible, this again raises the subsequent crucial question of what functional projection the second verb checks its feature against: the distant one headed by a or one in between the two verbs, headed by a null element? To answer this question here is beyond the scope of the present study, but could serve as a potential object of future inquiry.

etauften Ehepaar.

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