

RAISING SEMANTIC TRANSITIVITY WITH SERIAL VERB CONSTRUCTIONS IN HMONG

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When a structurally transitive verb occurs as the only verb in a clause in White Hmong, that clause always deviates, to some extent at least, from the expression of ‘cardinal’ transitivity (Hopper & Thompson 1980). In particular, such a clause deviates in the extent to which the action of the A argument is perceived as effective in relation to the O argument.

Even verbs like *tua* ‘kill, shoot’, *hlais* ‘cut, slice’, and *hlaws* ‘burn’ do not seem to express cardinal transitivity in Hmong. For example, the notion of affect is rarely encoded unambiguously in verbs that express impingement in this language. The reason seems to be that the focus of all structurally transitive action verbs in Hmong is on the action of the A argument, not on any outcome in relation to the O argument.

In order to raise the level of semantic transitivity and ensure that an action is understood to be fully effective, speakers of White Hmong employ a second verb in the same clause, generally in a serial verb construction (SVC). This paper examines data from narrative texts, and identifies three distinct types of SVC that appear very frequently and that function to raise the semantic transitivity of the entire clause.

In a ‘Pivotal’ SVC, the second verb in the construction is intransitive, and describes effective, intentional action resulting in some change in the undergoer. In a ‘Disposal’ SVC, more than two structurally transitive verbs can occur. Together they portray effective, intentional action resulting in ‘disposal’ of the undergoer, that is, how the A argument destroys, consumes, or relinquishes the O argument. Finally, the ‘Attainment’ SVC uses two structurally transitive verbs—the first, an activity or accomplishment and the second, an achievement—and portrays an effective action leading to attainment of some goal related to the undergoer.

Hopper and Thompson’s notion that transitivity ‘can be broken down into its component parts’ (1980, p. 253) is extremely useful in explaining the expression of semantic transitivity in White Hmong. As shown in this paper, in this language the expression of a high level of semantic transitivity is literally ‘broken down’ and achieved through the use of multiple verbs in a variety of different types of serial verb construction.

Hopper, Paul & Sandra A. Thompson. 1980. Transitivity in grammar and discourse. *Language* 56: 251–299.

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