

# Linked SVCs and the Construal of Events in White Hmong Narratives

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- This paper examines the phenomenon of linked SVCs in White Hmong, a language of the Hmong-Mien family, also called the Miao-Yao family, spoken in the mountainous regions of southern China, and in northern Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and possibly Myanmar, as well as in a number of diasporic communities in Western countries.
- Before we look at the phenomenon of linked SVCs, I will first briefly describe what verb serialisation basically involves, and show some examples of SVCs in Hmong in which no linking occurs.

# Serial Verb Constructions

An SVC is a construction involving two or more juxtaposed verbs that construed and 'packaged' as a single event

- (1)    tus    tsov    tom    liab    noj  
      CLF    tiger    bite    monkey    eat  
      'The tiger gobbled up some monkeys.'
- (2)    lawv    cub    mov    siav  
      3PL    steam    rice    be/become.cooked  
      'They steam rice.'
- (3)    lawv    mus    raws    cuag    nws  
      3SG    go    pursue    reach    3SG  
      'They caught him.'

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- An SVC can be described in very basic terms as a construction involving two or more verbs (or possibly verbs plus their objects) that are simply juxtaposed, and that are construed and 'packaged' as a single event.
- This can be seen in example (1). (Please note that in the orthography used here, syllable-final consonants are used to indicate the tone.)
- In example (1) the object of both verbs in the SVC—*liab* 'monkey'—appears between the verbs *tom* 'bite' and *noj* 'eat'. Clearly these two verbs together describe what is presented as a single event—'The tiger gobbled up some monkeys.'
- In (2), the NP that appears between the verbs—*mov* 'rice'—is the object of the first verb—the transitive verb *cub* 'steam'—but the subject of the second—the intransitive *siav* 'be/become cooked'. This sentence again expresses just one event; it explains that 'they cook rice by steaming it'.
- The SVC in example (3) involves two transitive verbs—*raws* 'pursue' and *cuag* 'reach'—but in this case the verbs appear back-to-back, with the shared object NP—*nws* 'him/her'—coming after the second verb. Although 'pursuing him' and 'reaching him' might elsewhere be presented as two separate actions, here they are portrayed as one, with the meaning 'They caught him.'

# Serial Verb Constructions

An SVC is a construction involving two or more verbs, construed and 'packaged' as a single event

The archetypal serial verb construction consists of a sequence of two or more verbs which in various (rather strong) senses, together act like a single verb.

Durie 1997: 289-90

Prototypical SVCs share arguments, and thus constitute a cohesive and tightly-knit representation of one event.

Aikhenvald 2006: 3

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- This property of SVCs of expressing a single event is one that is strongly emphasised by many scholars.
- For example, in his typological survey, Durie (1997: 289-290) found that:  
The archetypal serial verb construction consists of a sequence of two or more verbs which in various senses, together act like a single verb.
- And in more recent work, also based on a broad typological survey, Aikhenvald (2006: 3) says:  
Prototypical SVCs share arguments, and thus constitute a cohesive and tightly-knit representation of one event.

Let's look a little more closely at this idea of two or more verbs construed and packaged as a single event, and at the reasons why scholars use expressions like 'a 'cohesive', 'tightly-knit' and 'like a single verb' when characterising SVCs.

# Serial Verb Constructions

An SVC is a construction involving two or more verbs, construed and 'packaged' as a single event

'Packaging' as a single event involves ...

- Verbs simply juxtaposed within a single clause
  - ✧ no overt sign of linkage (but various iconic signs of unity)
- Shared arguments
  - ✧ at least one core argument
  - ✧ all peripheral arguments (e.g. time and location)
- Shared core and peripheral operators
  - ✧ deontic modality, tense, epistemic modality, evidentiality, illocutionary force

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There are a number of senses in which we can say that verbs in series are 'packaged' as a single event.

- This 'packaging' involves:
- Firstly, (as mentioned earlier) verbs being simply juxtaposed within a single clause, with no overt linkage such as a conjunction or a complementizer. There are, however, various *iconic* signs of unity, and the fact that the verbs occur back-to-back, or with only an object NP intervening, can be considered one of these. Another feature of SVCs that can be thought of as an iconic sign of unity is the fact that there are no pauses between the elements, which occur under a single intonation contour.
- A second feature of SVCs that can be thought of as a sign of their iconic 'packaging' as a single event is their shared arguments. SVCs share at least one core argument, often two when the verbs are transitive, and invariably share all peripheral arguments (such as arguments expressing time and location).
- Finally, the iconic packaging of SVCs as one event also involves the sharing of all operators (or grammatical categories) that relate to the core and periphery of the clause (such as deontic and epistemic modality, tense, evidentiality, and illocutionary force).

# Serial Verb Constructions

An SVC is a construction involving two or more verbs, construed and 'packaged' as a single event

'Construal' as a single event → a 'conceptual' event

A conceptual event is:

- a cognitive construct
  - ◇ Temporal experiences as metaphor of physical experiences.
  - ◇ As we classify the physical world into discrete entities, so we classify the temporal world into discrete events.
- a cultural construct
  - ◇ Cultural differences can result in differences in the construal of salient boundaries of eventhood.

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In order to understand how SVCs can be said to be construed as a single event, we need to discuss the notion of a 'conceptual' event. A conceptual event is both a cognitive construct and a cultural construct.

- It is firstly a cognitive construct in the sense that
  - we treat our temporal experiences as a metaphor of our physical experiences.
  - That is, just as we classify the physical world into discrete entities, so we classify the temporal world into discrete events.
- A conceptual event also a cultural construct. That is
  - Cultural differences can result in differences in the construal of the salient boundaries of eventhood.

This notion of a 'conceptual event' is very important in understanding the use of SVCs in general, and in particular of linked SVCs in White Hmong narrative texts.

# More about 'Conceptual Events'

- Conceptual events have mereological structures
  - ◇ Parts of events and combinations of events can themselves be considered instances of events.

Bohnenmeyer et al. (2007, p. 499)

- Verbs serve to 'lexicalise' events.
  - ◇ Different salient events in different cultures.
  - ◇ Different 'lexicalisation patterns' in different languages.

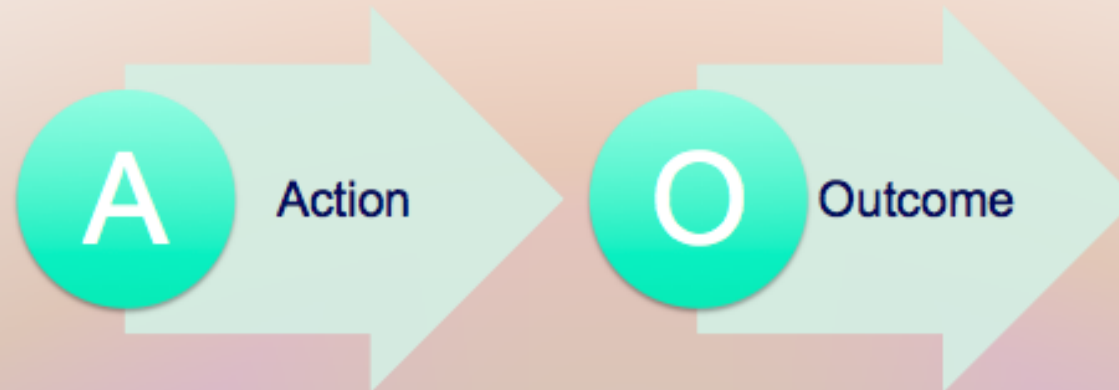
(Talmy 1985)

- SVCs involve two or more 'lexicalised' events, juxtaposed to express a single 'conceptual' event.
  - ◇ Different patterns for expressing events in different languages (and different genres within each language).

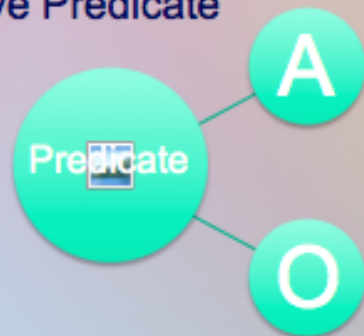
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- Conceptual events have mereological structures. That is, as pointed out by Bohnemeyer et al. (2007), parts of events and combinations of events can themselves be considered instances of events.
- Of course we are very familiar with the way in which verbs serve to lexicalise events. As a certain event comes to have a particular salience in a particular culture, a verb may be introduced into the language to refer to it. We are also familiar with the way that different languages may exhibit different 'lexicalisation patterns', as described by Talmy (1985) – different types of information can be encoded in different parts of speech in different languages.
- We can think of SVCs as involving two or more 'lexicalised' events, juxtaposed to express a single 'conceptual' event (remembering, of course, that those 'lexicalised' events are themselves also instances of 'conceptual events'). It is to be expected, then, that different combinations of lexical verbs may well occur in SVCs in different languages, to represent different salient events in the respective cultures. Furthermore, just as different lexicalisation patterns occur in different languages, what we might call different 'SVC patterns' are likely to emerge to express different types of conceptual events in different languages (and quite possibly also in different genres within a language).

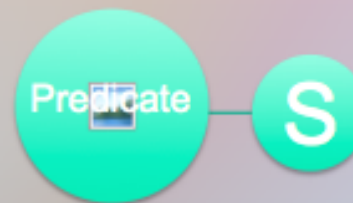
# SVCs Expressing Effective Action



Transitive Predicate



Intransitive Predicate



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The particular kinds of Hmong SVC types I focus on in this presentation express effective transitive actions, whereby an A argument (basically the subject of a transitive verb) acts directly on an O argument (the non-subject argument of a transitive verb), and that action is effective in relation to the O argument (that is, it involves some sort of outcome in relation to the O argument).

# SVCs Expressing Effective Action

(1) **tus** **tsov** tom **liab** noj  
CLF tiger bite monkey eat  
'The tiger gobbled up some monkeys.'

(2) lawv cub **mov** siav  
3PL steam rice be/become.cooked  
'They steam rice.'

(3) **lawv** mus raws cuag **nws**  
3SG go pursue reach 3SG  
'They caught him.'

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So if we go back to our three example SVCs, we can see that they are all of this basic type: In sentence (1) the tiger does not just bite the monkeys, but he eats them all up; in (2), they steam the rice so that the rice gets cooked; and in (3) they don't just pursue him, but they actually succeed in catching him.

In spite of this broad similarity between these three examples—that is, that they all express effective transitive actions, with a clear outcome in relation to the O argument—each one actually involves a different SVC type.



# SVCs Expressing Effective Action

a. Disposal SVCs:  $\boxed{A} \underline{V}_1 \boxed{O} \underline{V}_2 (V)$

b. Pivotal SVCs:  $A \underline{V}_1 \boxed{O=S} \underline{V}_2$

c. Attainment SVCs:  $\boxed{A} \underline{V}_1 \underline{V}_2 \boxed{O}$

a. Disposal SVCs: **A** V<sub>1</sub> **O** V<sub>2</sub>(V<sub>3</sub>)

(4) **tus** **tsov** tom **liab** noj  
 CLF tiger bite monkey eat

'The tiger ate some monkeys.'

(5) **tus** **tub** pov **nws** **rab** **hneev** tseg  
 CLF boy throw 3SG CLF crossbow abandon

'The boy threw his crossbow away.'

(6) **nws** muab **tus xyoob-tuam-tswm** tsa cia  
 3SG take CLF type.of.large.bamboo stand<sub>TR</sub> put.aside

'He took the bamboo pole [and] stood it to one side.'

The first type, which we saw in example (1), repeated here as example (4), is what I refer to as a 'Disposal' SVC (following the use of this term for a historically similar construction in Mandarin). In this SVC type, all the verbs are transitive, and both A and O arguments are shared.

- (5) and (6) are additional examples of this construction.
- In these examples we can see that the O argument intervenes between the two verbs, and the meaning of this construction is always that the A argument performs a sequence of actions that have the outcome of destroying, consuming or relinquishing the O argument.

## b. Pivotal SVCs: A $\underline{V}_1$ **O=S** $\underline{V}_2$

(7) lawv cub **mov** siav  
3PL steam rice be/become.cooked

'They steam rice.'

(8) kuv tua **nws** tuag  
1SG kill 3SG die

'I killed him/her'

(9) ... yuav.tau hlais **noob.qes** tawm ...  
must cut testicles leave<sub>INTR</sub>

'...[they] had to remove [the hog's] testicles ...'

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The second type, I refer to here as a Pivotal SVC. Actually it goes by quite a few different names in the literature, including Resultative SVC and Cause-Effect SVC.

- This type has only one shared argument, as shown in example (7) (previously example (2)),
- and in examples (8) and (9).

This type begins with a transitive verb, expressing a highly effective action. Next comes its O argument, which then becomes the S argument of the following intransitive verb, describing the result of that action.

c. Attainment SVCs: **S/A** V<sub>1</sub> V<sub>2</sub> **(O)**

(10) **lawv** mus raws cuag **nws**  
 3SG go pursue reach 3SG  
 'They caught him.'

(11) **kuv** mus txog **Thai-teb**  
 1SG go arrive Thailand  
 'I went to Thailand.'

(12) **hluav-taws kub~kub** tuaj ti nkaus  
 fire REDUP~be.hot come be.close INTENS  
 'A very hot fire came very close.'

The third type—which I have introduced previously with example (3)—here example (10)—I refer to as an Attainment SVC.

- (11) and (12) are further examples.

In this type the verbs can be either transitive or intransitive; they always appear back to back and the meaning of the construction can be thought of aspectual, with the second verb expressing the successful attainment of the goal of the first verb.

## Linked SVCs

(13) hnu**b**    mu**a**b    n**w**s    co**v**    ko**o**m  
sun            take            3SG    CLF.PL    produce  
ziab~ziab    tu**a**g    tsh**a**g    ta**s**    li  
REDUP~dry<sub>TR</sub>    die            INTENS    finish    INTENS

'**The sun** dried out **his produce** [so that **it** shrivelled up completely.]

The pattern I'd like to introduce now involves the linkage of all three of the SVC types we've looked at so far. This linked SVC pattern is particularly interesting in terms of the way it is used to facilitate a multi-focal construal of an effective event in narrative texts in Hmong.

- Example (13) is the first example of this type of linked SVC. The shared arguments are highlighted in bold and verbs are underlined.

## Linked SVCs

- (13) **hnub**<sub>A</sub>   muab   **nws**   cov   **khoom**<sub>O</sub>  
sun   take   3SG   CLF.PL   produce
- ziab~ziab   tuag   tshag   tas   li  
REDUP~dry<sub>TR</sub>   die   INTENS   finish   INTENS

'**The sun** dried out **his produce** [so that **it**] shrivelled up completely.'

a. Disposal SVC: **A** V<sub>1</sub> **O** V<sub>2</sub>

## Linked SVCs

(13)

|                                 |             |              |            |                               |
|---------------------------------|-------------|--------------|------------|-------------------------------|
| <b>hnu<b><sub>A/A</sub></b></b> | <b>muab</b> | <b>nws</b>   | <b>cov</b> | <b>khoom</b> <sub>O/O=S</sub> |
| sun                             | take        | 3SG          | CLF.PL     | produce                       |
| <b>ziab~ziab</b>                | <b>tuag</b> | <b>tshag</b> | <b>tas</b> | <b>li</b>                     |
| REDUP~dry <sub>TR</sub>         | die         | INTENS       | finish     | INTENS                        |

'**The sun** dried out **his produce** [so that **it**] shrivelled up completely.'

a. Disposal SVC: **A** V<sub>1</sub> **O** V<sub>2</sub>

b. Pivotal SVC: **A** V<sub>1</sub> **O=S** V<sub>2</sub>

Next comes a Pivotal SVC, which serves to shift the focus away from the effective action of the A argument (the sun) towards the outcome for the O argument (the produce), which 'shrivels up' (literally 'dies') as a result. Notice that the O argument does not appear between the verbs of the Pivotal SVC here, as it does in a simple Pivotal SVC, because it has already been introduced by the initial Disposal SVC in this linked construction.

## Linked SVCs

(13)

|                                 |             |              |            |                                 |
|---------------------------------|-------------|--------------|------------|---------------------------------|
| <b>hnu<b><sub>A/A</sub></b></b> | <b>muab</b> | <b>nws</b>   | <b>cov</b> | <b>khoom</b> <sub>O/O=S/S</sub> |
| sun                             | take        | 3SG          | CLF.PL     | produce                         |
| <b>ziab~ziab</b>                | <b>tuag</b> | <b>tshag</b> | <b>tas</b> | <b>li</b>                       |
| REDUP~dry <sub>TR</sub>         | die         | INTENS       | finish     | INTENS                          |

'The sun dried out his produce [so that it] shrivelled up completely.'

a. Disposal SVC: **A** V<sub>1</sub> **O** V<sub>2</sub>

b. Pivotal SVC: **A** V<sub>1</sub> **O=S** V<sub>2</sub>

c. Attainment SVC: **S** V<sub>1</sub> V<sub>2</sub>

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Finally we actually have an Attainment SVC that takes the S argument of the final verb in the preceding Pivotal SVC as its S argument also: The produce doesn't just 'shrive up', but it 'shrivels up completely'. The outcome in relation to the object is reinforced here not only by this Attainment SVC, but also by the intensifiers that intervene between the two verbs.

This kind of example should not be thought of as a sequence of three distinct SVCs. Bisang (2009) discusses sequences of SVCs that are used to describe rapid sequences of events in Khmer. The linked SVCs described here in Hmong do not involve a sequence of distinct events at all, but rather what I suggest is construed and packaged as a single event, albeit with a multi-focal construal.

In spite of the fact that three SVC types are involved, sentences of this type still involve exactly the same features as simple SVCs:

- They involve simple juxtaposition, with a range of iconic signs of unity. These include, for example,
  - a single intonation contour, with no pauses between the linked elements.
  - a single set of core arguments, with at least one core argument shared by all the verbs – in this case the 'produce'.
  - a single set of peripheral arguments, one time reference, all other operators / grammatical categories shared.



## Linked SVCs

(14) **hmoob**      txawm      muab      **nroj**      txiav  
Hmong          then          take          weed      chop  
**caj.dab**      poob      cuag      li      cas  
neck          fall          reach      like      how

'**The Hmong (farmer)** then chopped **the weeds'**  
**necks** [so that **they**] fell right down like anything!'

## Linked SVCs

(14) **hmoob**<sub>A</sub> txawm muab **nroj**<sub>O</sub> txiav  
Hmong then take weed chop

**caj.dab** poob cuag li cas  
neck fall reach like how

'**The Hmong (farmer) then chopped the weeds'  
**necks** [so that **they**] fell right down like anything!'**

a. Disposal SVC: **A** V<sub>1</sub> **O** V<sub>2</sub>

## Linked SVCs

- (14) **hmoob**<sub>A</sub> txawm muab **nroj**<sub>O</sub> txiav  
Hmong then take weed chop
- caj.dab**<sub>O'</sub> poob cuag li cas  
neck fall reach like how

'The Hmong (farmer) then chopped **the weeds'**  
**necks** [so that **they**] fell right down like anything!'

a. Disposal SVC: **A** V<sub>1</sub> **O** V<sub>2</sub> **O'**

## Linked SVCs

- (14) **hmoob**<sub>A/A</sub> txawm muab **nroj**<sub>O</sub> txiav  
 Hmong then take weed chop
- caj.dab**<sub>O'/O=S</sub> poob cuag li cas  
 neck fall reach like how

'The Hmong (farmer) then chopped the weeds' necks [so that **they**] fell right down like anything!'

a. Disposal SVC: **A** V<sub>1</sub> **O** V<sub>2</sub> **O'**

b. Pivotal SVC: **A** V<sub>1</sub> **O=S** V<sub>2</sub>

The final transitive verb of the Disposal SVC then becomes the first verb in a 'Pivotal' SVC, *txiav caj.dab poob* (chop neck fall), in which the second O argument of the verb *txiav* 'chop' becomes the S argument of the final verb, *poob* 'fall'. As in the preceding example, this SVC type serves to pivot the focus away from the process initiated by the A argument, *hmoob* (Hmong), and direct it towards the outcome of the event.

## Linked SVCs

(14)

|  |                     |                      |                                  |                      |
|--|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------|
| <b>hmoob</b> <sub>A/A</sub><br>Hmong       | txawm<br>then       | <u>muab</u><br>take  | <b>nroj</b> <sub>O</sub><br>weed | <u>txiav</u><br>chop |
| <b>caj.dab</b> <sub>O'/O=S/S</sub><br>neck | <u>poob</u><br>fall | <u>cuag</u><br>reach | li<br>like                       | cas<br>how           |

'The Hmong (farmer) then chopped the weeds' necks [so that **they**] fell right down like anything!'

a. Disposal SVC: **A** V<sub>1</sub> **O** V<sub>2</sub> **O'**

b. Pivotal SVC: **A** V<sub>1</sub> **O=S** V<sub>2</sub>

c. Attainment SVC: **S** V<sub>1</sub> V<sub>2</sub>

The verb *poob* (fall) then becomes the first verb in an 'Attainment' SVC *poob cuag* 'fall reach', in which *caj-dab* (neck) functions as the S argument of both verbs. This final SVC serves to reinforce the outcome of the event for the Undergoer: the 'necks' [of the weeds] do not just 'fall', but 'fall right down'. Further detail is added by the final adverbial intensification: 'they fall right down like anything!'

## Linked SVCs

(15) muab      **cov**   **ntoo**   **ub**      **no**      nplawm  
take            CLF.PL tree   yonder here   whip  
lov              tas    vau      tas  
break.off<sub>INTR</sub> finish   fall.down finish

'(The wind) whipped **the trees and everything**  
[so that **they**] broke right off [and] fell right down.'

## Linked SVCs

(15) muab    **cov**    **ntoo**    **ub**    **no**<sub>o</sub>    nplawm  
take        CLF.PL tree    yonder here    whip  
lov            tas    vau        tas  
break.off<sub>INTR</sub> finish fall.down finish

'**(The wind)** whipped **the trees and everything**  
[so that **they**] broke right off [and] fell right down.'

a. Disposal SVC: **A** V<sub>1</sub> **O** V<sub>2</sub>

## Linked SVCs

(15) muab    **cov**    **ntoo**    **ub**    **no**<sub>O/O=S</sub>    nplawm  
 take    CLF.PL    tree    yonder    here    whip  
lov    tas    vau    tas  
 break.off<sub>INTR</sub>    finish    fall.down    finish

'**(The wind)** whipped **the trees and everything**  
 [so that **they**] broke right off [and] fell right down.'

a. Disposal SVC: **A** V<sub>1</sub> **O** V<sub>2</sub>

b. Pivotal SVC: **A** V<sub>1</sub> **O=S** V<sub>2</sub>



## Linked SVCs

- (15) muab    **cov**    **ntoo**    **ub**    **no**<sub>o/o=S/S</sub>    nplawm  
 take      CLF.PL    tree    yonder here    whip
- lov      tas    vau      tas  
 break.off<sub>INTR</sub>    finish    fall.down    finish

'(The wind) whipped **the trees and everything**  
 [so that **they**] broke right off [and] fell right down.'

a. Disposal SVC: **A** V<sub>1</sub> **O** V<sub>2</sub>

b. Pivotal SVC: **A** V<sub>1</sub> **O=S** V<sub>2</sub>

c. Attainment SVC: **S** V<sub>1</sub> V<sub>2</sub>

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This example actually concludes with two Attainment SVCs: the 'trees and everything' 'break right off' ...

# Linked SVCs

(15) muab    **cov**    **ntoo**    **ub**    **no**<sub>o/o=s/s/s</sub>    nplawm  
 take    CLF.PL    tree    yonder    here    whip

lov    tas    vau    tas  
 break.off<sub>INTR</sub>    finish    fall.down    finish

'(The wind) whipped **the trees and everything**  
 [so that **they**] broke right off [and] fell right down.'

a. Disposal SVC: **A** V<sub>1</sub> **O** V<sub>2</sub>

b. Pivotal SVC: **A** V<sub>1</sub> **O=S** V<sub>2</sub>

c. Attainment SVC: **S** V<sub>1</sub> V<sub>2</sub> **x2**

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... and fall right down'.

- In this way, the transition from focus on the action of the A argument to the outcome in relation to the O argument is again articulated in a highly detailed and elaborate way.

# Serial Verb Constructions

An SVC is a construction involving two or more verbs, construed and 'packaged' as a single event

The archetypal serial verb construction consists of a sequence of two or more verbs which in various (rather strong) senses, together act like a single verb.

Durie 1997: 289-90

Prototypical SVCs share arguments, and thus constitute a cohesive and tightly-knit representation of one event.

Aikhenvald 2006: 3

Different patterns for expressing events in different languages.  
SVCs not *necessarily* tightly-knit representation, like single verb.

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If we return, then, to the issue of the 'single eventhood' of SVCs, we can see that these instances of linked SVCs that occur in narrative texts in White Hmong tell us something more about this notion.

- I suggest that, in spite of involving three or sometimes even more linked SVCs, these constructions are still, indeed, construed and packaged as a single event.
- However, the verbs in these structures clearly do not conform at all to what scholars have identified as a key feature of 'archetypal' or 'prototypical' verbs in series: that of 'acting together like a single verb' and being a 'cohesive and tightly knit' representation of a single event'.
- Far from it, the examples we have looked at from narrative texts in White Hmong show us that very different SVC patterns are used for expressing events in different languages. White Hmong has a strong preference for the highly detailed and elaborate expression of events—what we might characterise as a very *loosely*-knit representation, that allows the focus of the narrator to shift from the effective action of an A argument to a vivid depiction of the outcome of that action in relation to the O argument, all within a single clause.

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