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# On the Difference between

Serial Verbs

,

**Coverbs**

&

**Complex Predicates**

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# Background

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- A range of syntactic constructions across languages involve chains of verbal constituents.
- Two very prominent ones in Australian and Oceanic languages are:
  - serial verb constructions (SVCs): “at least two verbs form a single predicate”
  - coverb constructions (CVCs): “a coverb and a verb form a single predicate”
- Bril & Ozanne-Rivierre (2004) use the term ‘complex predicate’ (CP) to cover all serial-like constructions
- Bower (2014) refers to all CVCs in Australian languages as ‘complex predicates’
- Butt (1995), Baker & Harvey (2010), Nash & Samvelian (2016) distinguish the concept of ‘complex predicate’ from SVCs and CVCs

# Examples

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(1) *Bora-ga g-i-ya-ngana lek-ka gorrh-ma-gu.* [Wagiman, non-PNy]

river-ALL PRS-1PL-go-INCL go.down-NPFV fish-NPFV-DAT

‘We’re going down to the river for fishing.’ (Wilson 1999:85)

(2) *Nēk i=van tēqēl, nēk i=ēl ten [...]* [Vurës, Oceanic]

2SG 2SG.GNO=go go.down 2SG 2SG.GNO=look CON

‘You go down and have a look ...’ (Malau 2016:396)

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‘You go down and have a look ...’ (Malau 2016:396)

- Example (1) has been described as a coverb construction:
  - *ya* ‘go’ is the verb and *lek* ‘go down’ is the coverb
- Example (2) has been described as a serial verb construction:
  - *van* ‘go’ is the major verb or V1 and *tēqēl* ‘go down’ is the minor verb or V2

# Examples

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(3) *Jag yirr-ijga-ny binka-bina.*

go.down 1PL.EX-go-PST river-ALL

‘We’re going down to the river for fishing.’ (Schultze-Berndt 2000:469)

[Jaminung, Mirndi]

(4) *... me kakea koreo ghore lao pa Berosi meke ...*

and some boy go.down go LOC PN.GEO and

‘... and some boys went down to Berosi and ...’ (Frostad 2012:146)

[Ughele, Oceanic]

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- Example (3) has been described as a coverb construction:
  - *jag* ‘go’ is the coverb and *ijga* ‘go’ is the verb
- Example (4) has been described as a serial verb construction:
  - *ghore* ‘go down’ is the major verb or V1 and *lao* ‘go’ is the minor verb or V2

<sup>1</sup> In a later publication, Schultze-Berndt (2003:145) analyses the same sentence as PreV + V and glosses *jag* as ‘down’ but on p. 168 as ‘go down’

# Coverb Construction

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- Lord (1993:147):

*“Languages of Southeast Asia [...] show a range of **serial constructions** and verbs with prepositional functions. The prepositional homophone is called a **coverb**. [...] a number of **directional coverbs** are homophonous with **verbs of motion**.”*

- Lehmann (2002:30):

*“**Serial verbs** which develop into adpositions are called ‘**coverbs**’ in the literature.”*

- König (2009:35, fn. 3):

*“**Coverbs** [in !Xun] are verbs with a schematized meaning used in **SVCs**.”*

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- **Coverbs** in these languages accompany verbs and constitute a closed class:

- Mandarin (DeFrancis 1963, Hockett & Fang 1944:84ff.; Hanan 1958:13, Yin 2016)
- Cantonese (Matthews 2006:70-71)
- Taiwanese (Ko & Tân 1960:199)
- Sichuanese (Malmqvist 1961:166-171)
- Thai (Thepkanjana 1986:191ff.)
- Vietnamese (Clark 1975:136, Nguyễn 1996:144-146, Sophana 1998)
- !Xun (König 2009:41)
- Tama (Dimmendaal 2009:314-316)
- Ahamb (Rangelov 2020)



# Coverb Construction: Sinitic type (closed class)

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} East Asia

## Coverb Construction: Sinitic type (closed class)

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(5) 中国人用毛笔写字。

[Mandarin]

*Zhōng guó rén [yòng máo bǐ]<sub>PP</sub> xiě zì.*

central country people use hair writing.brush write Chinese.character

'The Chinese write characters [with a writing brush].' (DeFrancis 1963:215)

(6) *Tôi nhìn qua cửa kính.*

[Vietnamese]

1SG look cross window glass

'I look through the glass window.' (Sophana 1998:69)

(7) *N|ùhmē m-é n!hō n!!hào g!!hōē.*

[!Xun]

PN TOP-PST hit down:SG dog

'N|uhme hit the dog down.' (König 2009:41)

# Coverb Construction

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- Wilson (1999:45):
  - “[coverbs] are an open word class carrying a wide range of verbal, adjectival and other meanings.”
- Schultze-Berndt (2000:69)
  - “[...] there is an open class of uninflecting lexemes which translate into languages like English or German as either verbs or adverbs and also have properties which are intermediate between members of these two classes in other languages. Members of this class will be termed ‘coverbs’ here.”

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- **Coverbs** in these languages accompany verbs and constitute an open class:
  - Wagiman (Wilson 1999, Baker & Harvey 2010)
  - Jaminjung (Schultze-Berndt 2000:4)
  - Matngele (Zandvoort 1999:80ff.; Hoffmann 2016)
  - Bilinarra (Meakins & Nordlinger 2014:270-349)
  - MalakMalak (Hoffmann 2016)
  - Bardi (Bower 2014:264)
  - Amharic (Amberber 2010)
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  - Bengali (Onishi 2001:117)

# Coverb Construction: Australian type (open class)

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} Australia

## Coverb Construction: Australian type (open class)

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(8) *Yurr nga-ma-ji wirra mangurrb-bari.*

[Jaminjung]

rub 1SG-hit-REFL hair dark-QUAL

‘I dye my hair black.’ (DeFrancis 1963:215)

(9) *Wajim i-n-ma-n=irr.*

[Bardi]

wash 3-TR-put-CONT=3PL.OBJ

‘He/she washes them.’ (Bowern 2014:264)

(10) ጠርጾሁ ስብር አለ።

[Amharic]

*T’armus-u sibbirr al-ə.*

bottle-DEF break say:PRF-3M

‘The bottle broke (completely/suddenly).’ (Amberber 2010:296)

# Coverb Construction: A special type in Australia?

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- Kapitonov (2019:59-60)
  - *“Both coverbs and preverbs [in Kunbarlang] are uninflecting elements that only occur in construction with the verb. [...] Coverbs only occur in the postverbal position, while preverbs occur on either side with a preference for preverbal position. Preverbs are, effectively, an open class category for borrowing English verbs, while the coverbs are a closed class of morphemes. Coverbs are best analyzed as lexical clitics, while preverbs can be considered a word class.”*

(11) *Nga-rna=bokob bonj~bonj.* [Kunbarlang]  
1SG.NF-sit.NPL=float RED~exactly

‘I’m still sitting in the water.’ (Kapitonov 2019:61)

- The position of the Kunbarlang ‘coverb’ is reminiscent of the open coverb position in Mawng (Singer 2016:31ff.), which has around 700 members. Kapitonov (2019:48) analyses the 450 members of verbs in Kunbarlang as a closed class because borrowed lexemes from English are placed before the verb in the open preverbal position.
- This case needs further investigation.

# Serial Verb Construction

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- Foley & Olson (1985:18)
  - “Serial verb constructions always contain *two or more predicates*. Furthermore, [...] while they may require the same actor for both predicates [...], each verb in the series may have arguments not shared by other verbs.”
- Aikhenvald (2006:1)
  - “A serial verb construction is a sequence of verbs which act together as a *single predicate*, without any overt marker of coordination, subordination, or syntactic dependency of any other sort. Serial verb constructions describe what is conceptualized as a *single event*.”
- Baker & Harvey (2010:34)
  - “We regard the conceptual structure [of serial verb constructions] as one in which there are *multiple events*.”
- Haspelmath (2016:306)
  - “This criterion [= single event] is not practical to apply, because there is no objective way of identifying a *single event* and distinguishing it from a set of several events.”



# Serial Verb Construction

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- We need a more objective definition, which is more constrained.
- Haspelmath (2016:296) suggests:
  - *“A serial verb construction is a monoclausal construction consisting of multiple independent verbs with no element linking them and with no predicate–argument relation between the verbs.”*
- Advantages:
  - This definition gets rid of criteria which are difficult to test, such as intonation, eventhood, predicatehood.
  - It allows for better cross-linguistic comparability.
  - It can be easily tested.
- Disadvantage:
  - It excludes many constructions which have been termed SVCs in the literature, e.g. causative constructions like ‘make break’ and complement constructions like ‘know swim’.

# Serial Verb Construction Test

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(12) a. *Rōrō a=gav qiliañ kēl.*

2DU NPL.GNO=fly be.lost again

‘The two of them flew out of sight again.’ (Malau 2016:602)

[Vurës]

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‘The two of them flew out of sight again.’ (Malau 2016:602)

[Vurēs]

b. *Rōrō a=gav.*

2DU NPL.GNO=fly

‘The two of them were flying.’



# Serial Verb Construction Test: **Successful**

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b. *Rōrō a=gav.*

2DU NPL.GNO=fly

‘The two of them were flying.’



c. *Rōrō a=qiliañ.*

2DU NPL.GNO=be.lost

‘The two of them disappeared/got lost.’



# Serial Verb Construction Test

---

(13) a. *No mō=kōñ lēt o dem.*

1SG PRF=snap break ART yam

'I snapped the yam.' (Malau 2016:566)

[Vurës]

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1SG PRF=snap ART yam

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c. *\*No mē=lēt o dem.*

1SG PRF=break ART yam

(intended: 'I broke the yam.')



# Serial Verb Construction Test: Failed

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c. *\*No mē=lēt o dem.*

1SG PRF=break ART yam

(intended: 'I broke the yam.')



d. *\*O dem mē=lēt.*

ART yam PRF=break

(intended: 'The yam broke.')





# Complex Predicate

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- Verma (1993:1)
  - *The term “complex predicate” may be used as an umbrella term to designate a variety of forms/expressions. The core notion is exemplified by the merger of two or more morphological entities to form an expression with a **single complex argument structure**.*
- Butt (1995:2)
  - *The **argument structure** [of a complex predicate] is **complex** [...] The grammatical functional structure is that of a **simple predicate**. It is flat: there is only a **single predicate** [...] and a single subject.”*
- Bril & Ozanne-Rivierre (2004:x):
  - *In dealing with the Polynesian languages [...], the inadequacy of the “**serial verb**” label soon became apparent, as the noun/verb distinction is highly elusive in these languages. This prompted the choice of the term “**complex predicate/nucleus**” to bypass this categorial hurdle.*
- Amberber et al. (2010:1):
  - *What is a complex predicate? There is currently **no widely accepted answer** to this question, no agreed set of criteria which allow an analyst to classify Construction A as a ‘complex predicate’, and Construction B as ‘not a complex predicate’.*

# Complex Predicate

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- If we define that a complex predicate corresponds to a simple (monomorphemic underived) predicate in its argument structure and event structure, then we need to set up five parameters which allow us to determine which construction is a complex predicate and which is not:
  1. Single Clausehood Parameter:

Is the construction **monoclausal**?
  2. Nuclear Layer Parameter:

Are the participating constituents on the **nuclear layer**?
  3. Single Predicate Parameter:

Is the argument and event structure the same as that of a **simple predicate**?
  4. Single Event Parameter:

Does the construction refer to a **single event**?
  5. Argument Structure Parameter:

Do all participating constituents have an **argument structure**?

# Complex Predicate

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- All of the parameters must be tested individually, and they differ for each language.
- 1. Is the construction **monoclausal**? (cf. Butt 2010:57; Nash & Samvelian 2016:6)
  - Cross-linguistically reliable test of absence of coordination/subordination is through negation (Haspelmath 2016:298-301; cf. also Choi 2003 for Korean).
  - In Romance languages, ‘clitic climbing’ is used to test monoclausality (Aissen & Perlmutter 1976:3-4).
  - In South Asian languages, long distance agreement (Butt 1995:35-42)
  - In many Australian languages, intonation resetting designates the start of a new clause (M. Harvey, p.c.)

# Complex Predicate

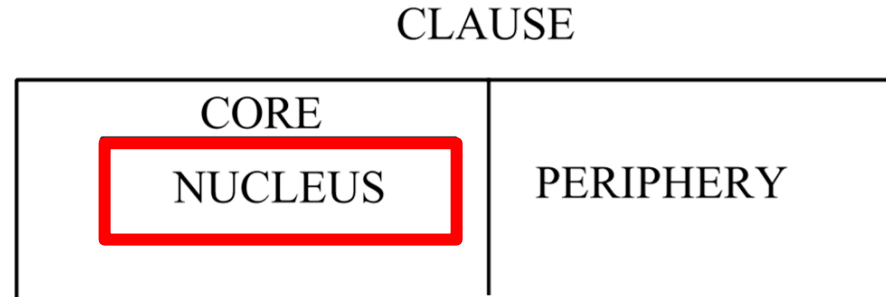
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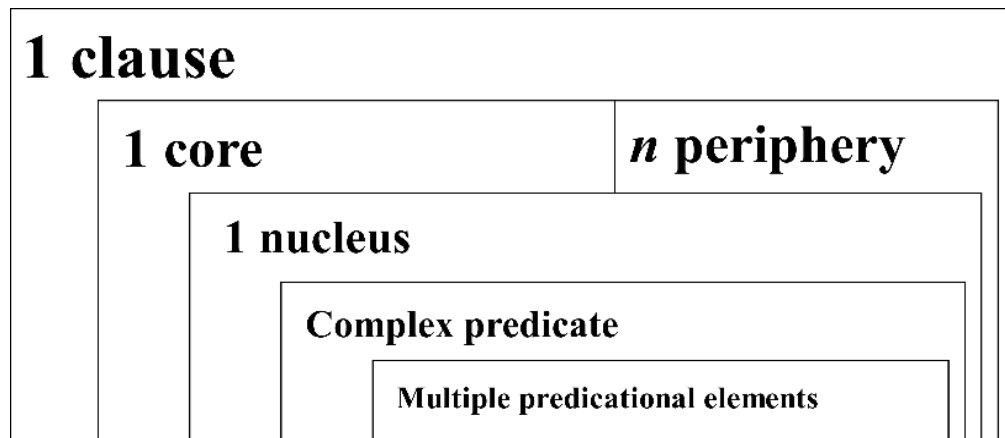
- The **nucleus** contains the **predicate**, thus also the **complex predicate**
- The core consists of the nucleus and the core arguments of the predicate
- The clause consists of the core and the peripheral adjuncts

# Complex Predicate

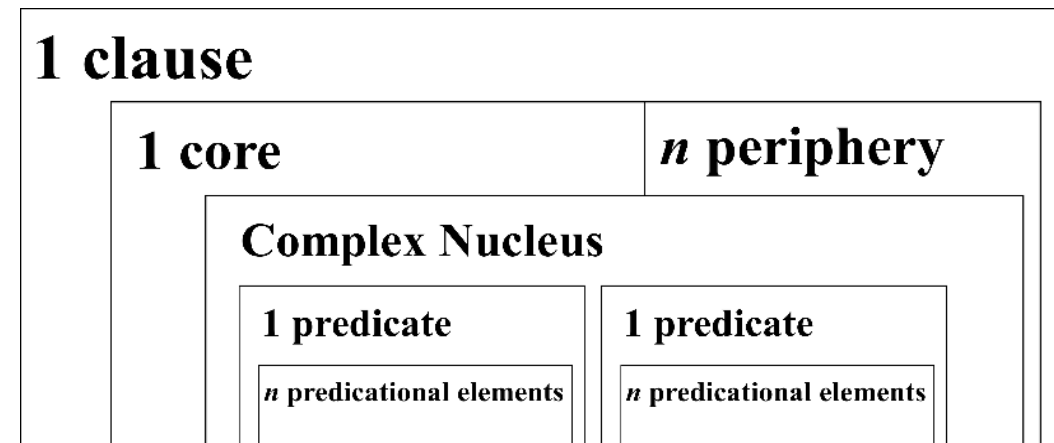
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nuclear layer



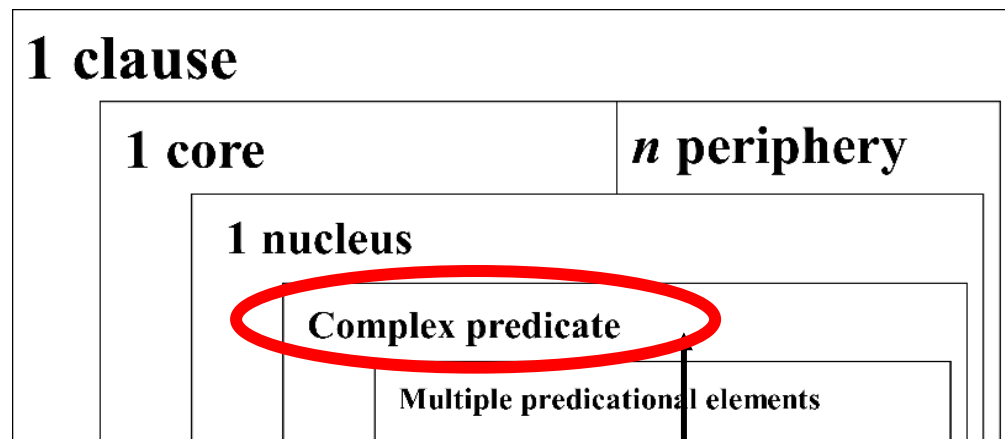
core layer



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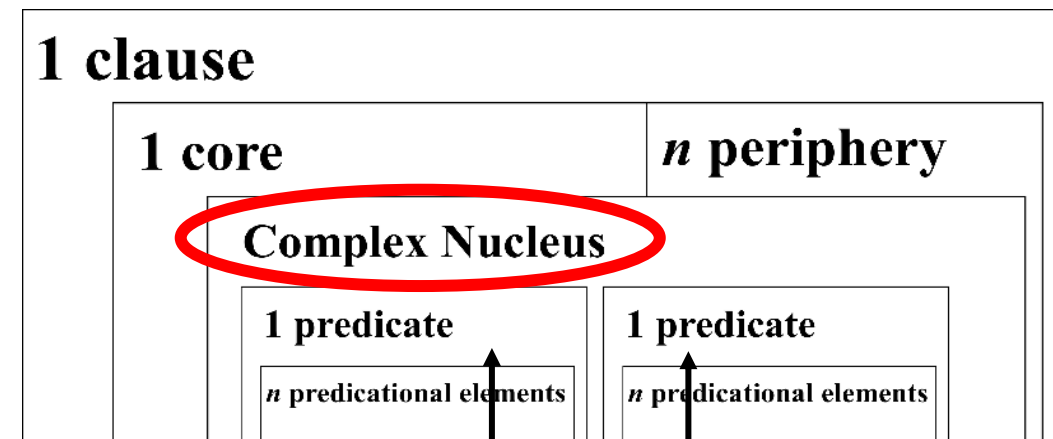
nuclear layer (complex predicate)



single event

Most CVCs and some SVCs work like this

core layer (no complex predicate)



multiple events

Most SVCs and some CVCs work like this

# Complex Predicate

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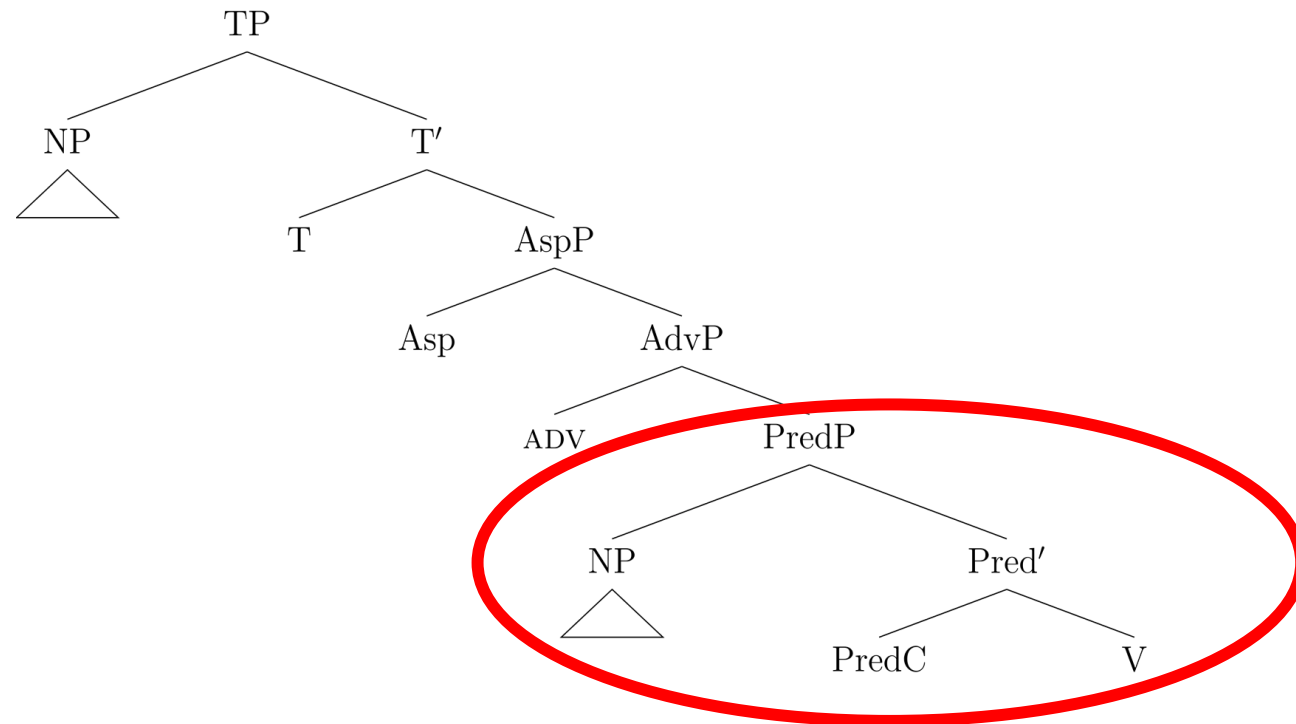
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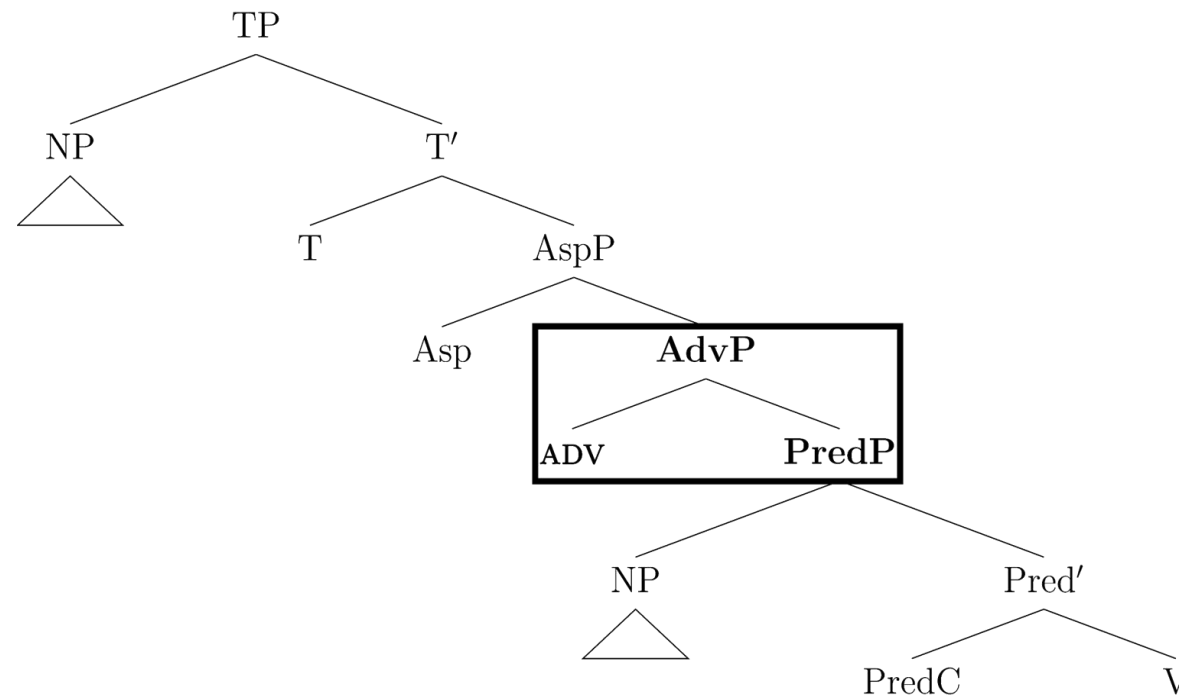
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- 3. Is the argument and event structure the same as that of a **simple predicate**?
  - I propose a Predicate Phrase (PredP), which consists of one necessarily predicational constituent (typically V) and at least one potentially predicational constituent (coverb, V2, preverb, nominal, applicative, etc.)



# Complex Predicate

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- All of the parameters must be tested individually, and they differ for each language.
- 3. Is the argument and event structure the same as that of a **simple predicate**?
  - Non-predicational constituents, which function as modifiers of the predicate, are outside of the complex predicate (outside of the PredP) and are located in the adverbial position (ADV), e.g. coverb, V2, preverb, nominal, adverb



# Complex Predicate

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- All of the parameters must be tested individually, and they differ for each language.
- 4. Does the construction refer to a **single event**?

# Complex Predicate

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- All of the parameters must be tested individually, and they differ for each language.
- 4. Does the construction refer to a **single event**?
  - If the event structure of a complex predicate corresponds to that of a simple predicate, which is typical assumption, then Baker and Harvey's (2010:20-22) proposal for merger constructions is perhaps the most consistent to account for complex predicates in general.
  - There are two major constraints on simple event structures:
    - (1) The major Predicate functions CAUSE, BECOME, MOVE and BE may appear only once in the Lexical Conceptual Structure of the overall complex predicate
    - (2) The major Predicate functions must appear in the following sequential order:

CAUSE } BECOME } BE  
          } MOVE

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    - (2) The major Predicate functions must appear in the following sequential order:  

CAUSE	}	BECOME	}	BE
		MOVE		
- Implication: If at least one language has a simple (underived monomorphemic) predicate with the same LCS, then the construction is a complex predicate

# Complex Predicate

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- All of the parameters must be tested individually, and they differ for each language.
- 5. Do all participating constituents have an **argument structure**?
  - If a complex predicate is multi-headed, all participating constituents have an argument structure.
  - This argument structure cannot exceed the adicity (number of arguments) of a simple predicate, the highest of which is three (= triadic, ditransitive), thus the arguments are not accumulated but merged.
  - I predict that the overall argument structure of the complex predicate corresponds to the highest adicity of one of its constituents (rare-type CPs are permitted under Exceptional Case Marking).

Verb / Light verb	Coverb / Postverb / V2 / Preverb	Typical CP	Rare CP
1 (INTR)	1 (INTR)	1 (monadic)	2 (dyadic)
1 (INTR)	2 (TR)	2 (dyadic)	1 (monadic)
2 (TR)	1 (INTR)	2 (dyadic)	1 (monadic)
2 (TR)	2 (TR)	2 (dyadic)	3 (triadic)

# Summary

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- Defining coverb construction:
  - A monoclausal construction involving one verb root and at least one coverb root, which has verbal, nominal and adverbial features, i.e. it is potentially predicational, it can be used referentially, or it can act as a modifier.
  - The verb inflects for TAM(P) and person, whereas the coverb does not express tense and mood.
  - The coverb cannot be used in the verb position without formal derivation.
  - I propose that the open/closed class distinction of coverbs is termed ‘Australian type’ vs. ‘Sinitic type’.
- Defining serial verb construction:
  - A monoclausal construction involving at least two verb roots, both of which can be used as predicates on their own.
  - There is no syntactic dependency between the verbal constituents.
  - The original semantics of each verbal constituent must be retained in the SVC.
- Definition of complex predicate:
  - It is not a single syntactic construction but a theoretical concept on the syntactic-semantic interface consisting of multiple predicational constituents which together form a single predicate on the nuclear layer.
  - The argument structure and event structure of the complex predicate is the same as that of a simple predicate.
  - A complex predicate can, among others, be expressed by an SVC or a CVC, whereas the opposite is not necessarily the case.

# Summary

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- There are SVCs that do not consist of true verbs or encode to multiple events and are therefore no complex predicates.
- There are CVCs that do not include a predicational coverb or encode multiple events and are therefore no complex predicates.
- There are descriptions of complex predicates, which are better analysed as V + Adv because at least one of the constituents has no argument structure but instead modifies the predicate.
- We need more consistent analyses of SVCs, CVCs and complex predicates to allow better cross-linguistic comparisons.



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