

Serial verb *ʔaw* ‘take’ with instrumental meaning in Isaan: A distinct construction?

Milntra Raksachat
University of Oregon
Email: milntrar@uoregon.edu

Contrary to previous hypotheses about the instrumental meaning of *ʔaw* ‘take’ in Thai and Lao serial verb constructions (SVCs), I argue that in the grammar of closely related Isaan (ISO: tts; Enfield 2002a) the instrumental meaning of *ʔaw* within an SVC belongs to a distinct ‘instrumental’ construction, and does not qualify as an instance of a more general SVC. The study relies on collexeme analysis within an Isaan corpus.

Serial verb constructions, according to one definition, comprise “a sequence of verbs which act together as a single predicate, without any overt marker of coordination, subordination or syntactic dependency” (Aikhenvald 2006: 1). When used in SVCs, some verbs like ‘give’, ‘say’, and ‘take’ have been claimed to function as grammatical markers that introduce causer, beneficiary, goal, theme, or instrument roles into the structure (Stine 1968; Lord 1973; Bickerton 1981; Sebba 1987). Previous discussions on SVCs in Tai-Kadai languages mostly concern two major languages: (Central or Bangkok) Thai and (Vientiane) Lao (Stine 1968; Thepkanjana 1986; Sudmuk 2005; Enfield 2002b; 2007), but not the Isaan variety of northeastern Thailand. Within this literature, there are proposals that SVCs with *ʔaw* ‘take’ and instrumental meaning are instances of a more generalized SVC that can also express purpose or motion/direction of an item. This is partly because the use of *ʔaw* in SVCs seems to correlate with multiple functions, e.g., from the fully lexical meaning ‘take hold of’ to grammatical ‘instrumental’ meaning. Previous analyses on Thai and Lao SVCs largely ignore corpus data and contextual uses which help clarify the lexical versus grammatical status of *ʔaw* and which augment understanding of syntactic and semantic structures of SVCs.

This study examines the syntactic properties and functions of serial verb clauses with *ʔaw* ‘take’ in Isaan from a Construction Grammar perspective (Langacker 1987; Goldberg 1995; Croft 2001; Diessel 2019). The goal is to determine whether there is a dedicated construction for the instrumental meaning in Isaan that involves serial verbs. By “dedicated construction”, I mean an idiosyncratic syntactic pattern that in this case is partly phonologically filled, and that is learned as a whole unit used for a specific function. The data are extracted from the Spoken Isaan Corpus which I have been building since 2018 with an aim to provide a resource for establishing the similarities and differences between Isaan, Thai and Lao.

I specifically argue that the pattern *ʔaw* NP VP does not qualify as an instance of the “purposive” SVC nor of the “handling-dispatch” SVC. The analysis uses a combination of semantic tests, discourse analysis and analysis of corpus frequency patterns. I follow the logic of the distinctive collexeme analysis developed by Gries & Stefanowitsch (2004) to differentiate distinct SVC constructions that can involve *ʔaw*. The collocation analyses suggest that serial verb uses of *ʔaw* with instrumental meaning not only have a syntactic pattern distinguishable from the purposive and handling-dispatch constructions, but also exhibit different discourse-informational structure; the instrument participant is typically new or contextually non-recoverable information, which is not true for the handling-dispatch construction.

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