

Towards a typology of coverb constructions in Papuan languages

Complex predicates consisting of an inflected verb in combination with an unmarked non-verbal element have been repeatedly pointed out to be a characteristic feature of Papuan languages, found in numerous Papuan languages across different families. Consider the following three examples from Duna (Isolate), Imonda (Border), and Yali (Dani).

- (1) a. *hata no anda re su*
 yesterday 1SG house eye hold:PFV
 ‘yesterday I watched the house’ (DUNA; San Roque 2008: 246)
- b. *ehe-m hël-fe-ual-fan*
 3-GL kill-do-DL-PFV
 ‘he has killed the two of them’ (IMONDA; Seiler 1985: 114)
- c. *kinang kulupnu=roho laha*
 earth shake=ADV.PART go:3SG.IM.PST
 ‘the earth shook’ (YALI; field notes)

These kinds of constructions have been called ‘verb compounds’ (Haiman 1980), ‘secondary verbs’ (Bromley 1981), ‘coverb’ constructions (Fedden 2011), and, probably most wide spread in the Papuan literature, ‘verb adjunct phrases’ (Pawley 2000, among others). Following Schultze-Berndt (2000), I will call them COVERB CONSTRUCTIONS (CVCs).

Papuan languages make use of coverb constructions (CVCs) in many different ways, and great cross-linguistic variation can be observed with respect to both the inflected verbs, as well as the non-verbal elements that participate in the construction. Thus, some languages only use one or two very generic verbs in the inflected verb slot (e.g. ‘do’ and ‘say’ in Mian (Fedden 2011)), while others draw from a much larger set of verbs (e.g. 12 major verbs in Enga (Lang 1975)). Likewise, languages differ with respect to what elements can occur in the non-inflected slots. In some languages, one will primarily find nouns, adjectives, and/or adverbs (cf. (1a)), in other languages the coverb can never occur in any other position or function and thus constitutes a word class on its own (cf. (1b)). In yet other cases, coverbs constitute a distinct word class, but allow for non-finite marking, such as, e.g., participle marking, as in (1c). Many languages exhibit all three options. We also find variation – cross-linguistically as well as language internally – as to how ‘tight’ CVCs are, i.e. whether (and if, what kind of) material is allowed to intervene between the coverb and the inflected verb.

Though CVCs are often mentioned in grammatical descriptions of single languages, unlike for serial verb constructions, only little comparative work is available. In this paper will give a first overview of CVCs in Papuan languages, showing more and less prototypical instances of CVCs and setting them off from other kinds of multi verb constructions and complex predicates.

ADV = adverbial; DL = dual; GL = goal; IM = immediate; PART = participle; PFV = perfective; PST = past; SG = singular

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