Interrogative Serial Verb Constructions in Kavalan

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Although the use of interrogative words as verbs is a typologically rare phenomenon (Hagège 2008), it is a common linguistic feature shared by many Austronesian languages (Huang, et al. 1999). It has been found that interrogative verbs in Kavalan, an Austronesian language spoken in Taiwan, can not only be used as intransitive or transitive verbal predicates but also be followed by a lexical verb in a Serial Verb Construction (SVC), as shown in (1) and (2) below (Lin 2010).

(1) naquni-an-su m-kala ya/tu sunis a yau
do.how-PV-2SG.ERG AV-find ABS/OBL child LNK that
‘How did you find that child?’

(2) tanian-an-su m-nubi ya/*tu kelisiw-ta
V.where-PV-2SG.ERG AV-hide ABS/OBL money-1 IPL.GEN
‘Where did you hide our money?’

The present paper further investigates the structural relationship between the interrogative verb and the lexical verb in this Interrogative Serial Verb Construction (ISVC) and argues that (1) and (2) involve different structures of verb sequencing.

Both (1) and (2) involve verb serialization, but they exhibit significant semantic and syntactic differences in terms of their subordination types. Based on the semantic and syntactic criteria established by Bierwisch (2003) and Dowty (2003), I argue that the VP headed by the lexical verb in (1) is a complement to the interrogative verb naquni, whereas the lexical VP in (2) should be analyzed as an adjunct of the interrogative verb tanian.

Another difference between (1) and (2) concerns the case marking of the theme argument. The theme argument in (1) can receive either absolutive or oblique case, whereas that in (2) can only be marked absolutive. This suggests that the theme argument in (1) can occur in the embedded clause or in the matrix clause, but the theme argument in (2) must appear in the matrix clause. This difference can be explained if we analyze (1) as a raising structure and (2) as a control structure. The raising analysis of (1) can explain in a straightforward manner why the theme argument can occur in the matrix clause even though it is not an argument of the matrix interrogative verb. In contrast, (2) involves adjunct control and is derived via sideward movement of the theme argument (Hornstein 1999; Nunes 2001). The adjunct control analysis of (2) can capture two important properties of the theme argument: It is shared by the lexical verb and the interrogative verb and it must be realized as the absolutive argument in the matrix clause.

In conclusion, ISVCs in Kavalan do not form a homogenous class. While an ISVC headed by naquni takes a complement VP and can involve raising of the embedded theme argument, an ISVC headed by tanian can be modified by a VP adjunct and involves adjunct control and sideward movement. The findings have both empirical and theoretical implications. Empirically, this study shows that when an interrogative verb co-occurs with a lexical verb, the interrogative verb can indeed be the primary predicate,
contrary to Hagège’s (2008) observation. The fact that the VP headed by the lexical verb in an ISVC can be an adjunct or complement depending on the matrix interrogative verb suggests that not all SVCs exhibit the same structure (Law and Veenstra 1992). Finally, the peculiar patterns of complementation and adjunction in different types of ISVC imply that our current syntactic treatment of complements and adjuncts needs a thorough re-examination (Bierwisch 2003; Dowty 2003).

References