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Morphosyntactic Diagnostics of Serial Verb Constructions in Ezaa-Igbo

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Abstract

This paper examines the morphosyntactic properties of serial verb constructions (SVCs) in Ezaa Igbo and the diagnostics that distinguish them from superficially similar multi-verb structures. Using qualitative data obtained from native speakers through elicitation, participant observation and informal interviews, the study focuses on argument sharing, tense-aspect marking, absence of overt clause linkers, monoclausality and verb-order restrictions. The data show that Ezaa SVCs characteristically have one overt subject interpreted across several predicates, while a single object may also be shared by successive verbs. Tense is typically realised once, especially on the initial verb, but interpreted across the entire verbal sequence. Serialized verbs occur without overt coordinators or subordinators and exhibit ordering restrictions motivated by temporal, causal and dependency relations. The paper argues that no single feature is sufficient for identifying an Ezaa SVC; rather, serialization is established by the convergence of several morphosyntactic properties. The findings provide dialect-specific evidence for predicate integration in Igbo and contribute to broader discussions of clausehood and complex predication in serialising languages.

Keywords: Ezaa Igbo, serial verb constructions, morphosyntax, argument sharing, monoclausality, tense-aspect, verb ordering

1. Introduction

Serial verb constructions (SVCs) are a prominent feature of many West African languages. They typically involve two or more verbs occurring within a single grammatical construction without overt coordination or subordination and jointly expressing a complex event or closely related sequence of sub-events (Aikhenvald, 2006; Foley & Olson, 1985). Their structure raises important questions concerning clausehood, argument sharing, tense-aspect distribution and the relationship between syntax and event interpretation.

A major problem in the analysis of SVCs is determining what qualifies as genuine serialization. The mere occurrence of adjacent verbs is not sufficient because multi-verb expressions may also result from coordination, subordination, complementation or other forms of complex predication. Reliable identification therefore requires a set of structural diagnostics.

In Igbo, verb serialization has received considerable scholarly attention (Emenanjo, 1978, 2015; Ndiribe, 2019). Recent studies have examined argument sharing, syntactic structure and event interpretation in Standard Igbo (Ji, 2024; Zimmermann & Amaechi, 2025). However, Igbo is characterised by substantial dialectal variation, and generalisations derived primarily from Standard Igbo cannot automatically be extended to every dialect.

Ezaa, an Igbo variety spoken principally in Ebonyi State, provides important dialectal evidence. Previous work has established that verb serialization occurs productively in Ezaa, but the combination of morphosyntactic properties by which such constructions may be distinguished from other multi-verb structures requires closer examination.

This paper therefore addresses one principal question:

What morphosyntactic properties characterise serial verb constructions in Ezaa Igbo?

It argues that Ezaa SVCs are best identified through the convergence of the following properties:

- argument sharing;
- non-repetition of recoverable arguments;
- shared tense-aspect interpretation;
- absence of overt coordinators and subordinators;
- monoclausal behaviour; and
- constrained verb ordering.

The paper is descriptive rather than fully derivational. Simple syntactic representations are employed where they illuminate the observed structures, while a detailed Minimalist account is reserved for separate treatment.

2. Literature Review

Serial verb constructions have been analysed from descriptive, typological and formal perspectives. Aikhenvald (2006) describes an SVC as a sequence of verbs functioning within one construction without overt coordination or subordination. Among their recurrent properties are shared tense-aspect-mood values, monoclausality and close semantic integration. Foley and Olson (1985) similarly approach serialization as a clause-level phenomenon in which several predicates operate within a common grammatical domain.

The absence of an overt conjunction is one frequently cited feature of SVCs, but this property alone is not sufficient. Schachter (1974) observes that serialized predicates typically occur without

overt linking morphology, yet languages may also allow other forms of asyndetic predicate combination. The identification of serialization must therefore rely on additional evidence.

Argument sharing is particularly important. Baker (1989) shows that an overt object may participate in the interpretation of more than one serialized verb. Collins (1997) similarly argues that argument sharing in SVCs is structurally constrained rather than the product of unrestricted juxtaposition.

Verb ordering also provides useful evidence. Durie (1997) notes that serialized predicates frequently occur in orders reflecting temporal progression, direction, instrumentality, causation and result. The order of the verbs is therefore often grammatically or semantically constrained.

In Igbo, SVCs have long formed part of descriptions of the verbal system (Emenanjo, 1978, 2015). Ndiribe (2019) re-examines the status of Igbo SVCs and highlights the importance of distinguishing genuine serialization from superficially similar structures. More recently, Ji (2024) argues for a hierarchically organised analysis of Igbo SVCs, while Zimmermann and Amaechi (2025) show that Igbo serial constructions differ in the degree and nature of event integration.

Dialectal evidence remains comparatively limited. Nwode and Ekwuowman (2024) provide a morphosyntactic account of verb serialization in Ezza Igbo and establish that serialization is a productive feature of the dialect. The present study extends the discussion by concentrating specifically on the diagnostics that characterise Ezaa SVCs.

The relevant diagnostics may be summarised as follows:

Diagnostic	**Expected SVC property**
Subject	One overt subject interpreted across verbs
Object	May be shared across predicates
Tense/aspect	Shared grammatical interpretation
Coordination	No overt coordinator
Subordination	No overt subordinator
Clausehood	Predicates function within one integrated domain
Verb order	Structurally or semantically constrained

Rather than treating any one of these properties as sufficient, the present study evaluates their convergence in Ezaa.

3. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative descriptive approach. The population consisted of adult native speakers of Ezaa who acquired the dialect as a first language and regularly used it in daily communication. Fieldwork was concentrated principally in Oshiegbe community in Ezza North Local Government Area of Ebonyi State.

Participants were purposively selected on the basis of native competence in Ezaa, continued association with an Ezaa-speaking environment and willingness to participate. The underlying study reports approximately ten to fifteen native speakers.

Data were obtained through elicitation, participant observation and informal interviews. Elicitation was used to obtain constructions relevant to argument sharing, tense-aspect marking and verb sequencing. Participant observation and informal interaction supplemented the elicited material with naturally occurring examples. Where necessary, recorded data were transcribed and checked with native speakers.

The data were analysed qualitatively using morphosyntactic diagnostics. Examples are presented in a three-line format consisting of the Ezaa expression, grammatical gloss and English translation.

Simple bracketed representations are used descriptively. Thus, a typical SVC may be represented schematically as:

$$[TP\ NP_i\ [VP\ V_1\ DP_j\ V_2\ V_3]]$$

where NP_i represents the shared subject and DP_j a nominal participant interpreted with more than one predicate. The representation indicates one integrated clausal domain but does not constitute a full derivational analysis.

4. Data Presentation and Analysis

4.1 Argument sharing

One of the clearest properties of Ezaa SVCs is argument sharing.

(1) *Ọ je-ru zuta nri shia ria*
3SG go-PST buy food cook eat
'He/she went, bought food, cooked it and ate it.'

The subject *Ọ* 'he/she' is overtly expressed once but is understood as the subject of *je* 'go', *zuta* 'buy', *shia* 'cook' and *ria* 'eat'. The object *nri* 'food' similarly remains relevant to the later predicates.

The construction may be represented descriptively as:

[TP $Ọ_i$ [VP je-ru zuta nri_j shia ria]]

A comparable pattern occurs in:

(2) *Whe shi-ru nri kuta ria*
3PL cook-PST food scoop eat
'They cooked food, scooped it and ate it.'

Here *whe* 'they' is shared by COOK, SCOOP and EAT, while *nri* 'food' is interpreted across the sequence:

[TP Whe_i [VP shi-ru nri_j kuta ria]]

Example (3) is similar:

(3) *Ọ zuta-ru okpa waa taa*
3SG buy-PST okpa slice eat
'He/she bought okpa, sliced it and ate it.'

Representation:

[TP $Ọ_i$ [VP zuta-ru $okpa_j$ waa taa]]

The same *okpa* constitutes the Theme of BUY, the Patient of SLICE and the entity consumed in EAT. Thus, argument sharing involves referential continuity even where the semantic role of the nominal differs from one predicate to another.

Longer sequences display the same pattern:

(4) *Whe zuta-ru nchi gbua shia taa*
3PL buy-PST grasscutter kill cook eat
'They bought a grasscutter, killed it, cooked it and ate it.'

The subject remains constant and *nchi* 'grasscutter' is interpreted throughout the sequence. These examples support the importance attributed to argument sharing by Baker (1989) and Collins (1997).

4.1.1 Recoverability and non-repetition

Shared arguments are generally not repeated where their reference remains recoverable. Compare the serial structure:

(5) *Whe shi-ru nri kuta ria*
'They cooked food, scooped it and ate it.'

with an expanded sequence of independently articulated predicates:

[TP Whe shi-ru nri] [TP whe kuta-ru nri] [TP whe ri-ru nri]

The serial construction instead takes the compact form:

[TP Whe_i [VP shi-ru nri_j kuta ria]]

The original study refers to this process as Equi-NP/Equi-VP deletion. The present analysis adopts the more cautious description non-repetition of recoverable material, since the surface evidence does not independently prove that several complete clauses are first generated and then deleted.

4.2 Tense and aspect marking

A second important property is the distribution of tense morphology.

(6) *M je-ru whu ya*
1SG go-PST see 3SG
'I went and saw him/her.'

Past tense *-ru* occurs on the first verb *je* 'go', while *whu* 'see' lacks separate past marking but receives the same past interpretation.

The structure may be represented as:

[TP M_i [T′ T[PST] [VP je-ru whu ya]]]

Similarly:

(7) *Whe bia-ru ria ji*
3PL come-PST eat yam
'They came and ate yam.'

and:

(8) *Ọ gude-ru mma bee anu*
3SG use-PST knife cut meat
'He/she used a knife to cut meat.'

Both display the pattern:

V_1-PST – V_2

with both verbs receiving past-time interpretation.

The same applies to longer sequences:

(9) *Whe shi-ru nri kuta ria*
3PL cook-PST food scoop eat
'They cooked food, scooped it and ate it.'

The descriptive representation is:

[TP Whe_i [T′ T[PST] [VP shi-ru nri_j kuta ria]]]

This differs from a sequence of independently tensed clauses:

[TP Whe shi-ru nri] [TP whe kuta-ru nri] [TP whe ri-ru nri]

The Ezaa SVC therefore exhibits a shared temporal domain. The available examples also favour a common completed-event interpretation, although a comprehensive account of Ezaa aspect would require broader paradigms.

4.3 Absence of overt coordinators and subordinators

Serialized verbs occur without overt clause-linking elements.

(10) *Ọ gbu-ru ọkụ gbaba l'ulo*
3SG kill-PST chicken run.enter house
'He/she killed the chicken and ran into the house.'

(11) *Whe wota-ru oshi chia ya*
3PL take-PST stick hit 3SG
'They took a stick and hit him/her.'

(12) *M gude-e oku kuta mini*
1SG use-PST cup fetch water
'I used a cup to fetch water.'

The characteristic serial pattern is:

[TP NP_i [VP V_1 DP V_2]]

rather than canonical coordination:

[TP NP [VP V_1 …]] COORD biabia ‘and’ [TP NP [VP V_2 …]]

For example:

Coordination

[TP Whe shi-ru nri] COORD biabia [TP e kuta ya] COORD bia [TP e ria ya]

Serialization

[TP Whe_i [VP shi-ru nri_j kuta ria]]

The absence of a coordinator is not sufficient by itself to establish serialization. Its significance lies in its co-occurrence with shared arguments, shared tense and integrated event interpretation.

4.4 Monoclausality

The preceding diagnostics jointly support a monoclausal analysis.

Consider:

(13) *Ọ je-ru zuta ji shia ria*
3SG go-PST buy yam cook eat
‘He/she went, bought yam, cooked it and ate it.’

The construction has:

- one overt subject;
- one overt tense specification;
- a shared/recoverable object;
- no overt clause linker; and
- an integrated event interpretation.

A descriptive representation is:

[TP $Ọ_i$ [VP je-ru zuta ji_j shia ria]]

rather than:

[TP Ọ je-ru] + [TP Ọ zuta-ru ji] + [TP Ọ shia-ru ji] + [TP Ọ ri-ru ji]

The same applies to:

(14) *Whe zuta-ru ekwa whua taa*
3PL buy-PST egg peel eat
'They bought eggs, peeled them and ate them.'

Although BUY, PEEL and EAT remain distinguishable sub-events, they are grammatically packaged within one integrated construction. Monoclausality therefore does not require an indivisible real-world event.

4.5 Verb sequencing and ordering constraints

Verb order in Ezaa SVCs is not arbitrary.

Consider:

(15) *Ọ zutu-ru ji baa wuru ye l'ite shia ria*
3SG buy-PST yam peel put PREP pot cook eat
'He/she bought yam, peeled it, put it in the pot, cooked it and ate it.'

The event sequence is:

BUY > PEEL > PUT-IN-POT > COOK > EAT

where **>** represents linear precedence.

Instrumental constructions display the pattern:

INSTRUMENT INTRODUCTION > ACTION

as in:

(16) *Ọ gude-e mma bee anu*
3SG use-PST knife cut meat
'He/she used a knife to cut meat.'

Thus:

gude mma > bee anu
USE KNIFE > CUT MEAT

Similarly:

(17) *Ọ shi-ru ria*
3SG cook-PST eat
'He/she cooked and ate.'

The order is:

COOK > EAT

The source data indicate that reversal disrupts the intended serial reading:

(18) **Ọ ri-ru shia ji*
3SG eat-PST cook yam
Intended: 'He/she ate and cooked yam.'

For the intended preparation-consumption interpretation:

COOK > EAT

is preferred over:

*EAT > COOK

The important point is not that the opposite temporal sequence is impossible in reality. Rather, reversal fails to preserve the same integrated relation involving the same participant.

The Ezaa data therefore suggest the following recurrent ordering patterns:

Motion > Purpose/Activity

Instrument > Action

Preparation/Cause > Result

Earlier dependent sub-event > Later dependent sub-event

These restrictions reinforce the view that Ezaa SVCs are structurally organised rather than freely concatenated verb strings.

5. Discussion and Findings

The principal finding of this study is that Ezaa serial verb constructions are identified most reliably through a cluster of converging morphosyntactic properties.

First, argument sharing is highly productive. One overt subject may be interpreted with several verbal predicates, while an internal nominal may similarly participate in several predicate relations. Importantly, sharing a referent does not mean that the nominal necessarily bears the same thematic role with every predicate.

Second, Ezaa SVCs exhibit extensive recoverability of shared material. Subjects and objects that remain identifiable throughout the event need not be repeated. This produces structurally compact constructions, although the data do not require an analysis in terms of transformational deletion.

Third, tense is characteristically overtly marked once and interpreted across the entire verbal sequence. This provides significant evidence that the predicates fall within one temporal domain. In the structures examined, later verbs do not require independent past-tense marking.

Fourth, serialized verbs occur without overt coordinators or subordinators. Nevertheless, the absence of a linker alone cannot define an SVC. Its diagnostic value arises from its combination with argument sharing and shared tense.

Fifth, the constructions display cumulative evidence of monoclausality. One subject, one tense domain, shared arguments, lack of overt clause boundaries and event integration all support analysis within one grammatical domain.

Finally, verb ordering is constrained. Instrumental, preparatory and causally prior predicates characteristically precede the dependent action or result. Reversal can disrupt the intended serial interpretation.

These findings may be summarised as follows:

Property	**Ezaa SVC behaviour**
Multiple lexical verbs	Present
One overt subject	Characteristic
Subject sharing	Present
Object sharing/recoverability	Frequent
Shared TAM domain	Present
Overt coordinator	Absent
Overt subordinator	Absent
Monoclausal behaviour	Strongly supported
Event integration	Present

Free verb ordering	Restricted

A characteristic Ezaa SVC may therefore be represented descriptively as:

$$[TP\ NP_i\ [T'\ T\ [VP\ V_1\text{-}(TAM)\ DP_j\ V_2\ V_3]]]$$

This should be understood as a descriptive schema rather than a complete derivational structure.

The findings also distinguish serialization from coordination. In canonical coordination, the predicates belong to separately articulated clausal units:

$$[TP\ NP\ [VP\ V_1\ \ldots]]\ COORD\ [TP\ NP\ [VP\ V_2\ \ldots]]$$

In an SVC, by contrast:

$$[TP\ NP_i\ [VP\ V_1\ DP_j\ V_2\ V_3]]$$

the predicates share grammatical resources and participate in a more integrated structure.

The major implication is that no single feature should be treated as the defining property of an Ezaa SVC. Argument sharing alone, lack of conjunction alone or shared tense alone would provide incomplete evidence. Their convergence supplies the stronger analysis.

One issue remains insufficiently supported by the available data: negation. Although negation falls within the stated scope of the original study, the reported data do not provide a sufficiently systematic set of negative SVCs to establish polarity scope and distribution. Future work should test whether a single negative marker scopes over the complete serial sequence or whether individual predicates can receive independent negative interpretation.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined the principal morphosyntactic properties of serial verb constructions in Ezaa Igbo.

The analysis shows that Ezaa SVCs characteristically exhibit subject sharing, frequent object sharing or recoverability, common tense-aspect interpretation, absence of overt coordination and subordination, monoclausal behaviour and constrained predicate ordering. These properties demonstrate that serialization in Ezaa involves substantially more than the linear juxtaposition of verbs.

A typical SVC may be schematically represented as:

$$[TP\ NP_i\ [VP\ V_1\ DP_j\ V_2\ V_3]]$$

where the verbs participate in one integrated grammatical domain.

The study's central conclusion is that Ezaa SVCs are best identified through a convergence of diagnostics. No isolated property is sufficient. Rather, argument structure, TAM distribution, clause-linking behaviour, event integration and verb ordering collectively establish their status.

The findings contribute dialect-specific evidence to Igbo morphosyntax and provide an empirical foundation for a more formal account of how Ezaa serial verb constructions are syntactically derived.

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