Serial verb constructions in Vietnamese

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A serial verb construction in Vietnamese is a sequence of verbs occurring together with a non-overt subject and/or a non-overt object in terms of Government and Binding Theory. The sentence with the non-overt subject is claimed to be an infinitival clause.

The non-overt NP is syntactically active but has no overt form. This non-overt subject of infinitivals will be represented as PRO whereas the non-overt object will be represented as pro, which is non-referential.

A sentence with one main verb will be illustrated first, a sentence with a serial verb presented second, and the underlying sentence presented third.

In the Vietnamese parts of speech, a basic state verb is a verb as well as being an adjective. Therefore the use of negation is one of the arguments to justify status as a verb as in (1) and (1a).

(1) Anh āy nhanh lám. 
edbro that fast very
“He is very fast.”

(1a) Anh āy không nhanh lám. 
edbro that not fast very
“He is not very fast.”

The following sentence (1b) has a serial verb construction .

(1b) Anh āy hiếu nhanh lám. 
edbro that understand fast very
NP VP VP AdvP
“He understands very fast.”

Sentence (1b) is derived from the underlying sentence (1c).

(1c) Anh āy _ _ hiếu pro [CP [VP PRO i nhanh.]] 
edbro that understand fast VP
NP VP
Agt Pat Agt
“He understands very fast.”
In (1c) the verb *híeu* ‘to understand’ is a transitive verb, and the non-overt object of this verb is *pro*, which is governed by the verb *híeu*. In the infinitival clause the non-overt subject is PRO, which is controlled by the overt subject of the main clause. This non-overt subject PRO is not governed by I(nflection), which is empty in the infinitival clause in Vietnamese. The infinitival clause is an adjunct of the main clause. The structure of this sentence is shown in (1d).

The sentence in (2) has only one basic state verb in one clause.
(2) Tôi ñôm.
I sick
"I am sick."

In (2a) there are two verbs occurring together.

(2a) Tôi nghĩ ñôm hai ngày.
I rest sick two day
NP VP VP NP
"I’ve rested (because I was) sick for two days."

In (2a) the verb nghĩ ‘to rest’ is an intransitive verb. The non-overt subject of the infinitival clause is PRO, which is controlled by the overt NP subject of the main clause. This sentence is subject controlled. The infinitival clause is the adjunct of the main clause as in (2b).

(2b) Tôi [CP [IP PRO] ñôm hai ngày.]
I rest sick two day
NP VP VP NP
"I’ve rested (because I was) sick for two days."

(3) Lan chăm chỉ.
Lan diligent
"Lan is diligent."

In (3a) there are two verbs occurring together which have a derived preposition vè ‘to return/ back’ which need to be observed.

(3a) Lan chăm chỉ viết thư vè nhà.
Lan diligent write letter return home
NP VP VP NP P NP
"Lan is diligent to write letters back home."

(3a) has the same structure as (2a). chăm chỉ ‘diligent’ is an intransitive verb. The non-overt subject of the infinitival clause is PRO, which is controlled by the overt NP subject of the main clause. This sentence is subject controlled. In (3b) the infinitival clause is an adjunct of the main clause.

(3b) Tôi [CP [IP PRO] viết thư vè nhà.]
Lan diligent write letter return home
NP VP VP NP P NP
Agt Agt Pat Des
"Lan is diligent to write letters back home."

vè ‘to return, back’ is not claimed to be a verb because it cannot be preceded by a negative or an auxiliary to the verb as in (3c). Therefore it is claimed as a preposition which is the head of the PP. P vè ‘back’ + NP, nhà.
(3c) \( \text{Lan}_i \), diligent \( \text{châm} \) [\( \text{PRO}_i \) \( \text{viết} \) \( \text{thư} \)]
\( \text{Lan} \) VP \\
\( \text{Agt} \) VP \\
\( \text{Agt} \) Pat

\*không/*sẽ về nhà.[]
\not \) will return home
\( \text{NEG} \) AUX \( \text{P} \) NP

Des

"Lan is diligent to write letters *not*/will back home."

(4) \( \text{Lan} \) là có giáo.
\( \text{Lan} \) be teacher
\( \text{VP} \) VP \\
\( \text{NP} \) VP \\

"Lan is a teacher."

(4b) \( \text{Lan} \) là một giáo viên tiếng Anh có kinh nghiệm.
\( \text{Lan} \) be one teacher language English has experience
\( \text{NP} \) VP \\
\( \text{NP} \) VP \\

"Lan is a teacher of English (who) has experience."

In (4b) there are two possible ways to justify status as a verb as in (4c) and (4d). In (4c) the non-overt subject of the infinitival clause is controlled by the overt-subject of the main clause.

(4c) \( \text{Lan}_i \), là một giáo viên tiếng Anh
\( \text{Lan} \) be one teacher language English
\( \text{NP} \) VP \\
\( \text{NP} \) VP

\[ \text{[CP [IP PRO}_i \text{ có kinh nghiệm.]]} \]
\( \text{has experience} \)
\( \text{VP} \) NP

"Lan is a teacher of English (who) has experience."

Another possibility is that PRO is controlled by the overt object of the main clause which refers equally to the overt subject of the main clause. The infinitival clause is the adjunct of the main clause as in (4d).

(4d) \( \text{Lan}_i \), là một giáo viên tiếng Anh
\( \text{Lan} \) be one teacher language English
\( \text{NP} \) VP \\
\( \text{NP} \) VP

\[ \text{[CP [IP PRO}_i \text{ có kinh nghiệm.]]} \]
\( \text{has experience} \)
\( \text{VP} \) NP

"Lan is a teacher of English (who) has experience."

Goral (1986: 292-293) calls this kind of verb an adjectival verb which is equivalent to the basic state verb in this study.
(5) Ông trễ.
you late
“You are late.”

(5a) Ông đến trễ.
you arrive late
“You arrived late.”

(6) tran dau tiếp tục.
clf battle continue
NP VP NP VP
“The battle is going on.”

In (6) the verb tiếp tục ‘continue’ is an intransitive verb.

(6a) Tôi nghỉ một lát lại tiếp tục làm.
I rest one moment again continue do
NP VP NP AdvP VP VP
“I rest a moment then continue to do it.”

In (6a) there are three verbs in the sentence which can be analysed as in (6b).

(6b) Tôi nghỉ một lát [cq [IP PROi lại tiếp tục]]
I rest one moment again continue
NP VP NP AdvP VP
Agt

[IP PROi làm pro].
VP
Agt Pat
“làng pro]
“làng pro]
“Agt Pat
“I rest a moment then continue to do it again.”

In (6b) there is one main clause and two infinitival clauses. The non-overt subjects of the infinitival clauses are PROs which are controlled by the overt subject of the main clause. The non-overt object of the verb làm ‘to do’ is pro, which is governed by the verb làm. The third clause is the complement of the second clause, whereas the second clause is an adjunct of the main clause.

(7) Tôi đi chợ.
I go market
“I go to the market.”

(7a) Chúng ta đưa con đi chơi công viên.
we bring child go play park
NP VP NP VP
“We take a child and go for a walk in the park.”

In (7a) there are two verbs in the sentence, as shown in (7b).
(7b) Chúng ta đưa con [cp [VP PRO i đi chơi công viên]].
we bring child go play park
Agt VP NP VP NP
"We take a child and go for a walk in the park."

In (7b) the non-overt subject of the infinitival clause is controlled by the overt subject of the main clause. The second clause is the complement of the first clause.

(8) Họ hét âm lên.
they scream noise up
NP VP NP P
"They screamed very noisily."

(8a) Chị ấy gọi như hét vào tai.
edd sis that call as scream into ear
NP VP A VP P NP
"She calls like (she is) screaming into one’s ear."

In (8a) there are two verbs, as shown in (8b).

(8b) [cp [VP Chị ấy gọi pro] như
edd sis that call A
NP VP P
Agt Pat
[cp [VP PRO i hét vào tai.]]
scream into ear
VP P NP
Agt Des
"She calls like (she is) screaming into one’s ear."

In (8b) the verb ‘to call’ is a transitive verb which has as its complement the non-overt object pro. It is governed by the verb gọi, whereas the non-overt subject of the infinitival clause is PRO, which is controlled by the overt subject of the main clause. The second clause is the complement of the main clause. vào ‘enter, into’ is claimed to be a preposition, not a verb, because it cannot be negated or preceded by an adverb as a verb can be.

(9) Nước mắt lan trên go ma.
water eye roll on knoll cheek
NP VP P NP
"The tears rolled down her cheeks."

(9a) Bà ngã lan ra đất.
grandmo fall down roll out/exit ground
NP VP VP P NP
"Grandmother fell down and rolled on the ground."
In (9a) there are two verbs in the sentence. The non-overt subject of the infinitival clause is controlled by the overt subject of the main clause, as shown in (9b).

(9b) Bà ngã [CP [IP PRO lan ra đấ́t]].
grandmother fall down roll out ground
NP VP NP
“Grandmother fell down and rolled on the ground.”

In (9b) ra ‘out / exit’ is not a verb because it cannot be preceded by a negative or an adverb. It is a derived preposition which is the head of the PP.

Goral (1986:376) analyses derived prepositions as directional verbs, e.g. nhìn ra [lit: look (at) exit] ‘to recognize’, but I analyse this kind of verb as a coverb.

(10) Tôi nghe dài.
I listen radio
NP VP NP
“I listen to the radio.”

(10a) Chủ ý nghe tôi giáng lại.
pay attention listen I explain again
VP VP NP VP Adv
“Pay attention and listen to my explanation again.”

In (10a) there are three verbs in the sentence. There are non-overt subjects of the main and the second clauses which are PRO. Because Vietnamese is not an inflectional language like Italian or Spanish, therefore pro is not used in these positions because these empty elements have no definite reference to a verbal inflection. The non-overt object of the verb giáng ‘to explain’ in the third clause is pro which is governed by the verb giáng. The third clause is the adjunct of the second clause, whereas the second one is the complement of the first clause, as in (10b).

(10b) [CP [IP PRO Chủ ý]] [CP [IP PRO nghe tôi]]
pay attention listen I
VP VP

[CP [IP PRO giáng pro lai]].
explain again
VP Adv
“Pay attention and listen to my explanation again.”

Goral (1986:436-7) sets up criteria for considering a verb concatenation as a single verb: if verbs are separated by unambiguous clause or sentence boundaries, then they do not belong to a single concatenation. But my study permits boundaries between clauses in one sentence, such as the complement or the complementizer (e.g. dé ‘for’). These internal boundaries do not affect my criteria because there is
related reference within each sentence. Since verbs are considered a sequence because there are both non-overt subjects and non-overt objects in the main and infinitival clauses. The non-overt subject is referred to as PRO, the non-overt object is referred to as pro.

REFERENCES


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