
Semantic fieldwork and its interfaces: A look from serial-verb-constructions and exceed-comparatives.

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This talk examines Serial Verb Constructions (SVCs) and exceed-comparatives across Sub-Saharan languages, including Yoruba, Akan, Ga, Dagbani, Jula, Ewe, and Igbo. Fieldwork in these languages revealed methodological challenges with uniform elicitation procedures, emphasizing the need for flexible fieldwork design.

SVCs - while widespread in African languages, display significant definitional and structural variation: Haspelmath (2016) treats SVCs as monoclausal combinations of verbs without linking elements; Aboh (2009) posits functionally dependent light verbs; and Veenstra and Muysken (2017) highlight argument sharing and event unity. Empirical data from the studied languages show examples aligning with and contradicting each definition, underscoring the need for refined diagnostics. A new semantically based diagnostic (Zimmermann & Amaechi 2025) identifies systematic SVC patterns, where syntactic variation obscures uniformity. The revised questionnaire, enriched with background rationales, enhances cross-linguistic comparability by accommodating speaker variation and context.

Exceed-comparatives – contrary to particle-type comparatives (Stassen 1985), employ an EXCEED verb to express comparison—characteristic of many African and Asian languages (Beck 2004). Data elicited through an extended questionnaire reveal extensive variation both across and within languages. While some Yoruba exceed-constructions align with SVCs, languages such as Akan require alternative analyses. These findings challenge presumed typological uniformity by demonstrating microvariation in the semantics and syntax of exceed-verbs.

Cross-linguistic results highlight three main insights: (i) elicitation methods must be theoretically informed and context-sensitive; (ii) semantically oriented diagnostics uncover deep structural patterns in SVCs; and (iii) exceed-comparatives show greater typological diversity than previously assumed. Overall, the study underscores methodological adaptability and diagnostic refinement as crucial for semantic fieldwork on complex predicate and comparative structures in under-documented languages.

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