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SERIAL VERBS IN SURINAM CREOLES

George L. Huttar

One of the most fascinating aspects of language, for linguist and layman alike, is the matter of origins: how did a particular language get a particular feature--phonological, syntactic, or semantic? For most languages, of course, the answers to many of these questions will remain forever hidden in millenia of unrecorded prehistory. For relatively young languages, however, such as many known today as pidgins and creoles, we are in a much better position to answer some of these questions about origins.

It is for this reason--their recent origin and in some cases their extant documentation from within a few decades of their origin--that pidgins and creoles (PC's) are especially valuable sources of data not only about language development and language contact, but also about the nature of language itself. It is not surprising, then, that a major part of creole studies is devoted to answering questions like "Where did Haitian Creole get the morpheme for sweet potato?" or "Which regional dialects of English contributed to the lexicon of the English PC's of West Africa?"

Such questions have been answered primarily about phonology and lexicon (e.g., in Voorhoeve, 1970), to some extent about syntax (e.g., in Taylor, 1960), and to a lesser extent about semantic organization (e.g., in Huttar, forthcoming). Recently, especially in connection with an increasing interest in language universals, PC syntax has been receiving more attention (e.g., in Givon, forthcoming). Sources of PC syntactic features are usually claimed to be one or more of the following four:

1. language universals,
2. PS universals (determined by the processes by which PC's arise),
3. substrata
4. dominant (e.g., European) languages.

A case in point is that of serial verb constructions in Krio, a creole spoken in Sierra Leone. Williams (1971) has pointed out some specific resemblances between Krio and the Kwa languages of West Africa with regard to these constructions. The obvious conclusion that one is tempted to draw is an answer to a question about origins, namely, Krio must have acquired this set of syntactic features from the influence of Kwa languages. Whether that is the correct evaluation of the resemblance between Krio and Kwa, however, must be determined by the answers to some other questions, such as the following:

How widespread are identical or similar constructions in other PC's?

How widespread are identical or similar constructions in other, 'ordinary,' languages?

How exactly do the Krio constructions correspond to those in a given Kwa language or group of Kwa languages?

Obviously I can't answer all these questions well in this paper. What I want to do is present some relevant data from some creoles spoken across the Atlantic from the Krio area, namely in the country of Surinam (former Dutch Guiana). I hope thereby to lay part of the groundwork for more serious consideration of the questions just raised. Data from creoles and other languages in other parts of the world will also be brought into the discussion, so that we may start to determine the origins of these syntactic patterns--African or creole or universal.

Our point of departure will be Djuka,² the Surinam creole with which I am most familiar and about which the least information has been published. Where possible I have also included parallel data from Sranan and Saramaccan, the two other major creoles of Surinam.

By serial verb constructions I mean sequences of verb phrases that are immediately juxtaposed in surface structure. In particular, no subject and no conjunction or other particle intervenes.

We begin with the use of three verbs of motion postposed to another verb phrase to indicate direction. In Djuka these verbs of motion are kon (<come>), go (<go>), and gwe₃ (<go away>). In I.A. these three verbs are used as independent verbs.

I.A. Surinam creoles. Verbs of motion as independent verbs.

1.	a	kon	He came.	2.	a	go	a	osu	He went home.
	a	kon			a	go	na	oso	
	a	ko			a	go	a	wosu	
		he come				he go	at	house	
3.	a	gwe	He left.						
	a	gwe							
	-----								
		he leave							

(In all examples with forms from the three Surinam creoles, the Djuka form appears in the top line, the corresponding Sranan form in the second line, and the Saramaccan form in the third line. The gap in I.A.3. indicates that Saramaccan uses only two verbs in this position, as opposed to the three used in Djuka and Sranan.)

In I.B. we see the same verbs of motion postposed to the intransitive verb phrase waka (<walk>), 'walk, move, trave₁':

1. a waka kon He walked (to point of reference).
a waka kon
a waka ko
he walk come
2. a waka go a osu He walked home (away from point
a waka go na oso of reference).
a waka go a wosu
3. a waka gwe
a waka gwe He walked away.

I. C. Surinam creoles. Verbs of motion postposed to transitive VP.

1. a tyai den fisi kon He brought the fish.
a tyari den fisi kon
a tya dee fisi ko
he carry pl. fish come
2. a tyai den fisi go a osu He took the fish home.
a tyari den fisi go na oso
a tya dee fisi go a wosu
3. a tyai den fisi gwe He took the fish away.
a tyari den fisi gwe

I.D. Krio. Verbs of motion postposed to intrans. (1) and trans
VP (2-4).

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The resemblance between the creoles of Surinam and Krio (and, for that matter, other Caribbean creoles) on this point might suggest that we are dealing here with a feature of creole languages in general. In this connection it is instructive to note data from several other languages. I.E. shows Igbo examples of parallel constructions with intransitive (1.) and transitive (2.) VP's; parallel examples from various other Kwa languages could be given as well:⁶

I.E. Kwa (Igbo). Verbs of motion postposed to intrans. (1) and trans. (2) VP.

1. ọ gbàrà ọsọ́ gáa áhà He ran to the market.
he ran &go market

2. ọ wèrè ìtè byá He brought the pot.
took pot &come

From what we know of the history of Krio and of the Caribbean creoles, it is reasonable to assume some substratal influence here. But I.F. shows a parallel construction in Vagala, a Gur (Voltaic) language of Ghana; so rather than speaking of a Kwa substratum, we should probably be less specific in our claims and speak merely of a West African substratum:⁷

I.F. Gur (Vagala). Verb of motion postposed to trans. VP.

1. ù kyìgò níí bà She brought water.
she carried water came

The examples in New Guinea Pidgin (Neo-Melanesian) given in I.G. are not precisely parallel to the examples given from other languages so far, because of the particle i intervening before the verb of motion:

I.G. Neo-Melanesian. Verbs of motion with trans. VP.

1. em i kisim buk i kam long skul. He brought the book to
he take book come at school school.

2. em i kisim buk i go long skul. He took the book to school.
go

While these data suggest that the serial verb construction now under consideration is not a PC universal, this argument may not be emphasized. For it turns on whether i is taken to be a subject marker (in which case we do not have here immediately juxtaposed VP's) or a predicate marker (in which case it could be argued that the i is part of the second VP and therefore does not intervene between the two VP's.)

At any rate, the Kwa material exemplified in I.E. demonstrated that the construction is not limited to creole languages. The data in I.H. from Chrau of Viet Nam further show that the construction is not even limited to creoles and West African languages:⁹

I.H. Chrau. Verbs of motion postposed to trans. VP.

1. nĕh văt sirăq tăt He brought the book
he carry book come/arrive
2. nĕh văt sirăq sŷq He took the book back.
return
3. nĕh văt sirăq saq He took the book away
go

In summary, the data presented from various creoles and other languages, along with our knowledge of the extralinguistic history of the creoles spoken on both sides of the Atlantic, suggest (1) that the hypothesis of a West African, though not necessarily Kwa, origin of these serial verb constructions in Krio and the creoles of Surinam is probably correct; but (2) the possibility of concomitant operation of language universals cannot yet be discounted.

Turning now to a serial verb construction more specifically associated with languages of West Africa, and in much of the literature with Kwa languages in particular, let us examine the use of 'give' as a preposition-like introducer of dative and/or benefactive noun phrases. In II.A. we have first the verb 'give' as an independent verb (1.), then as an introducer of a dative (indirect object) (2), then as an introducer of a benefactive (3.), in Djuka, Sranan, and Saramaccan:

II.A. Surinam creoles. 'give' as independent verb (1),
introducing dative and benefactive (2-4).

1. a gi mi den fisi He gave me the fish.
a gi mi den fisi
a da mi dee fisi
he give me pl. fish
2. a tyai den fisi kon gi mi He brought me (dative)
a tyari den fisi kon gi mi the fish.
a tya dee fisi ko da mi
carry come give me
3. a go a foto gi mi He went to town for me (benefactive).
a go na foto gi mi
a go a foto da mi
he go at town give me

Note that the same construction is used for both dative and benefactive. Examples II.A.2. and 3. were chosen to represent fairly unambiguous uses of this construction for dative and benefactive, respectively. In II.A. 4., however, the same construction can be taken either way:

4. a kisi den fisi gi mi He caught the fish for me/
a kisi den fisi gi mi He caught me the fish (i.e.,
a kisi dee fisi da mi caught and gave them to me).
catch

structions in Atlantic creoles unlikely, although such factors may have had some reinforcing effect upon their development in these languages.

The third sort of serial verb construction we will consider is that involving 'take' to introduce an instrument, as in the Yoruba data in III.A.1. (which could, again, be matched with parallel data from, e.g., Igbo, Yatye, and Ewe):

III.A. Kwa (Yoruba). 'take' introducing instrument (1) and manner (2).

1. ó fī òbē gé ẽrǎ He cut the meat with a knife.
he take knife cut meat

The same construction is also used to express manner in Yoruba, as in III.A2.:

2. ó fī èsò gé ẽrǎ He cut the meat with care.
care

III.B.1. shows the same construction used for instrument in the Gur language Vagala:

III.B. Gur (Vagala). 'take' introducing instrument.

1. ù kpá kíyzéè mòng ówl He cut the meat with a knife.
he took knife cut meat

For the instrumental usage, Krio uses the same construction, given in III.C.1., although another construction, considered Anglicized Krio, given in III.C.2., is also used:

III.C. Krio. Instrument expressed with 'take' (1) and without (2).

1. i tek nɛf ʧɛʧɛ di bif	}	He cut the meat with a knife.
he take knife cut the meat		
2. i ʧɛʧɛ di bif wit nɛf	}	
with		

Krio does not use verb serialization with 'take' for manner, however.

In the creoles of Surinam, such a serialized construction is rare even for instrument. In Djuka, for example, the parallel construction given in III.D.1. is possible, but very infrequent. A Djuka speaker is more likely to use either the simple clause construction given in III.D.2., or two overtly conjoined clauses as in III.D.3. I believe the same can be said of Sranan and Saramaccan, although I do not have enough experience with those languages to support this hunch.

III.D. Djuka. Instrument expressed with 'take' (1) and without (2-3).

1. a teke ne fi koti a meti	}	He cut the meat with a knife.
he take knife cut the meat		
2. a kot i a met i ang a ne fi		
with knife		
3. a teke ne fi, ne a kot i a met i		
take then he		

As in Krio, this construction is not used at all for manner.

The resemblance between the usual Djuka construction in III.D.2. and English is evident. Does this mean that this particular construction was borrowed into Djuka from English? Not necessarily; for Kwa languages also have a parallel construction using 'with' for expressing instrument. We again limit our data to a Yoruba example, given in III.E.:¹⁰

III.E. Kwa (Yoruba). Instrument expressed without 'take'.

1. ó gé ẽrǎ̀ kpèlú òbè He cut the meat with a knife.
he cut meat with knife

Further, it should be remembered that many languages, including the Surinam creoles, English, and Kwa languages, but not Krio, use the same prepositional construction for instrumental, manner, and comitative, as in III.F., G., H., and I.:

III.F. English. Instrument, manner and comitative with 'with'.

1. He cut the meat WITH a knife.
2. He cut the meat WITH pleasure.
3. He cut the meat WITH Kofi.

III.G. Surinam creoles. Instrument, manner and comitative with 'with'.

1. a kot i a met i	ANGA	ne fi	He cut the meat with a knife.
a kot i a met i	NANGA	ne fi	
a kot i di gbamba	KU	faka	
2. a kot i a met i	ANGA	piisii	He cut the meat with pleasure.
a kot i a met i	NANGA	prisiri	
a kot i di gbamba	KU	piizii	
3. a kot i a met i	ANGA	kofi	He cut the meat with Kofi.
a kot i a met i	NANGA	kofi	
a kot i di gbamba	KU	kofi	

III.H. Kwa (Yoruba). Instrument, manner, and comitative with 'with'.

1. ó gé ẽrǎ̀ KPÈLÚ òbè He cut the meat with a knife.

2. ó gé ěrã̃ KPĚLÚ `es` He cut the meat with care.
 3. ó gé ěrã̃ KPĚLÚ ʔakĩ̃ He cut the meat with Akin.

III.I. Krio. Instrument and manner with 'with', contrasting construction for comitative.

1. i ʔĕĕdi bif WIT nɛf He cut the meat with a knife.
 2. i ʔĕĕdi bif WIT gladi He cut the meat with pleasure.
 but 3. ʔĩ en kofi ʔĕĕdi bif He cut the meat with Kofi.
 he and Kofi

(Let us note in passing, without citing examples, that Neo-Melanesian does not use the 'take' construction for expressing instrument; and that it uses the general preposition long to introduce an instrument, but a different preposition, wantaim, to introduce comitative. On the other hand, Vietnamese does express instrument with a serial verb construction, e.g. 'He use knife cut meat' for 'He cut meat with a knife', but does not express manner in this way.)

The lack of specific resemblances among the Surinam creoles, Kwa (and Gur?) languages, and Krio should introduce caution in assuming that the resemblances that are present among these languages can all be explained in terms of a Kwa or even general West African substratum. On the other hand, the lack of such surface structures in Neo-Melanesian must warn us against assuming too easily an origin in language universals, or even PC universals, for these construction. Yet the presence of parallel constructions in languages of other parts of the world (exemplified in this paper by data from Viet Nam) does mean that we do not know enough yet to reject the role of language universals in favor of the exclusive operation of specific West African substrata.

When we have studied enough syntactic constructions from enough languages (both PC and ordinary), we will probably find that even for one creole language, different constructions are due to different influences: sometimes the dominant language, sometimes the substratal languages, sometimes (perhaps) the nature of the process by which PC's arise, sometimes the nature of communication itself as reflected in language universals--and perhaps most often a combination of some or all of these factors.

FOOTNOTES

*A slightly different version of this paper was given at the SECOL XI meeting in Tampa, Florida, on May 4, 1974.

- ¹ Bendix (1970) discusses resemblances between Papiamentu and Ijo. Krio is compared with Kwa languages in more detail in Givon (forthcoming).
- ² Further information on Djuka is given in Huttar (1972) and Huttar and Huttar (1972)
- ³ All Djuka data are from my own field work, in consultation with James Park. The Sranan data are also from my own field work, though I have benefited from discussion with Hein Eersel. The Saramaccan data are from Naomi Glock and Catherine Rountree (see especially Glock (1972)).
- ⁴ All Krio data are from Ian Hancock (personal communication)
- ⁵ In the variant; i bri am kam, the notion of direction-toward is expressed by the main verb briŋ as well as by the postposed kam.
- ⁶ The Igbo data are from Hyman (1971). The ampersand in the glosses indicates that "The second verb occurs in what is typically referred to as the 'consecutive' construction, one form of sentential conjunction" (op. cit., p.30), not a conjunctive formative separate from the verb.
- ⁷ All Vagala data are from Pike (1970).
- ⁸ All Neo-Melanesian data are from Ellis Deibler and Allan and Phyllis Healey (personal communication).
- ⁹ All Chrau data are from David and Dorothy Thomas (personal communication).
- ¹⁰ The Yatye example is from Stahlke (1970).
- ¹¹ The Yoruba data in III.A. are from Stahlke (1970). Those in III.E. and III.H. are from Lord (1973).

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