

Concordant subject marking in Mauritian Creole serial verb constructions

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Abstract. Syea (2013) and Muysken & Veenstra (2017) identify some parameters along which subject marking varies in Mauritian Creole's Serial Verb Constructions (SVCs). Subject marking in SVCs are shown in these works to be either single (marked once for the whole construction), or concordant (marked once for each verb). They argue there is an interaction between subject marking, subject type (referential or pronominal), and negation marking (single or concordant). This work expands on these findings, through the exploration of the SVC Composition parameter (as identified in Aikhenvald 2006). The findings show concordant subject marking for all symmetric SVCs regardless of the other factors above, but not in asymmetric SVCs.

Keywords. Serial Verb Constructions; Serialization; Mauritian Creole

1. Introduction. Syea (2013) revisits the debate from the late 1900s regarding the status of the constructions represented in example (1).

- (1) Mauritian Creole (from Syea 2013:16)
 Zot pran balye koko zot bat Kazer.
 3PL take broom coconut 3PL beat Kaiser
 'They beat the Kaiser with a coconut broom.'

The main argument of those against referring to such structures as SVCs (e.g., Seuren 1995) is the repetition of the subject: as shown by the 3PL subject *zot* in the above example. Syea shows that, under particular circumstances, there is single subject marking, particularly with referential subjects. The exact reflexes of subject marking in Mauritian Creole's (MC) SVCs are not as simple as they first seem. Muysken & Veenstra (2017) expand on Syea's data exploring the effects of negation marking on subject marking.

This paper further expands on this work, showing different reflexes than those shown in Syea (2013) and Muysken & Veenstra (2017). In particular, the reflexes vary according to the Composition parameter (Aikhenvald 2006).

The paper has the following layout. Section 2 presents theoretical background of Serial Verb Constructions and the past work on Mauritian Creole. Section 3 presents the Methodology and data collected in this study. Section 4 discusses the differences in the data found here and that reported in Syea (2013) and Muysken & Veenstra (2017), the limitations of this study, and future directions. Finally, Section 5 reports the Conclusions that can be drawn from this work.

2. Background. Mauritian Creole is a French-lexified Creole spoken on the island of Mauritius (located in the Indian Ocean near Madagascar). This section provides background on Serial Verb Constructions (Section 2.1) and the previous work on SVCs in MC (Section 2.2).

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2.1. SERIAL VERB CONSTRUCTIONS. We can distinguish between necessary, prototypical, and less-prototypical features of SVCs Aikhenvald (2006). Necessary features¹ of SVCs include:

- being prosodically consistent with a simple clause
- no overt coordinator or subordinator
- single TMA value for the construction

Prototypical and less prototypical features relevant to this study are summarized by Table 1.

prototypical	less prototypical
Single Subject Marking	Concordant Subject Marking
Single Negation Marking	Concordant Negation Marking
Single TMA Marking	Concordant TMA Marking
Object Sharing	No Object Sharing

Table 1. Table comparing prototypical and less prototypical features of SVCs

The first three of these features reference *single* and *concordant* marking. This refers to the number of times that a given grammatical element is marked with reference to the verbs in the construction. Single marking therefore refers to a single overt marking for the entire construction, where concordant marking has one marking per verb in the construction. Below are examples demonstrating single (2) and concordant (3) subject marking which both occur in MC.

- (2) Mauritian Creole: Concordant Subject Marking (from Syea 2013:16)

Zot pran balye koko zot bat Kazer.
 3PL take broom coconut 3PL beat Kaiser
 ‘They beat the Kaiser with a coconut broom.’

- (3) Mauritian Creole: Single Subject Marking (from Syea 2013:18)

Zan pran kuto kup zanana.
 John take knife cut pineapple
 ‘John cuts the pineapple with a knife.’

The last feature in Table 1 identifies how objects of the SVC behave when the object is an argument of both (or all of when composed of more than two verbs) the verbs in the construction. When an SVC has object sharing, the object is only marked once, as the object of the first verb. In contrast, when an SVC does not have object sharing, the object must be identified (e.g. with an object pronoun) for the second verb as well as the first. Syea (2013) states that MC’s SVCs have object sharing. The following example shows that in an SVC, the object pronoun *li* cannot be overt.

¹ It is not clear that these all are truly ‘necessary’ features of SVCs, for example, Aikhenvald mentions Yimas as a potential counter example to the overt coordinator/subordinator.

- (4) Mauritian Creole: Object Sharing (from Syea 2013:25)

Li pran pom la li manze (*li).
3SG take apple DET 3SG eat 3SG
'He takes the apple and eats it.'

Mauritian Creole's reflexes with respect to the marking parameter will be further explored in Section 2.2.

Another distinction relevant to this study is the Composition parameter (Aikhenvald 2006). This parameter distinguishes between symmetric and asymmetric SVCs. Symmetric SVCs do not have any restrictions with respect to the verbs which appear in the construction, while asymmetric ones do. All of the examples so far are examples of asymmetric SVCs, where the first verb *pran* 'take' is the restricted verb used for argument introduction (instrument in ex. 1, 2, 3, and direct object in 4). Syea also reports 'ALL-PURPOSE' serials (5, which correspond to symmetric SVCs in Aikhenvald's terminology.

- (5) Mauritian Creole: Symmetric SVC (from Syea 2013:18)

Zot kwi diri zot manze.
3PL cook rice 3PL eat
'They cook rice and eat.'

While Syea (2013) only refers to the *kwi-manze* 'cook-eat' combination, this type of SVC should allow for any combinations that are pragmatically apt (e.g. sing-dance).

2.2. PREVIOUS FINDINGS. This section briefly summarizes the findings of previous studies with respect to the marking parameter, and discusses the gaps that this work set out to fill.

First, TMA is always concordantly marked in MC (Syea 2013; Muysken & Veenstra 2017): in example 6 the past tense marker *ti* must appear marked on both verbs.

- (6) Mauritian Creole: Symmetric SVC (from Syea 2013:27)

Li ti pran pom la li ti gard dan so sak.
3SG TNS take apple DET 3SG TNS keep in 3SG.POSS bag
'He took the apple and kept it in his bag.'

With regards to negation marking, Syea (2013) and Muysken & Veenstra (2017) find different reflexes. Syea states that negation marking is always concordant (7), while Muysken & Veenstra show both single (8a) and concordant (8b) negation marking to be possible.

- (7) Mauritian Creole: Concordant Negation (from Syea 2013:16)

Zot pa ti pran balye koko zot pa ti bat Kazer.
3PL NEG TNS take broom coconut 3PL NEG TNS beat Kaiser
'They did not beat the Kaiser with a coconut broom.'

- (8) a. Single Negation Marking (from Muysken & Veenstra 2017:37)
 Li pa inn galupe (*li) inn al lakaz.
 3SG NEG ASP run 3SG ASP go house
 ‘He didn’t run to the house.’
 b. Concordant Negation Marking (from Muysken & Veenstra 2017:37)
 Li pa inn galupe *(li) pa inn al lakaz.
 3SG NEG ASP run 3SG NEG ASP go house
 ‘He didn’t run to the house.’

These articles also differ in the documentation of where single and concordant subject marking occur. Syea notes that referential subjects *must* have single subject marking (9a), while pronominal subjects *must* have concordant subject marking (9b). Muysken & Veenstra state that referential subjects may have either single or concordant marking (10a) and that pronominal subjects must have concordant marking (10b), in positive sentences.

- (9) a. Single Subject Marking- Referential subject (from Syea 2013:24)
 Mari pran balye koko (*li) bat Kazer.
 Mary take broom coconut 3SG beat Kaiser
 ‘Mary beats the Kaiser with a coconut broom.’
 b. Concordant Subject Marking- Pronominal subject (from Syea 2013:24)
 zot pran balye koko *(zot) bat Kazer.
 3PL take broom coconut 3PL beat Kaiser
 ‘They beat the Kaiser with a coconut broom.’
- (10) a. Optional Concordant Subject Marking- Referential subject (from Muysken & Veenstra 2017:6)
 Madam la inn mars kat pat (li) inn al lakaz.
 Woman DET ASP walk four legs 3SG ASP go house
 ‘The woman went home on all fours.’
 b. Concordant Subject Marking- Pronominal subject (from Muysken & Veenstra 2017:6)
 Li inn ranpe *(li) inn al lakaz.
 3SG ASP crawl 3SG ASP go house
 ‘He crawled to the house.’

Muysken & Veenstra also explore how negation interacts with subject marking: example (8a) shows that pronominal subjects with single negation marking must have single subject marking. Additionally there must be concordant subject marking when concordant negation marking occurs (8b). They further note that referential subjects have single marking in the case of concordant negation (11).

- (11) Single (Referential) Subject Marking with Concordant Negation Marking (from Muysken & Veenstra 2017:37)
 Madam la pa inn galupe (*li) pa inn al lakaz.
 woman DET NEG ASP 3SG NEG ASP go house
 ‘The woman didn’t run to the house.’

This shows one gap that this study sets out to fill: what type of subject marking occurs in the case of a referential subject and single negation marking?

Furthermore, in her discussion of the Composition (symmetric vs. asymmetric) parameter, Aikhenvald (2006) notes that in languages with both symmetric and asymmetric SVCs, these constructions may have different reflexes with regards to the Marking parameter. Within Muysken & Veenstra (2017)'s data, there are only asymmetric examples. This work therefore examines the interaction of negation and subject marking, and compares the reflexes found in symmetric vs. asymmetric SVCs.

3. Methods and Results.

3.1. METHODS. This study collected grammaticality judgements and interpretations, from three 25-year-old female native MC speakers. The survey was conducted through Google Forms, and therefore has important limitations. Most importantly, although speakers were asked if they could pronounce the sentences without a pause, there is no way to be sure of the prosody of the structures without a proper prosodic study. Other limitations will be discussed in section 4.2.

3.2. RESULTS. The results of the study are broken up into the results for symmetric SVCs and asymmetric SVCs.

3.2.1. SYMMETRIC SVCs. The case of symmetric SVCs shows concordant subject marking across-the-board regardless of the type of negation marking and type of subject.

Example (12) shows that with concordant negation, the pronoun must be repeated. Example (13) also requires repetition of the subject, and suggests that a single negation cannot take scope over the entire construction.

- (12) Li pa kwi diri *(li) pa manze.
3SG NEG cook rice 3SG NEG eat
'(S)he doesn't cook rice, (so) (s)he doesn't eat.'

- (13) Li pa kwi diri *(li) manze.
3SG NEG cook rice 3SG eat
'(S)he doesn't cook rice, (but) (s)he ate.'

The same reflexes are shown for referential subjects as shown by examples (14) and (15).

- (14) Zan pa kwi diri *(li) pa manze.
John NEG cook rice 3SG NEG eat
'John doesn't cook rice, (so) he doesn't eat.'

- (15) Zan pa kwi diri *(li) manze.
3SG NEG cook rice 3SG eat
'John doesn't cook rice, (but) he eats.'

Furthermore, speakers find the inclusion of an Negative Concord Item (NCI) in symmetric SVCs to be odd (16) and rather opt to not include an object.

- (16) Mari pa'nn kwi #nanye *(li) pa'nn manze.
 Mary ASP.NEG cook nothing 3SG ASP.NEG eat
 'Mary didn't cook (or) eat anything.'

The implications of these findings are further discussed in Section 4.

3.2.2. ASYMMETRIC SVCs. The speakers consistently prefer subjects to be concordantly marked in asymmetric SVCs. This is shown for pronominal subjects with both types of negation (17a, 17b)², as well as referential subjects (17c) with single negation marking.

- (17) a. Li pa pran kuto *(li) pa kup zanana.
 3SG NEG take knife 3SG NEG cut pineapple
 '(S)he isn't cutting the pineapple with a knife.'
- b. Li pa pran kuto *(li) kup zanana.
 3SG NEG take knife 3SG cut pineapple
 '(S)he isn't cutting the pineapple with a knife.'
- c. Zan pa pran kuto *(li) kup zanana.
 John NEG take knife 3SG cut pineapple
 'John isn't cutting the pineapple with a knife.'

In the case of a referential subjects with concordant negation marking, concordant subject marking is optionally available (18). Even in this case, speakers reported a preference to concordantly mark the subject.

- (18) Zan pa pran kuto (li) pa kup zanana.
 John NEG take knife 3SG NEG cut pineapple
 'John isn't cutting the pineapple with a knife.'

Unlike the symmetric cases, NCIs are licensed in asymmetric SVCs, as in example (19) below.

- (19) Mari pa'nn pran balye koko *(li) inn bat personn.
 Mary NEG.ASP take broom coconut 3SG ASP beat nobody
 'Mary didn't hit anyone with a coconut broom.'

4. Discussion.

4.1. COMPARISON WITH PRIOR RESEARCH. This study found that Symmetric SVCs always required concordant negation marking and concordant subject marking, while asymmetric ones can have single negation, and single subject marking under certain circumstances. These findings compared with the findings of Syea (2013) and Muysken & Veenstra (2017) are summarized in Table (2) in terms of the prototypical vs. less prototypical nature of the feature. This table shows that this study found Symmetric SVCs to be less prototypical than Asymmetric ones.

² One of the consultants did not interpret the negation over the entire construction for the single negation (17b) case: thus something more like "(S)he isn't taking the knife. (S)he is cutting the pineapple."

	Symm. Syea	Asymm. Syea	Asymm. M & V	Symm.	Asymm
Subject Marking	Sometimes Prototypical	Sometimes Prototypical	Sometimes Prototypical	Not Prototypical	Sometimes Prototypical
Negation Marking	Not Prototypical	Not Prototypical	Sometimes Prototypical	Not Prototypical	Sometimes Prototypical
TMA Marking	Not Prototypical	Not Prototypical	Not Prototypical	Not Prototypical	Not Prototypical

Table 2. Table comparing the different findings of the features of MC's SVCs

This study also filled the gaps in the data from Muysken & Veenstra (2017)'s data, as well as showing slightly different reflexes. This is summarized in Table (3).

	Asymm. M & V	Symm.	Asymm
Concordant Neg. + Pronominal Subj.	Concordant Subject	Concordant Subject	Concordant Subject
Single Neg. + Pronominal Subj.	Single Subject	Not possible	Concordant Subj
Concordant Neg. + Referential Subj.	Single Subject	Concordant Subject	Optional Concordant Subject
Single Neg. + Referential Subj.	N/A	Not possible	Concordant Subject

Table 3. Table Comparing Findings of the Interaction of Negation and Subject Marking

This shows that Symmetric SVCs do not show any of the same reflexes as those reported by Muysken & Veenstra (2017). This is not surprising, as we saw that the Marking parameter may vary based on the Composition parameter. Comparing the results of the asymmetric interactions, there are also differences with Muysken & Veenstra (2017)'s data. First, pronominal subjects still require concordant subject marking with single negation marking. Second, concordant negation marking with referential subject marking does not require single marking, but rather may have either single or concordant marking.

As reflected by these tables, it is clear that the interaction of negation and subject marking in MC's SVCs shows a lot of variation among speakers, and it is unclear so far what sociodemographic factors affect which interactions different speakers have. One factor may be the age of the speakers, although a more precise comparison of the speakers' demographics of each of the studies would be necessary to properly address this question.

4.2. LIMITATIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS. As mentioned in the Section 3.1, this study was limited by the format of the survey. While participants were asked whether they could pronounce the sentence without pausing, this is a quite abstract detail, and should be verified with future prosodic studies. This would further verify the status of these constructions as SVCs. Furthermore, mismatching TMA markers were not tested which would be necessary to confirm the status of these constructions. This was not examined in this study based on the assumption that these structures would be present for the speakers. However some of these results suggest that the status of these constructions should be reevaluated.

First, as noted in Section 3.2, the interpretations of the symmetric SVCs are quite different from the translations provided by Syea (2013). In particular, these interpretations do not seem to reflect a single conceptual event, but rather some kind of causal relation. For example, considering example (12) repeated below as example (20), the interpretation given by speakers was 'He/she doesn't cook rice, so he/she doesn't eat.' The translations given by Syea (2013) were 'He/she doesn't cook rice and eat.' This shows a conceptual difference between Syea's consultants who see the cooking and eating events to be closely related, where the consultants of this study see them as less related.

- (20) Li pa kwi diri *(li) pa manze.
 3SG NEG cook rice 3SG NEG eat
 ‘(S)he doesn’t cook rice, (so) (s)he doesn’t eat.’

Second, while this study did not examine object sharing particularly, the results are consistent with object sharing not being required. First, as in the interpretation provided above, the consultants seem to interpret the ‘eat’ verb as intransitive. Future work should examine cases like this with purely transitive verbs, to get clear evidence for or against object sharing. A lack of object sharing could also account for the NCI results presented. Recall that in symmetric SVCs the NCI item was not licensed, while in asymmetric SVCs it was. Of course, this could just be a reflection of the potential intransitivity of both verbs in the symmetric SVCs, and could be further explored with purely transitive verbs in both positions.

These points lead to the suspicion that symmetric SVCs may not be available for these consultants, which should be studied through prosodic studies and mismatching TMA features on the verbs, as noted above. Future work can also continue to compare the grammars of different speakers of MC, to determine what factors impact the interaction of negation and subject marking.

With respect to the ‘TAKE’ instrumental (asymmetric) SVCs tested here, this construction also seems to be falling out of style: one consultant offered the example (21) as a more natural expression.

- (21) Zan pa’nn pran kuto pu kup zanana.
 John NEG.ASP take knife for cut pineapple
 ‘John didn’t take the knife to cut the pineapple.’

Furthermore, this study only considered the ‘TAKE’ instrumental type of asymmetric SVC. Future work should confirm what types of asymmetric SVCs are available to consultants to better understand how sociodemographic factors affect the availability of different types of SVCs.

5. Conclusion. Through the review of data previously presented on MC’s SVCs, and the data of this study, it is clear that there is a lot of variation on the acceptability of different types of marking. For the three 25-year-old speakers consulted here, symmetric SVC are shown to have across-the-board concordant subject marking and concordant negation, while asymmetric SVCs under certain circumstances have single subject marking and may have single negation marking. This suggests that symmetric SVCs may no longer be SVCs for my consultants, though this must be confirmed in future work. Additional directions include documenting along what sociodemographic factors SVCs vary and further documenting the extent to which SVCs are available and used by different speakers.

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