

The difference between converbs and coverbs: Are they both complex predicates?

‘Converb’ and ‘coverb’ are terms that have been used in descriptions of a wide range of languages to refer to chains of verbal constituents which form a single clause. However, a clear difference is not immediately obvious. ‘Complex predicate’ is sometimes used as a cover term of both (Amberber et al. 2010:8; Azeb 2010:263ff.; Baker & Harvey 2010:14ff.; Baranova 2013; Bugaeva 2018; Shibatani 2009:257ff.).

According to Haspelmath (1995:3), a ‘converb’ is “a nonfinite verb form whose main function is to mark adverbial subordination.” In the description of East Asian languages, a ‘coverb’ is defined as a “derived preposition, related to their corresponding verbs” (Clark 1975:4), whereas in northern Australian languages, it refers to a distinct lexical category with verbal, adjectival, or adverbial properties (Dixon 2004:60; Schultze-Berndt 2000:4; Wilson 1999). In contrast, ‘complex predicates’ are monoclausal but multiheaded constructions (Alsina et al. 1997:1; Butt 1995:2, 2010:49; Nash & Samvelian 2016). The terminology is fuzzy, and further confusion is added when of these constructions overlap with ‘serial verbs’ or ‘multi-verb constructions’ (Aikhenvald et al. 2011; Aikhenvald 2018; Aikhenvald & Dixon 2006; Azeb & Dimmendaal 2006; Bril & Ozanne-Rivierre 2004; Drude 2011; Hoffmann 2016; Unterladstetter 2020). This confusion has been the topic of a few recent studies, such as Bisang (1995), Hyslop (2013), Krauße (forthcoming, 2020), and Ross (2016).

Compare the converb construction (ConVC) in (1) from Kalmyk with the coverb construction (CoVC) in (2) from the Australian language Wagiman, both of which include a combination of ‘eat ~ swallow’ and ‘throw’.

- (1) *Carcaxa urkca id-äd xaj-ža-na.*
locust crop eat-CV.ANT throw-PROG-PRS
‘Locusts are eating (all) the crop.’ (Baranova 2013:20)
- (2) *Gabarna wek-ka g-a-ra-n.*
quickly swallow-NPFV PRS-3>3SG-throw-PST
‘He swallows it quickly.’ (Wilson 1999:46)

Drawing on novel data from selected Australian languages with CoVCs in comparison with existing descriptions on ConVCs, I establish a coherent analysis and provide clear criteria for the terms converb, coverbs, and complex predicate. The criteria can be summarised as follows:

- A converb consists of a verb root and a converb affix. The prototypical pattern is VERB+SUF, however some languages have converb prefixes or circumfixes (Anderson 2007:1260).
- A coverb is a potentially predicational non-finite constituent which has verbal properties but is a distinct lexical category.
- A complex predicate is a monoclausal structure in which one necessarily predicational constituent and at least one potentially predicational constituent merge on the nuclear layer of a clause and on the same level in the *c*-structure.

Thus, both ConVC and CoVC *can* be complex predicates. If the participating constituents are potentially predicate and form a single clause. If they do not, then these constructions cannot be described as complex predicates. Interestingly, none of these constructions need to be contiguous, as examples from Mongolian (Haspelmath 1995:1) and Wagiman (Krauße forthcoming:208). However, there is a strong cross-linguistic tendency that a converb or coverb immediately precedes the finite verb. Another important finding is that almost all languages with converbs are SOV (cf. Ross 2016). In the case of Australian languages, all languages with coverbs are also SOV, however coverb languages of East Asia are exclusively SVO.

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