

Converbs: Definition, Distribution & Typology

Daniel Ross (danielrosslinguist.com, djross3@gmail.com)

(University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign & University of California, Riverside)

In this talk, I will present the results of a typological survey of 325 languages, based on my dissertation (Ross 2021), which is the first large-scale, worldwide survey of the distribution and properties of converbs. In English, verbs ending in *-ing* can function as converbs (*Eating ice cream, I walked down the street*), but usage is much more extensive in other languages, as in (1) below:

- (1) Xot-od or-ž nom aw-aw
town-DAT go-CVB book buy-PST
'Going to town I bought a book.' (Khalkha Mongolian; Haspelmath 1995:1)

The category of converbs consists of mixed properties. It is tempting to define them as deverbal adverbs, thus in the domain of category-changing derivational morphology, yet converbs in many languages seem to fill an important role of inflectional paradigms. Furthermore, often the non-finite verb forms used as converbs are not limited to this function but may also be used as adjectival participles or nominalizations (cf. English *-ing*). There is also variation in their realization as non-finite verb forms: whereas typical converb affixes are in complementary distribution with normal finite inflection, some languages have been reported to have converbs with some characteristics associated with finiteness (e.g. subject agreement).

A major point of disagreement in previous research regards whether the core function of converbs is clause-chaining or adverbial. The term was introduced by Ramstedt (1902) for Mongolian, a language where converbs are prominent in clause-chaining (alongside adverbial usage), but more recently, in the popularization of converbs as a cross-linguistic category, Haspelmath (1995) has argued that adverbial functions are primary, distinct from clause-chaining (although that may also be a secondary function), resulting in two distinct, sometimes conflicting, research traditions. At the same time, a range of functions with mixed properties are labeled adverbial, while clause-chaining introduces a number of puzzles for theoretical analysis.

The survey reveals that converbs are especially common in Eurasian languages but found around the world, with varying properties. I will discuss the general typology of converbs, while focusing on marginal or exceptional cases. In total, converbs are found in about two-fifths of the languages sampled. Adverbial converbs are most common, but clause-chaining is also found in a significant minority of the languages, while the number of converb types also varies across languages, from just one type up to dozens. Additionally, another distinct function is revealed, specifically in monoclausal multi-verb constructions (complex predicates), with properties similar to serial verb constructions for example; this usage is found in about two-fifths of the languages with converbs. Given the multi-functionality of converbs, we must be careful to distinguish the usage of the term as a category label (e.g., a specific verb form) and functions of converbs. The results of the survey also reveal typological correlations: converbs tend to be found in SOV languages (and conversely SOV languages also tend to have converbs); similarly, with SOV languages tending to be heavily suffixing, converbs are almost exclusively suffixal, with few exceptions (Grossman et al. 2018). These word order tendencies also extend to the ordering of converbs and finite verbs: clause-chaining typically involves initial converb clauses followed by final finite clauses (again with rare exceptions: Mauri 2017); similarly, in converb complex predicates, a non-finite lexical converb typically is followed by a finite functional verb.

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