Serial Verb Constructions in Late Archaic Chinese

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Abstract

The serial verb construction (SVC), also known as verb serialization, is a grammatical phenomenon extensively distributed in African, Southeast Asian, Pacific, and South American languages. Modern Chinese is widely accepted in the literature of Chinese linguistics and general linguistics as a typical serializing language. The SVC is generally believed to be the source of a number of crucially important grammatical morphemes and constructions in Modern Chinese. As a remote predecessor of Modern Chinese, Archaic Chinese is also assumed to be a serializing language by the majority of linguists working on historical syntax of Chinese.

This dissertation presents a critical examination of SVCs in Archaic Chinese, particularly Late Archaic Chinese, in an approach informed by contemporary typological research on SVCs across languages in the world, with the following major findings.

(1) Contrary to the opinion of recent skeptics on the validity SVC as a distinct grammatical category, we present a series of evidence showing that the SVC in Chinese indeed exhibits a number of syntactic and semantic properties distinguishable from other types of VP sequences such as coordinate construction, adjunct construction and other constructions with similar surface forms. (2) After an extensive discussion on the difficulty in defining and identifying SVCs, particularly those in Archaic Chinese, a new set of criteria for the SVC, more precise and practical, is proposed. (3) Based on the new criteria, a comprehensive examination of SVCs in Late Archaic Chinese is conducted, which reveals that the number of genuine SVCs, in terms of both type and token, is drastically lower than that what was reported in previous research. This observation leads to the logical conclusion - contrary to the general belief in the field - that Late Archaic Chinese cannot be taken as a typical serializing language. It suggests that the Chinese language may have undergone an important typological shift from a marginal serializing language in the Archaic period to a full-fledged serializing language in the period of Medieval Chinese. (4) Despite of its low occurrence, the SVC plays a crucial role in the development of a number of important grammatical morphemes and constructions. A revision of the universal grammaticalization paths postulated by typologists is further proposed to accommodate the data from Archaic Chinese.