

Defining converbs ten years on – a hitchhiker’s guide¹

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1 Introduction

The term “converb” is used in a bewildering variety of senses, all while the label itself remains little known in mainstream linguistics outside of specialised circles. This article reviews various uses of the term “converb” and discusses the issues involved in its definition. I aim at providing an introduction for the general linguist and at offering the field worker some diagnostic tools for “converbs” and related “unidentified linguistic objects”.

Section 2 presents an overview of major converb definitions and lists common functions of converbs that are not covered by these definitions. In section 3 I discuss areas of major divergences in converb definitions. Section 4 concludes the paper with a checklist of further variables for a description of converbs. The appendix finally provides an explanatory list of some of the more specialised converb labels found in the literature.

In keeping with the spirit of a hitchhikers’ guide, the remainder of this introductory section jump-starts the discussion with some frequently asked questions.

FAQ (with non-partisan answers)

Q What are converbs?

A While there are various definitions, they are generally taken to be dependent verb forms that are neither argumental nor adnominal, i.e. that are – roughly – neither used like a typical noun nor like an attributive adjective. Within this “greatest common denominator”, individual authors or areal traditions make their own further restrictions (section 2). Here is an example of a Spanish verb form that most people would call a converb:

- (1) *Haci-endo autostop hasta Sand nos paró una furgoneta [...]*
do-CV hitchhiking(N) until S. us stopped a minibus
‘Hitchhiking up to Sand, a minibus took us on board [...]’
(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7PhyC_qX8s. Accessed 23.02.10)

Q Are there any converbs in English?

A The *ing*-form functions like a converb in certain cases, e.g. *Writing this article, I had people like you in mind*. However, it has other functions as well, including that of an argument as a verbal noun (*Defining converbs is a tricky business*) and of an adnominal modifier (*People having an interest in converbs often get confused by terminology*). In addition, the *ing*-form participates in the formation of compound tenses (*was writing*), a characteristic it shares with converbs in many languages (2.3).

Q Is converb just another term for serial verb?

A No. However, the two are functionally largely identical, the difference lying mainly in morphology. Converbs have distinctive morphology, while serial verbs have none at all or the same amount and type of morphology as the final/initial verb. A converb form by itself generally cannot form the predicate of a main sentence, while a verb in the form of a serial verb can (cf. Bisang 1995 for an excellent comparison of the two categories). By definition, a fully isolating language cannot have converbs.

Q Are converbs the same as coverbs?

A No, coverbs are (roughly) grammaticalised serial verbs, though individual usages among linguists may differ. According to some, their function is limited to the encoding of “case” relations/introduction of further participants.

Q There are case-marked nominalised verbs that function like converbs in my language. Do they count as converbs?

A No, converbs are verb forms, thus part of the verbal paradigm (table 1).

Q My language has special verb forms for relative clauses. Are these converbs?

A No, converbs are not adnominal.

Q I have a special verb form for clausal complements in my language. Does that count as a converb?

A No, converbs are not argumental.

Q Is a dedicated narrative tense a type of converb?

- A That depends on your specific type of converb definition. Read on (especially sections 2 and 3.2.1)!

2 Definitions of converbs

Scholars who work in linguistic areas where the term converb has a tradition sometimes use the term for a variety of functions without making their definition explicit. For the general linguist, the confusing variety of uses is further compounded by the fact that these definitions do not always correspond to those of other language areas or authors.

Originally coined in 1903 by the Altaicist Ramstedt for Khalkha Mongolian, the term “converb” received wider attention as a cross-linguistic category outside of Altaic studies following the works of Nedjalkov & Nedjalkov (1987), Haspelmath (1995) and others. Since then it has come to refer to categories previously known by a large variety of labels, including adverbial participle, conjunctive participle, gerund, *gerundio*, *Gerundium*, *perfetto/passato subordinato* and consecutive. However, the term “converb” itself has recently been used in a bewildering variety of senses, some of which are passed review below.

Irrespective of their specific definition of the term “converb”, most linguists agree that a converb is *a verb form specialised for combining clauses* and, more specifically, *marking a dependent² verb form that is neither argumental nor adnominal*. This bundle of semantic–syntactic features distinguishes converbs from related forms, which are presented in table 1:

Table 1: Baseline definition of converbs

<i>converb feature</i>	<i>distinguishes converbs from e.g.</i>
verb form	verbal nouns
[+dependent]	independent verb forms
[-argumental]	verbal complements, subject/object clauses
[-adnominal]	participles, relative clause verb forms

As is often the case in the construction of linguistic terminology, this definition only covers the main or prototype case. In some languages, forms that are converbs in this broad sense also have one or more of the functions that are actually excluded in table 1. Such forms are sometimes termed “non-prototypical” or “nonstrict” con-verbs in the literature.

Under the umbrella of this greatest common denominator (table 1), linguists differ in how they further restrict the notion of “converb”. Table 2 summarises four uses found today, slightly extending the overview in van der Auwera (1998a). As the table shows, these uses arise from the introduction of two additional defining parameters,

finiteness and embedding. For ease of reference, we label the various uses by “small”, “medium” etc.:

Table 2: Uses of the term “converb”

verb form			
+dependent, -argumental, -adnominal			
+embedded		-embedded	
+finite	-finite	-finite	+finite
	narrow converb (S)		
	broad converb (M)		
	broader converb (L)		
	broadest converb (XL)		

Some of the differences in terminology reflected in table 2 were already present in the first cross-linguistic monograph on converbs, edited by Haspelmath & König (1995). Besides the uses in table 2, the term “converb” has other meanings in specific linguistic traditions or even individual authors. In Ethiopian linguistics, for instance, “converb” is now often taken to denote a dependent verb form that has the following three major functions: expressing anteriority, expressing chains of actions, and expressing simultaneity between the action of the main and the dependent verb (Hetzron 1972: 99).

Variation in the use of the term converb is however not only caused by the whims of linguistic traditions. As many other linguistic categories, notions like finiteness, embedding and dependency themselves are difficult to define, which means that for a given verb form there might be some discussion and conflicting analyses as to whether it should be labelled a “converb”, irrespective of the specific converb definition one accepts. Further variation is brought in by the fact that the linguist has to decide how to treat minor uses – such as when a predominantly dependent verb form is also used independently as the sole verb in a main clause, or when an adverbial form is also found adnominally – and the question of course is what counts as a “minor” use. V.P. Nedjalkov (1995: 103) advocates using text frequency to determine the primary function of a form, which will also give the form its label.

In such a situation it is all the more important to be explicit about one’s terminological and methodological choices: What do I call a converb and why?

Note, finally, that none of the uses in table 2 concern the specific semantics of converbs, such as whether a converb clause is simultaneous or anterior to the main clause, or which specific adverbial relations are coded by a converb (cf. König 1995 i.a. for a semantic typology).

2.1 Haspelmath's (1995) definition

The most influential of the definitions represented in table 2 is probably that of the narrow converb (S), found in Haspelmath (1995) (cf. e.g. Hagege 1996: 94, I.V. Nedjalkov 1998: 421, 425, Haspelmath 1999).³ For this reason, I take it as the starting point to comment on some theoretical issues in the converb discussion (section 3). This definition is also the most restrictive of the ones listed in table 2. In fact, it further characterises the notion of converb by requiring it to be adverbial in its prototypical use, in the sense of modifying a verb, clause or sentence (Haspelmath 1995: 7):⁴

Table 3: Haspelmath's (1995) converb definition

verb form			
+dependent, -argumental, -adnominal			
+embedded		-embedded	
+finite	-finite	-finite	+finite
+adverbial			
	narrow converb (S)		

Haspelmath (1995) is also one of the few studies that place the converb in a broader typology of dependent verb forms. Table 4 is a schematic representation of his definition, together with the labels for related categories (Haspelmath 1995: 26).

*Table 4: Haspelmath's (1995) converb definition
in the context of related categories*

verb form			
+dependent, -argumental, -adnominal			
+embedded		-embedded	
+finite	-finite	-finite	+finite
+adverbial			
subordinate "mood"	narrow converb (S)	medial verb ⁵	

In terms of parts of speech, Haspelmath's converb is a verbal adverb, just like participles are verbal adjectives and "masdars"⁶ verbal nouns (Haspelmath 1995: 3-4). Note also that he defines converbs on the basis of their "main function", leaving room for minor uses of the same form. As wise as this is from a practical point of view, it may potentially cause the descriptively awkward situation of a "converb" being used as a "medial verb".

2.2 Pros and cons of various definitions

It has occasionally been advocated to retain the term *converb* in the original sense it had in Mongolian studies, which is basically a narrow *converb* that can form clause chains (see 3.2.1). This type is also known as *Asian converb*, as opposed to the “*European converb*”,⁷ which cannot form clause chains except for very marked stylistic purposes. Consider the following unfelicitous “*English*” example with the *ing*-form used in its *converb* function:

- (2) ??/**Getting up this morning, taking a shower, going into the kitchen, pouring myself a coffee, sitting down on a chair, I switched on the radio.*

In itself such a historical argument has little strength if the original sense is not theoretically and/or typologically cross-linguistically useful. Consider the fate of the term “*aspect*”. First used in the description of Slavic languages, its mainstream usage now covers a theoretical domain in which, as Dahl (1985: 20-21) nicely put it, the Slavic perfectivity-imperfectivity distinction stands out like a Great Dane among the more common canine creatures. At present, unfortunately, we lack sufficient data for a re-representative cross-linguistic sample to assess what is most common among dependent, non-argumental, non-adnominal verb forms and hence the historical argument is ineffective for the time being. (Alternatively, though, one could argue that if we cannot assess what is common, we better leave the terminology as it was. There is a point here, but it does not advance typology in any way.)

Using the term *converb* in one of the broader senses has the practical advantage of being able to refer to a set of forms before a detailed syntactic and morphological analysis of a language is available. For more detailed discussions, however, it seems more convenient to have concise labels for the various lower level slots in table 2. As Bickel (1998: 395) states,

[w]hen reading that a language has converbs in this broader sense [i.e. M – XL in table 2 (CJR)], the only information we would gain is that in this language at least some interpositional relations are marked by verbal affixes rather than free morphemes (conjunctions). But [...] this distinction certainly does not correlate with the use and distribution of converbs in various clause linkage types.

If, then, one wants to avoid the term *converb* in its broader senses, the terms *non-final* (Slater 1998: 300), *non-initial*, or simply *dependent verb* could be used to refer to dependent verb forms without committing oneself to a specific syntactic statement. These terms in fact have the advantage of being vague about the precise syntactic relation (embedding/subordination or cosubordination), a vagueness that “*medial verb*” and “*converb*” do not necessarily have (cf. table 2). Without being committed to a particular *converb* definition, the labels *non-final* and *non-initial verb* reflect the

level of analysis reached (or intended), they are transparent, intuitive and invite cross-linguistic comparison of a large scale of forms.

It will be noted that all the definitions reflected in table 2 treat converbs as a clause linking strategy. In this respect, two points merit further attention: First, none of the definitions specifies at which level of the clause the linkage occurs, although there are cross-linguistic and areal patterns here. Many Kiranti languages, for instance, use non-finite converbs for adverbial, but (more) finite forms for adverbial subordination (Bickel 1998: 394, Ebert 1993: 89). In Russian and other languages of Europe, by contrast, converbs are used both adverbially and adverbially (Bickel 1998: 395, Rappaport 1984). This is an area that deserves attention in any detailed description of a converb in a given language. More parameters that enter into a more fine-grained description are presented at the end of this article. Second, forms identified as “converbs” typically have other functions than mere clause linkage in a given language. A range of such functions is treated in the following section.

2.3 Other functions of converb forms

As stated above, all the converb definitions represented in table 2 delineate verb forms that code *interpositional* relations, while forms labelled “converb” are typically also used for other functions in any language. These are only briefly mentioned here in passing, because they mostly have not played an important role in defining converbs. They fall into three groups: Functions where (a) the CV is part of a construction in which some other element is grammaticalised, (b) the CV itself is grammaticalised and (c) the CV is part of a construction that is lexicalised.

The more commonly attested functions are listed in (3), alongside less common ones which have been reported for different linguistic areas. For each function one example is given, without aiming at presenting a complete semantic typology here:

(3) *Further variously attested functions of converbs*⁸

- a. CV is part of a construction in which some other element is grammaticalised
 - part of compound TAM or aktionsart formation
e.g. continuous aspect: come-CV **stay**-FULL.INFLECTION = ‘keep coming’
 - part of construction introducing additional participants into the sentence
e.g. benefactive: work-CV **give**-FULL.INFLECTION = ‘work for’
 - part of a construction involving a directional
e.g. fly-CV **go**-FULL.INFLECTION = ‘fly away’

b. CV itself grammaticalised

- grammaticalisation into adpositions
e.g. **last-CV** = ‘during’
- grammaticalisation into conjunctions
e.g. **say-CV** = marker of direct quotes /
complements of speech and cognition verbs /
ideophones /
purposive clauses

e.g. ‘How are you?’ **say-CV** asked. = ‘asked ‘How are you?’’
- grammaticalisation into discourse particles
- head-to-tail linking (in recapitulation clauses)
e.g. ... and **go-FULL.INFLECTION. Go-CV**, ...
= ‘... and went. Having gone, ...’

c. CV is part of a construction that is lexicalised

- part of lexicalised combinations of verbs
e.g. **know-CV hold** = ‘understand’
(Such items are notoriously difficult to define as a separate category.)

A converb in a given language may of course not be used in all the functions listed in (3). Note also that there is a widespread, often implicit, but erroneous opinion that medial verbs only occur in clause chaining and not with any of the functions in (3). Hence, if a given dependent, non-argumental, non-adnominal verb form is found with such functions, it is sometimes hastily concluded that it must be a converb in the narrow sense (i.e. subordinate) and cannot be a medial verb. However, medial verbs – i.e. non-embedded, dependent, non-argumental, non-adnominal verb forms – have been found with most or all of the functions listed in (3) (e.g. Reesink 1987: 104, Roberts 1987: 232, 256f. on medial verbs in tense-aspect formation, Rapold 2006, 2008 for all above functions except adposition and discourse particle).

3 Issues in the converb discussion

Some researchers have explicitly criticised one or the other criterion of Haspelmath's (1995) in favour of a broader converb definition. This is not surprising, since some languages conflate various fields in table 3 in their formal expression.

The main issues of contention are the finiteness of converbs (3.1) and whether converbs can be used for clause chaining or not. The latter issue is often cast in terms of subordination (3.2) and adverbiality (3.3).

Of course there are other parameters of “converbs” that enter into their typology, but these are not normally taken to be relevant for the definition of the category. Hence they are not discussed in detail here. For a checklist of these so far rather non-controversial parameters see section 4.

3.1 Finiteness

Whether a “converb” can be finite is closely linked to the question how finiteness is viewed. Some linguists hold that nonfiniteness as a defining criterion for converbs can only mean formal (i.e. morphological) nonfiniteness. In this line of thought, Ebert (2008) is probably the most detailed treatment to date. She gives the following typology of “converbs and functional equivalents” in Asian languages and seems to draw the dividing line between C’ and D (Ebert 2008: 25-26, here slightly adapted by CJR):

Table 5: *Finiteness of converbs and functional equivalents (Ebert 2008)*

non-finite △ — ▽ finite	A	prototypical CVs: no person or tense-aspect markers
	A’	person-sensitive forms
	B	forms with nominal person or number markers
	C	forms containing a tensed stem
	C’	forms containing an aspect marker
	D	minimally reduced forms with respect to main verb (phonological reduction or lack of speech act marker) + suffix (linker or subordinator)
	E	fully finite verb + suffix (linker or subordinator)

Bisang puts morphological finiteness in the broader perspective of “asymmetry” which holds “between the form of the verb in the main clause and the form of the subordinate form with regard to the *concepts* which must be *expressed obligatorily*” (Bisang 1998: 739-740, italics by CJR). Note that this asymmetry need not be caused by the fact that the subordinate verb has fewer markers than the main verb. The opposite also occurs. Moreover, for Bisang different markers for the same category also count as asymmetry (Bisang 1998: 748).

In a formal (or morphological) perspective, the problem is where to draw a non-arbitrary line between finiteness and nonfiniteness, as these are two poles on a scale (Haspelmath 1995: 5), or at least problematic categories themselves. This problem does not seem to be solved by the concept of asymmetry, since in some languages main clause verb forms also vary with respect to the obligatorily expressed concepts (e.g. less or no person-number-gender marking in certain TAM categories). For this reason, many authors opt for a functional perspective of finiteness, as illustrated by the following quote from I. V. Nedjalkov (1998: 421):

The definition of a converb involves two features, nonfiniteness and adverbiality. Nonfiniteness is understood here as the impossibility of a verb form (irrespective of the presence or absence of the tense, aspect or agreement markers) of being used as the only verb form in a simple nonelliptical sentence. In other terms, a non-finite verb form cannot be the only predicate of the matrix clause without auxiliary verb forms.

In this perspective, “finiteness” becomes coextensive with “dependence” (cf. table 1 and endnote 1), thus rendering it superfluous as a separate ingredient of the converb definition. The functional approach thus subsumes more types of verb forms under the label converb than the morphological one, thereby inviting cross-linguistic comparison of verb forms that would otherwise fall under different labels. Whether the more narrow, morphological or the broader, functional approach will eventually prove to be more fruitful in typology, is a matter that will largely have to be seen in practice.

3.2 Embedding/subordination⁹

Some people, especially researchers working in Central and South Asian languages, argue that the term converb should not be restricted to subordinate forms. Before going into details, we list some of the more commonly mentioned criteria for subordination (4), because researchers differ in their respective definitions of this notion and do not always make them explicit.

(4) *Criteria for subordination (mainly based on Haspelmath 1995)*¹⁰

- subordinate element is part of the superordinate element, either as an argument or an adjunct
- subordinate element has a variable position with respect to the superordinate one (before/after). Varying positions do not affect the temporal interpretation of the subordinate element, e.g.

*Seeing the police, Mark fled into the bush. ~ Mark fled into the bush, seeing the police.*¹¹

- discontinuous superordinate element: the subordinate element may occur inside the superordinate one (a.k.a. “centre embedding”), e.g.

Mark fled, seeing the police, into the bush.

This criterion is problematic in cases like ‘NP [...] main verb’, where NP is co-referential with the subject of the main verb, because NP could be a topic outside of the sentence proper. Intonation patterns can help decide the question.

Mark (,) seeing the police, (he) fled into the bush.

Another problem is that the subject NP could be part of the dependent clause:

Mark seeing the police, fled into the bush.

- subordinate element can be semantically restricting (“modifying”) the superordinate element¹²
hence also: focusability of subordinate element, e.g. by ‘only’, ‘also’
- subordinate element can contain a (zero) cataphoric pronoun, e.g.

After she, had come home, Zamira, solved the problems.

(cataphoric SUB pron.)

Ø_i talking to Pedro, she, solved the problems.

(zero cataphoric SUB pronoun, implicit SUB in subord. clause)

Talking to him, Zamira solved all of Pedro's problems.

(cataphoric OBJ pron.)

- possibility of extraction (e.g. in a wh-question) out of the superordinate element in the presence of a subordinate one, e.g.

*What did X buy, having sold his car? vs. *What did X sell his car and buy?*¹³

- morphosyntactic locus test: The relation between the superordinate and a subordinate element is marked once, but not also on a doubly subordinate element, e.g.

I know [that X has come, [but Y has left]]-SUBORD.MARKER.

vs.

**I know [that X has come-SUBORD.MARKER,*

[but Y has left]]-SUBORD.MARKER.¹⁴

These criteria may not be equally applicable to or even met by a given construction. For instance, in a strict head-final language, “variable position” may be excluded for clauses that are subordinate by all other criteria. Still, talking about the first six of the above criteria, Haspelmath (1995: 12) claims that nonsubordinate clauses fulfil none of them.¹⁵ In addition to the above criteria, individual researchers may use other criteria. Suter (2008), for instance, takes instances of the “gerund” [a general converb, CJR] in Ethiosemitic to be subordinate if they pass relevant substitution tests (Suter 2008: 192); similarly, Tamori (1976: 341-355) uses subject honorification as one diagnostic among others for subordinate dependent verb forms in Japanese.

It goes without saying that it is necessary to test each individual verb form that is a converb candidate, and also in different constructions. The Japanese *-te* dependent verb form for instance has been described as subordinate when in a same-subject

interpropositional construction, thus functioning as a converb in the narrow sense, but cosubordinate, i.e. functioning as a medial verb, in different-subject constructions (Kuno 1973: 123-124, cf. also Alpatov and Podlesskaya 1995: 468, 470-474). Thus, irrespective of one's terminological choices in defining a converb, a clear distinction is to be made between verb forms and the functions they have in various constructions.

Researchers sometimes adduce functional criteria such as presupposition or semantic-pragmatic adverbiality in determining the syntactic status of dependent verbs, though these are better kept separate. To illustrate this point, consider the following case: In Guugu Yimithirr there is no overt conditional, conditionals being expressed by sequences as in (5) (Haviland 1979):

(5) *The dog might bark. The postman might run away.*

interpretation: as in (6)

(6) *'If the dog barks, the postman may run away.'*

In (6) there is syntactic embedding. As Evans and Levinson argue (2009: 443), the Guugu Yimithirr equivalent of (5) conveys the same message, but "the "embedding" is in the discourse understanding – the semantics and the pragmatics, not the syntax." The point is that "pragmatic inference can deliver embedded understandings of non-embedded clauses", and thus there is no way of knowing whether a given clause is subordinate or not without syntactic tests. As Hengeveld (1998: 336) has also mentioned, paratactic expressions "may have a similar semantic value as corresponding subordinate constructions". Examples come from Benchnon medial verbs, which can assume an adverbial interpretation in appropriate contexts (Rapold 2006, 2008).

Few people would want to argue that the clauses in (5) are in a subordination relationship, but as soon as there is special morphology on the pragmatically and semantically embedded clause, as in potential "converbs", this conclusion is much more readily drawn. In sum, then, and irrespective of the converb definition one opts for, "embedding/subordination" is best defined in rigorous syntactic terms and dependent verb forms tested for their syntactic behaviour in all the various constructions they occur.

3.2.1 A note on clause chaining

Researchers arguing against the feature [+embedded/subordinate] as part of the converb definition typically do so based on the fact that the "converb" in the languages they investigate can form clause chains, which are often taken not to involve subordination. Here is an example of a vanilla type clause chain, "used to convey a sequence of successive events", from Kumyk (Turkic) (Haspelmath 1995: 7):

- (7) *Bu-lar, köl-nü gör-üp, arba-syn toqtat-yp, čemodan-ny*
 this-PL lake-ACC see-CV cart-3.POSS stop-CV suitcase-ACC
Manaj-ğa da göter-t-ip, köl-nü jağa-syn-a bar-yp,
 Manaj-DAT also take-CAUS-CV lake-GEN bank-3.POSS-DAT go-CV
čemodan-ny aç-yp, šišla-ny čyğar-yp tiz-ip,
 suitcase-ACC open-CV bottle-ACC take.out-CV put.in.row-CV
suw-dan toltur-up, qajtar-yp čemodan-ğa sal-a.
 water-ABL fill-CV return-CV suitcase-DAT put-PRES
 ‘They see the lake, stop their cart, make Manaj bring the suitcase, go to the
 bank of the lake, open the suitcase, take out the bottles, put them in a row, fill
 them with water, and put them back into the suitcase.’
 (Haspelmath 1995: 7, citing Džanmavov 1967: 234)

In this section, I take a closer look at the term “clause chaining”. While individual definitions and uses differ, most linguists agree that clause chaining is a clause combining strategy involving a string of clauses that is dependent on a finite clause. In addition, the number of dependent clauses must be potentially unlimited and the dependent clauses must be able to advance the plot.

The additional two criteria (unlimited number of clauses and advancing the plot) are necessary to exclude other types of dependent clause constructions, such as adverbial clauses. These two criteria are syntactic and semantic correlates of each other. In many languages one of them will probably suffice to define clause chaining within the class of dependent clause constructions. Whether this holds universally is a matter of further research.

Under the umbrella of the above definition, there are different opinions about the syntactic status of the dependent clauses. Much like in the case of the term converb (table 2), researchers differ on whether dependent clauses in *clause chains* may be embedded or not, though the dominant view is that they are not. For the sake of convenience, I use the term in a general way here without committing myself to either stance.

Whatever one’s specific definition of “clause chain”, the mere fact that dependent verb forms are able to form strings of clauses in a given language cannot of course be taken as proof that they are not subordinate. This conclusion can only be reached if rigorous syntactic tests have been applied to clause chains in a given language. In this sense chains of converb clauses are not an argument per se against the feature [+embedded] in the definition of converbs.

Note in this connection that it is conceivable that the syntactic status of a dependent verb varies depending on whether it occurs in a longer chain with basically sequential

function or in a single dependent clause with an adverbial relation to the main clause (cf. the case of Japanese *-te* in section 3.2 above).

3.2.2 Terminology: cosubordination and medial verbs

On a terminological note, the syntactic status of non-embedded verbs in clause chains is sometimes called “cosubordinate” following a concept developed in Olson’s 1981 dissertation (Foley and Van Valin 1984: 238ff., Van Valin and LaPolla 1997 i.a.). Such verbs are not part of the main clause, but unlike coordinated independent verbs or clauses, they are not specified for some semantic features like illocutionary force, tense and mood, which they share with the main verb. As a result, they are dependent in the sense that they cannot constitute a sentence on their own, although they are not syntactically subordinate, but coordinate (Foley 1991: 445).¹⁶ A more transparent equivalent of the label “cosubordinate” is indeed “dependent-coordinate” (Foley 1986). In Papuan language studies, where forms of this type abound, they are called medial verbs, a term that more recently has been proposed as a cross-linguistic label (Longacre 1985: 263-283, Givón 1990: 865ff., Haspelmath 1995: 20-27) (cf. table 4). In mainstream linguistics the term medial verb has the advantage of not being burdened by many traditional usages.

3.3 Adverbiality

The occurrence of dependent, non-argumental, non-adnominal forms in clause chains is sometimes taken as evidence to reject the feature [+adverbial] in Haspelmath’s 1995 definition (cf. table 3 above), since “converbs” in a typical clause chain are generally seen not to be adverbial (a view shared by Haspelmath 1995: 8).

However, Haspelmath’s (1995: 3) definition concerns only the main function of converbs, so strictly speaking the occurrence of “converbs” in a clause chain need not be a reason to discard [+adverbial] from the converb definition. Haspelmath himself gives an example of converbs in a clause chain, but states that this is not the “central, typical use of the converb because it is not really adverbial” (Haspelmath 1995: 8). In some languages this perspective leads to a situation where the most frequent use of the “converb” in that language – namely clause chaining – is treated as non-prototypical by the converb definition.

This mismatch between frequency of occurrence and an analytical perspective motivated by wider structural or theoretical considerations is a common dilemma. Consider e.g. the case of Swahili *po-* in relative clauses: Everything in the language suggests an analysis as a locative marker, while its most frequent use in actual discourse is temporal (*a-li-po-fika* ‘when s/he arrived ...’, rather than ‘where s/he arrived’ (CL.I-PAST-PO-arrive)).¹⁷

One way to solve this dilemma is to choose a more abstract definition that would cover both uses, but as the Swahili example shows, this does not always enhance the analysis.

For Haspelmath (1995: 4), the wider theoretical motivation for his definition lies in the following system of word classes, verb forms and syntactic functions:

Table 6: Correlations between word class, verb form and syntactic function

<i>word class</i>	noun	adjective	adverb
<i>verb form</i>	verbal noun: masdar	verbal adjective: participle	verbal adverb: converb
<i>syntactic function</i>	argument	adnominal modifier	adverbial modifier

Proponents of a wider converb definition, on the other hand, aim at solving the tension between theory/structure and frequency by a definition that covers both adverbial and non-adverbial uses of the verb forms in question. This solution comes at a cost of loosing the symmetry in table 6 and of greater terminological vagueness (cf. section 2.2 above). Whether this is to avoid or just to embrace is a matter of debate. Crucial in any case is the use of clear and explicit definitions.

Part of the confusion around the status of adverbiality is that it remains a vague term in mainstream linguistics. In this respect, it can be questioned whether its inclusion in a converb definition is useful at all. The classical understanding of “adverbial” is a syntactically optional modifier of primarily non-nominal constituents (van der Auwera 1998b: 3, Ramat and Ricca 1994). Some authors simply take “adverbial” to be synonymous with “subordinate” when talking about non-adnominal, non-argumental clauses (I.V. Nedjalkov 1998: 425, 439). As these characteristics are already covered by the features [+dependent, –argumental, –adnominal] (table 2), it is not clear why [+adverbial] should be part of any converb definition. Eliminating it from Haspelmath’s (1995) definition would still leave us with a category with clear, if not unproblematic, boundaries. The features of finiteness and subordination have the advantage of being testable by a range of diagnostics, which does not readily seem to hold for adverbiality.

Others use “adverbial” primarily in a semantic sense and the term then covers interpropositional relations like simultaneity, anteriority, posteriority, simultaneity, manner/means, purpose, cause, concession, potential and unreal condition, adversity etc. In this semantic sense, [+adverbial] makes the converb definition more explicit, but since medial verbs, which are non-embedded, can occur with various of these functions as well (cf. the discussion of (6) above), the parameter in this semantic sense does not contribute anything towards delimiting a narrow category of converb.

4 In lieu of a conclusion

More than ten years ago, van der Auwera (1998a: 281) mused that it was perhaps too early to decide which of the various uses of the term “converb” is the most useful cross-linguistically. While much headway has been made in the meantime, we still do not have a large cross-linguistic sample of converb-like forms and constructions on which to base an informed choice.

Like any label, “converb” risks masking cross-linguistic diversity and in this sense the discussion about its most useful definition is to be embraced, as it draws attention to different variables. Real progress, however, will not be made by collecting data from more languages only, but also making more fine-grained analyses. These will not only explicitly state their definition of “converb” or any other label for dependent verb forms, but actually go beyond the checklists given above for finiteness (3.1), subordination (3.2), other functions (2.3) etc. This will lead to a multivariate analysis that treats diversity in the same way as many other disciplines: rather than reducing it by forcing phenomena into typological moulds (“converb”), they try to measure it (Bickel, to appear).¹⁸

Such a multivariate analysis of converbs and related clause linking strategies will take into consideration variables like the following, which are mostly due to Bickel’s (to appear) pioneering study:

- (8) *Further variables for a more fine-grained analysis of converbs and related dependent verb forms*
- a. Syntax
- uses of the verb form that go against the baseline converb definition (table 1)
 - independent use as main verb
 - argumental use as verbal complement, subject/object clause
 - adnominal use
 - dependent clause can be separated from main clause by other (types of) dependent clauses. (For others variables concerning position, see 3.2 above.)
 - level of main clause at which the dependent clause is linked
 - ad-V: linked to the verb or predicate. Centre-embedding allowed¹⁹
 - ad-S: linked to the entire main clause. Centre-embedding not allowed
 - detached: linked to entire main clause, but syntactically and intonationally separate

- verb gapping (allowed/not allowed)

John cooking dinner, so did Harry. (pro-verb in the second clause)

b. Marking

- switch reference marking (present/absent)
- marking of illocutionary operators (like question, imperative) in dependent clause (allowed/not allowed/allowed, but only if matching the marking in main clause)
- marking of tense operators in dependent clause (allowed/not allowed/allowed, but subject to constraints based on tense in main clause)
- marking of status (realis/irrealis) operators in dependent clause
- marking of negation in dependent clause (allowed/not allowed/special verb form for negation)
- range of categories expressed in main and dependent clause
 - symmetrical: same range (often in combination with conjunctions)
 - asymmetrical: range can be different (often in combination with dependent verb morphology)
 - free: range can be different and the linked entities can be different types in terms of parts of speech, clauses, NPs, etc., e.g. in sentential topic constructions

(Given that) man dog hit_{CLAUSE TOP}, did it die?, cf. (As for) man_{NOUN TOP}, his garden is in the landslide. (Reesink 1987: 283ff. cited in Bickel, to appear).

- constituent or predicate focus marking inside dependent clause (allowed/not allowed)
- *wh*-question words inside dependent clause (allowed/not allowed)
 - Sitting where, did he tell you?* (not as an echo question)

c. Scope

- scope of illocutionary operators (like question, imperative) in the main clause
 - conjunct: scope over main and dependent clause
 - local: scope over main clause only
 - disjunct: scope over either main or dependent clause
 - extensible: either conjunct or local

(but never scope over dependent clause only)

constraint-free: scope is not regulated by the clause linkage type

- scope of negation markers in the main clause
(conjunct/local/extensible/scope only over dependent clause (NEG raising))
- scope of tense markers in the main clause
(conjunct/extensible/local (mostly where dependent clause has its own tense marker;²⁰ disjunct and 'scope only over dependent' apparently not attested))
- scope of status (realis/irrealis) and other markers in the main clause
- focus marking with the whole dependent clause in its scope
(allowed/not allowed)
- antecedent of a long-distance reflexive pronoun in the dependent clause may be in the main clause (allowed/not allowed)²¹
*John_i hitting self_{i/j}, Mary_j cried out vs. John_i hit self_{i/*j} and Mary_j cried out.*
[long-distance pronoun: its antecedent can be outside of its own clause, if it falls within the scope of the antecedent]

d. Semantics

- subject reference in main and dependent clause
(same/different/same or different)
- semantics of the dependent form (vague or polysemous/dedicated to a specific meaning; cf. "contextual" vs. "specialised" CVs in the Appendix)
- range of semantic relations of dependent clause to main clause (cf. 3.3)

e. Other aspects

- grammaticalised or lexicalised uses of the verb form (section 2.3)
- the number of specific dependent clause categories in a language
(cf. the previous variable)
- clauses are linked by bound morphology/free conjunctions, and/or specific intonation
- discourse aspects of dependent form (frequent/infrequent (Masica 1976); stylistic values)

The converb discussion is clearly far from closed. In this sense, the morale of this article is: Get out there and describe verb forms and constructions as detailed as possible!

Appendix: List of labels in CV literature

This list is not exhaustive and only gives labels that are less readily interpretable for non-specialists. The references given are not always the first attestation of a given term, but have been selected from a few sources for pure convenience. CV stands for converb.

Asian CV 1. (Bickel 1998: 395) = converb of the S type (table 4) that can form clause chains

2. (Genetti 2005: 76, 81) = non-finite medial verb in table 4

canonical CV (V.P. Nedjalkov 1995: 102) = strict CV

combined CV (V.P. Nedjalkov 1995: 102) = nonstrict CV. Cf. strict CV

conjunctive CV (Bisang 1995: 155f.) = specialised CV.²² Cf. contextual CV

contextual vs. specialised (I. Nedjalkov 1998: 424) vs. **narrative CV** (V.P. Nedjalkov 1995: 109)

Semantically vague/polysemous CV vs. CV that is dedicated to one meaning vs. CV that expresses a “coordinative connection that advances the narration”

converbal function (V.P. Nedjalkov 1995: 104)
functioning as a strict CV. Cf. strict CV

converb-like phrase (I.V. Nedjalkov 1998: 429)
participle/verbal noun + semantically and syntactically autonomous adposition

coordinative converb (V.P. Nedjalkov 1995: 109) = narrative CV

European CV (Bickel 1998: 394) = CV of the S type (table 2)

general CV (Ebert 2008: 8) = contextual converb

inflected CV (Ebert 1993: 106; Ebert 2008: 23 distances itself from this term)
fully finite-marked verb form followed by a linker or subordinator, with the same function as CVs in other languages

joker CV (cf. Imart 1981: §1600) = contextual CV

monofunctional CV (V.P. Nedjalkov 1995: 104) = strict CV

narrative CV: cf. contextual CV

noncombined CV (V.P. Nedjalkov 1995: 102) = strict CV

nonstrict CV: cf. strict CV

prototypical CV = strict CV

quasi-CV

1. (V.P. Nedjalkov 1995: 103) = nonstrict CV. Cf. strict CV

2. (Ebert 2008: 20)

participles or verbal nouns followed by a case marker or postposition with converbial function; if the combination is “totally frozen, the form can be regarded as a converb proper” (Ebert 2008: 20)

specialised CV: cf. contextual CV

strict CV – considered **prototypical** (I.V. Nedjalkov 1998: 422, 425), also called: **canonical** or **noncombined** or **monofunctional** CV (V.P. Nedjalkov 1995:98, 102, 104) –

vs. **nonstrict** CV (I.V. Nedjalkov 1998: 422, 425), also called **combined** CV or **quasi-CV** (V.P. Nedjalkov 1995: 103)

CV form that only has interpropositional (“adverbial”) functions vs. CV form that can also be used in other functions (e.g. attributively or “nominally” (i.e. as an argument or adjunct)) [This disregards the “other functions” presented in section 2.3 above.]

taxis vs. **non-taxis** vs. **mixed** converbs (I.V. Nedjalkov 1998: 423)

semantic subdivision of adverbially used CVs: **taxis** = coding temporal alignment (e.g. ANT); **non-taxis** = other adverbial meanings (e.g. PURP, MANN); **mixed** = taxis and non-taxis functions

varying-subject CV (I.V. Nedjalkov 1998: 425)

subject of CV may be coreferential or noncoreferential with the subject of the finite verb/main verb in the matrix clause

Notes

- ¹ The first part of this title is inspired by van der Auwera's (1998a) seminal article. I wish to thank Azeb Amha, Anne-Christie Hellenthal, Maarten Kossmann, Maarten Mous, Thilo C. Schadeberg, Sascha Völlmin and Silvia Zaugg-Coretti for useful comments on earlier versions of this paper. All shortcomings and errors are my own.
- ² I.e. structurally, and often semantically, dependent on some other verb without necessarily being syntactically embedded/subordinate (embedding and subordination are used as synonyms here, see also endnote 9). Dependent verb forms are easily spotted by the fact that they cannot occur on their own as the main predicate of a sentence (except under ellipsis in some languages).
- ³ Even authors who opt for another definition tend to refer to Haspelmath (1995) by way of contrast.
- ⁴ Whether adverbiality is an additional restriction or simply an entailment of the other features and specifications in the definition is debatable. For more details on adverbiality see section 3.3.

- ⁵ Van der Auwera (1998a) restricts the term medial verb to non-finite verbs in this cell, distinguishing them from finite cosubordinate “moods”. Note that this distinction is not current in Papuan studies, where the term originates.
- ⁶ A term from the Arabic grammatical tradition.
- ⁷ These labels already reveal the traditional geographical bias in converb studies.
- ⁸ Whether some of these functions are still interpropositional is a matter of debate. For the quotative function, for instance, see Genetti (2005: 46-49) for an excellent discussion.
- ⁹ Embedding and subordination are commonly treated as synonyms and for the purpose of this article I follow this usage. In Role and Reference Grammar, however, the two are not synonymous, subordination being characterised by the features [+embedded, +dependent] (cf. Foley & Van Valin 1984: 141-142).
- ¹⁰ For ease of formulation, the terms “subordinate” and “superordinate” element are used here, although strictly speaking this is of course sloppy in a heuristic tool like the present list.
- ¹¹ The examples in this section are pseudo-English and the *ing*-form is meant to emulate a general converb here (see the Appendix for “general converb”).
- ¹² This does not apply to subject and object clauses (Van Valin & LaPolla 1997: 453).
- ¹³ Prevented by the Coordinate Structure Constraint. For *in situ wh*-question words, see section 4.
- ¹⁴ Based on Kazenin and Testelets (2004: 229, 232-233). In embedded coordinate structures, by contrast, *each* element can usually be marked for the relation with the superordinate element (e.g. *I demand [that [X ask (*asks)] and [Y answer (*answers)]]*).
- ¹⁵ It would lead too far to discuss (apparent) counterexamples to this claim here.
- ¹⁶ See Roberts (1988) on Amele (Papuan) for a detailed argumentation that medial verbs are not subordinate.
- ¹⁷ Thanks to Thilo Schadeberg for this example.
- ¹⁸ Ultimately, this does not solve the fundamental problem of comparing things that are unique in their own right. However, using finer-grained parameters will reduce the amount of reduction.
- ¹⁹ In the sense that the dependent clause can occur inside the main one (cf. (4) above, the third criterium).
- ²⁰ Lack of tense marker in the dependent does not necessarily mean there is conjunct scope of tense operator.
- ²¹ Cf. (4), the fifth criterion.
- ²² Empirically it is very difficult to maintain a strict distinction between contextual and specialised CVs (Bisang 1995: 156).

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