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# A cross-linguistic perspective on converb constructions in Sylheti

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## Abstract

This paper identifies cross-linguistic characteristics of converbs and describes how they function in Sylheti. Using examples from data collected during elicitation sessions with a Sylheti speaker in the Field Methods course at SOAS in 2015-2016, I show that Sylheti has converb constructions and that they function in a way specific to it.

The converb, as a linguistic category, is associated with an array of cross-linguistically attested characteristics. It has been defined by Haspelmath (1995) as a non-finite verb form that marks some sort of adverbial subordination. There are other cross-linguistic features that have been identified, relating to semantic and aspectual interpretations of converbs, the relations between converbal clauses and matrix clauses with regard to coreferentiality, and so on. In Sylheti, converbs show many of these characteristics, e.g., they are non-finite verb forms and do have an adverbial function. On the other hand, Sylheti converbs have language-particular functions which differ from other languages, especially with regard to aspectual and temporal interpretation, and coreferentiality requirements between the converbal clause and the matrix clause. The paper concludes with an analysis of the Sylheti constructions using Role and Reference Grammar, arguing that they are cosubordinate structures, rather than subordinate, as claimed by Haspelmath (1995) and others.

## 1. Introduction

Classifying linguistic units into categories requires two parts: a ‘label’, i.e., the term by which the linguistic unit is referred, and a ‘definition’, i.e., the list of criteria determining category membership. In this paper we discuss the category ‘converb’, which has also been labelled as ‘gerund’, ‘gerundive’, ‘adverbial participle’, ‘conjunctive participle’, and ‘*deepričastie*’ (in Russian). This category is generally comprised of verb-forms that are non-finite and mark adverbial subordination (Haspelmath 1995:3).

An important question to consider before continuing the discussion is the validity of cross-linguistic categories. Moravcsik (2013: 101) points out that assigning labels to units such as morphemes, words, phrases, and clauses is a fundamental issue for typologists and descriptive linguists alike, but it is often difficult to achieve. This is because the list of common properties that must, in principle, be shared to constitute membership in a category may be insufficient. Haspelmath (2007) gives several compelling examples of the deficiencies in using what he refers to as ‘pre-established’ categories as a cross-linguistic tool of comparison. He argues that there is no evidence for *cross-linguistic categories*, but that *language-specific* categories do exist. He concludes that discussion of whether a phenomenon is a member of a certain cross-linguistic category is therefore pointless.

However, though the use of pre-established categories for cross-linguistic comparison may be imperfect, the practice does shed light on similarities across languages. In fact, many typological generalizations need to reference formal cross-linguistic categories (Newmeyer 2007). Haspelmath (2007: 127) also concedes that questions of category assignment can lead to new insights and ‘indirectly play a positive role’ in the field.

In this paper, we consider Sylheti converbs as members of a cross-linguistic ‘converb’ category, while also describing their language-specific characteristics, particularly regarding the issue of subordination. The remainder of this Section introduces the corpus on which the analysis is based, and other practicalities. Section 2 describes the research methodology and methods. Section 3 is a description of Sylheti converbs as four main adverbial clause types. Section 4 provides evidence that Sylheti converb clauses are ‘cosubordinate’, using the terminology of Role and Reference Grammar. Section 5 concludes the paper.

The data on which this paper is based was collected during research conducted by myself and fellow students within the 2015-2016 Field Methods course at SOAS, University of London, as well as through independent research during the summer of 2016. Most of the examples cited were provided by Farhana Ferdous, a Sylheti speaker originally from the Moulvibazar district of Greater Sylhet now living in London. She is a veteran consultant in that she has worked with documentation and description students over a number of years, both in class and informally. Some examples

originate from narratives which were collected by my colleagues, both for the Field Methods 2015-16 course and/or for the *Sylheti Storybook Project* (see Simard, Dopierala & Thaut, this volume). Examples that originate from audio recordings were transcribed using the ELAN software tool, and annotated, stored, and managed using FieldWorks Language Explorer (FLEx).

Sylheti grammars by Chalmers (1996) and Plettner (2007) were consulted to supplement the corpus, and are referred to below where relevant. As Sylheti is a minoritized language, linguistic research materials are limited.

The orthography employed here is a romanisation developed by the SOAS Sylheti Project. Corpus examples are referenced by a code which gives the date of the recording, session number (if applicable), and utterance number, e.g., (16-07-15(1), 175) refers to utterance 175 recorded in session 1 on 16<sup>th</sup> July 2015.

## 2. Research methodology and methods

The Sylheti language data discussed here is analysed using a qualitative methodology which focuses on features, characteristics, and distributions in the corpus. Note that it only represents a single consultant's idiolect.

Data collection was carried out primarily via recorded sessions with the consultant during which a variety of methods were employed to generate language data, including:

- *elicitation* – this involves translating English sentences into Sylheti, with and without a particular context, and translating or summarizing the elicitor's speech in a variety of contexts;
- *grammaticality checks* – this involves evaluating the semantic and grammatical felicity of Sylheti sentences in the corpus or found elsewhere;
- *semi-elicited speech* – this involves prompting Sylheti sentences via the following methods: demonstrating actions, activities or states and asking for a description of them; giving non-translation English prompts such as contexts or situations; requesting descriptions of pictures or videos that do not have any written or spoken language in them; requesting alternative versions of a particular sentence.
- *conversation* – some data originates from one session where the consultant was joined by a Sylheti speaking friend and they had a 10 minute recorded conversation with no-one else present.

### 3. Description of Sylheti converbs

As mentioned above, Haspelmath (1995: 3) defines a ‘converb’ as ‘a nonfinite verb form whose main function is to mark adverbial subordination’. There are four characteristics highlighted in this definition: non-finite, verb form, adverbial, and subordination. They also appear in other converb definitions, and in descriptions across various languages.

Consider first the features ‘non-finite’ and ‘verb form’. Thompson et al. (2007: 238) note that there are several ways languages mark subordinate clauses: subordinating morphemes, particular word order, and special verb forms. Special verb forms:

- (a) do not appear in independent clauses, i.e. they are verb-like but functionally different from prototypical verbs heading a clause; and
- (b) lack one or more subject-verb agreement categories, i.e. they are non-finite (see also Nikolaeva 2007).

Sylheti converbs are one such ‘special verb form’ in that they are not used in independent clauses and lack the agreement categories available for finite verbs,<sup>1</sup> namely tense, aspect, and person/number/honorificity. The schemas for possible grammatical slots for inflection on Sylheti finite verbs (Baratashvili 2016:21) and converbs (Dopierala 2016a,b,c) are:

**Finite Verb:** Root + Causative + Aspect + Tense + Person/number/honorificity

**Converb:** Root + Converb suffix

Consider now the remaining two cross-linguistic characteristics of converbs: adverbial modification, and subordination. We will concern ourselves with adverbial clauses here, and discuss the issue of subordination in depth in Section 4. Diessel (2013: 341) defines adverbial clauses as a type of subordinate clause which ‘occurs in complex sentences expressing a temporal or logical relationship between two events’. In other words, the main clause and the adverbial clause occur in the same sentence, and relate to each other in particular semantic ways. Thompson et al. (2007: 238) argue that the

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<sup>1</sup> Several linguists use non-finiteness as a criterion for converb-hood, including Haspelmath (1995: 3), Nedjalkov (1998: 340), and Amha & Dimmendaal (2006: 393), but others find the criterion of finiteness to be less than illuminating (see, e.g., Nedjalkov (1995) regarding finiteness and Evenki converbs).

adverbial clause functions as a modifier of a verb phrase or an entire clause, and such modification can be classified into one of the following semantic types: conditional, manner, temporal, and simultaneous. Here are Sylheti examples of each type:<sup>2</sup>

## (1) Conditional

|             |              |              |                |
|-------------|--------------|--------------|----------------|
| <i>tumi</i> | <i>ge-le</i> | <i>[ami]</i> | <i>zai-m-u</i> |
| 2.SG.IF     | go-CVB       | 1.SG         | go-FUT-1       |

‘If you go, [I] will go.’ (16-07-11, N/A)<sup>3</sup>

## (2) Manner

|            |               |               |
|------------|---------------|---------------|
| <i>φua</i> | <i>dor-ia</i> | <i>ge-s-e</i> |
| boy        | run-CVB       | go-PRF-3.IF   |

‘The boy ran away (lit. The boy having run, went).’ (16-01-15, 5)

## (3) Anterior

|             |               |             |            |              |
|-------------|---------------|-------------|------------|--------------|
| <i>goru</i> | <i>raxa-t</i> | <i>g-ia</i> | <i>job</i> | <i>fomoi</i> |
| cattle      | pasture-LOC   | go-CVB      | all        | time         |

|              |                |                |
|--------------|----------------|----------------|
| <i>ex-ta</i> | <i>dustami</i> | <i>xor-t-o</i> |
| one-CLF      | mischief       | do-inflT-3.IF  |

‘After going to the cattle pasture he would always make mischief.’<sup>4</sup>

## (4) Simultaneous

|            |              |              |              |               |                 |
|------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|-----------------|
| <i>ami</i> | <i>filli</i> | <i>di-te</i> | <i>di-te</i> | <i>zanala</i> | <i>mus-r-am</i> |
| 1.SG       | whistle      | give-CVB     | give-CVB     | window        | wipe-PROG-1     |

‘I am whistling and wiping the window’ (16-07-15(1), 175)

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<sup>2</sup> Abbreviations in the glosses are: 1 – first person, 2 – second person, 3 – third person, A – agent, CAUS – causative, CFC – counterfactual, CLF – classifier, CONJ – conjunctive, CVB – converb, DEM – demonstrative, FL – formal, FUT – future, IF – informal, INF – infinitive, inflT – inflected t form, LOC – locative, M – masculine, NEG – negative, NHM – non-human, OBJ – object, POSS – possessive, PL – plural, PRF – perfective, PROG – progressive, REL – relative, PST – past, SG – singular, VN – verbal noun

<sup>3</sup> This recording has not been fully transcribed and therefore the example does not have an utterance number.

<sup>4</sup> See Lau (this volume) for discussion of the inflT form. This example is from an unpublished transcription of *The Boy Who Cried Tiger* (Line 3). The analysis is mine, the transcription and translation are by Marie Thaut.

Note that in the examples above, the verbs *zaimu*, *gese*, *xorto*, and *musram*, are inflected for tense, aspect, and person, and therefore are finite verbs. The converbs, *gele*, *doria*, *gia*, and *dite*, lack such inflection and are therefore non-finite.

### 3.1 Conditional clauses

We will refer to the non-finite form that appears in conditional clauses as the *-le* converb. Example (1) above expresses simple hypotheticality: *If you go then I will go*. Clauses with *-le* can also convey a counterfactual meaning (Dopierala 2016b: 4), as in:

#### (5) Counterfactual

|              |                 |           |              |                 |                 |           |
|--------------|-----------------|-----------|--------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------|
| <i>Tumra</i> | <i>Portugal</i> | <i>na</i> | <i>oi-le</i> | <i>tumra-re</i> | <i>dex-l-am</i> | <i>ne</i> |
| 2.PL.IF      | Portugal        | NEG       | be-CVB       | 2.PL.IF-OBJ     | see-PST-1       | CFC       |

‘If you had not been in Portugal, I would have seen you.’ (16-01-12(2), 27)

### 3.2 Manner clauses

Verbs marked as *-le* converbs seem to appear in conditional clauses exclusively. However, converbs marked with *-te*<sup>5</sup> and *-ia* occur in several different contexts, with apparently overlapping functions. It is not always clear which translation or nuance is more accurate, however, the data will be presented in the most illustrative way possible, in the hope that uncertainty will inspire further research.

Several linguists have observed that, cross-linguistically, converbs appear in manner clauses,<sup>6</sup> as in example (2) above (‘The boy ran away’). Here we have an *-ia* converb form of ‘run’ and a finite form of ‘go’, with the somewhat awkward literal translation: ‘The boy having run, went’. This kind of manner interpretation seems to be limited semantically to instances where a manner of motion converb modifies a finite directed motion verb.<sup>7</sup> Section 4.2 describes this construction in more detail.

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<sup>5</sup> Both Plettner (2007: 19-21) and Chalmers (1996: 31-32) describe a non-finite *-te* form that has an infinitival use in certain constructions, though their descriptions do not overlap completely. I do not make any claims about the converb-hood of this *-te* non-finite form.

<sup>6</sup> See Haspelmath (1993: 377) for discussion of manner converbs in Lezgian, and Alpatov & Podlesskaya (1995: 466-474) for Japanese.

<sup>7</sup> It is unclear whether it is possible to have a manner interpretation with intervening lexical material, such as in the English example in Section 4.1, 19(b)

Consider the following examples of apparent manner clauses:<sup>8</sup>

(6) Manner

|           |              |              |             |
|-----------|--------------|--------------|-------------|
| <i>he</i> | <i>sa-ia</i> | <i>sa-ia</i> | <i>za-r</i> |
| 3.SG.IF.M | see-CVB      | see-CVB      | go-PROG     |

‘He goes, looking at him.’ (16-01-15(2), 120)

(7) Manner

|            |               |               |             |
|------------|---------------|---------------|-------------|
| <i>bol</i> | <i>φala-i</i> | <i>φala-i</i> | <i>za-r</i> |
| ball       | jump-CVB      | jump-CVB      | go-PROG     |

‘The ball goes, bouncing.’

Note that in (6) and (7), the *-ia* converb<sup>9</sup> appears twice and, according to the English translation, seems to have a manner interpretation. In (6), ‘he’ is going by, looking at someone else, and in (7) ‘the ball’ goes, bouncing (lit. jumping). ‘Looking’ and ‘bouncing’ modify the way in which the subject is ‘going’.

It is important to note that, according to the consultant (16-01-15, 38:49.00 – 38:54.00), it is not always obligatory to reduplicate the converb though most speakers prefer to do so. Consider (8), which was given as a semantic equivalent to (7), though the converb occurs only once:

(8) Manner

|            |                |             |
|------------|----------------|-------------|
| <i>bol</i> | <i>φala-ia</i> | <i>za-r</i> |
| ball       | jump-CVB       | go-PROG     |

‘The ball goes, bouncing.’

We will see in the following section that reduplication, or lack thereof, may have some semantic implications; it is unclear what difference is expressed here. Non-converbal adverbs, as in (9) can be reduplicated in similar circumstances, which suggests at least that a certain reduplicative tendency is associated with a manner interpretation.

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<sup>8</sup> Examples (7) and (8) originate from sessions conducted by colleagues with the same consultant. The original file names are (j3-2 00:17:15-00:17:30) and (j3-2 00:17:35), respectively.

<sup>9</sup> We consider *-i* as a variant of *-ia* for the purposes of this paper; more research is needed.



## (9) Manner

*aste aste lex-s-i-l-a*  
 slow slow write-PFV-CONJ-PST3.FL  
 ‘[She] wrote slowly.’ (16-22-01, 120)

### 3.3 Temporal Clauses

Let us recall example (3), above, where the converbal clause is translated as ‘After...’. In that sentence, ‘making mischief’ (the finite verb) is interpreted as happening after ‘going to the cattle pasture’ (the converb), i.e., there is a succession of events where someone goes to the cattle pasture *and then* makes mischief. Cross-linguistically, converbs that are used to express anteriority may also function as connectors in narrative discourse (Diessel 2013: 350).

In Sylheti, *-ia* converbs can link clauses in a series of events (Dopierala 2016c: 10-11), as in the following example from an unpublished transcript of *The Boy Who Cried Tiger* (Line 5), where multiple *-ia* converb clauses are linked together (the converbs are bolded and the finite verb is underlined):

## (10)

*tar sillani hunia elaxar manof laṭi-zaṭa bia tare basanir lagi dḥoria aita.*  
 ‘Hearing his **screaming**, the local people would **come running** with weapons (sticks and spears) to save him.’

Non-finite verb forms linking clauses in narrative chains such as this are a typological feature of verb-final languages in South Asia (Coupe 2007: 344). They are perhaps so common that they are potentially found in any narrative context (Abbi 1991: 208).

As noted in Section 3.2, *-ia* converbs are found in manner clauses. The following examples were presented in English for translation by the consultant in the hope of eliciting further examples of manner clauses. For instance, ‘the picture fell, shaking’ and ‘shaking, the picture fell’ were given, where ‘shaking’ is meant to describe the ‘falling’. However, according to explanations by the consultant, it seems that these clauses potentially exhibit an anterior meaning rather than manner.

## (11) Anterior

*sobi-ṭa* *ḥor-s-e* *xaḥ-ia*  
 picture-CLF.NHM fall-PRF-3.IF shake-CVB

‘The picture shook and fell (Having shaken, the picture fell).’ (16-02-16, 7)

## (12) Anterior

|                 |               |                |
|-----------------|---------------|----------------|
| <i>sobi-ta</i>  | <i>φor-ia</i> | <i>xaφ-s-e</i> |
| picture-CLF.NHM | fall-CVB      | shake-PRF-3.IF |

‘The picture fell and shook (Having fallen, the picture shook).’

(16-07-15(2), 118)

Apparently, example (11) describes a situation where the picture’s shaking happens before the falling, whereas in (12) the picture fell first and then shook. Notice that in (11) the converb *xaφia* ‘having shaken’ comes after the main verb, however, this does not make the converbal clause posterior in meaning. That is, word order does not impact the temporal interpretation. It is unclear whether there is a possible manner interpretation present for these examples (c.f. Section 3.2). If not, it is also unclear what differentiates a manner interpretation from an anterior one, though the explanation could potentially be semantic, as mentioned above, or structural, as discussed in Section 4.2. We will leave this open to further research.

### 3.4 Simultaneous clauses

Examples of reduplicated *-ia* converbs expressing manner were presented in Section 3.2; reduplicated *-te* converbs expressing simultaneity were seen in example (4). Abbi (1994: 35) claims that reduplicated verbal adverbs are ‘universally used by all South Asian languages to indicate aspects like simultaneity, continuity, iteration, sequentiality and non precipitativity’. We will focus here on simultaneity; other possible functions in Sylheti need further research.

Sylheti *-ia* and *-te* converbs seem to engage in what Abbi terms ‘complete word reduplication’ (CWR), at least to some extent. In (4) above, the *-te* converb is reduplicated and ‘whistling’ and ‘wiping the window’ happen at the same time. Reduplicated *-ia* converbs may also have a simultaneous interpretation, as in:

## (13) Simultaneity

|            |             |               |               |                 |
|------------|-------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|
| <i>ami</i> | <i>tibi</i> | <i>dex-ia</i> | <i>dex-ia</i> | <i>φor-r-am</i> |
| 1.SG       | T.V.        | watch-CVB     | watch-CVB     | read-PROG-1     |

‘I am watching t.v. and reading.’ (16-07-15(1), 34)

Like manner clauses, however, converbs do not necessarily need to be reduplicated to express their intended simultaneous meaning. Let us consider the following examples of *-te* and *-ia* converbs.

## (14) Simultaneity

|           |              |              |            |               |                 |
|-----------|--------------|--------------|------------|---------------|-----------------|
| <i>he</i> | <i>filli</i> | <i>di-te</i> | <i>ami</i> | <i>zanala</i> | <i>mus-r-am</i> |
| 3.SG.IF.M | whistle      | give-CVB     | 1.SG       | window        | wipe-PROG-1     |

‘He whistles and I am wiping the window.’ (16-07-01, 130)

## (15) Simultaneity

|              |              |              |            |               |                 |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|------------|---------------|-----------------|
| * <i>ami</i> | <i>filli</i> | <i>di-te</i> | <i>ami</i> | <i>zanala</i> | <i>mus-r-am</i> |
| 1.SG         | whistle      | give-CVB     | 1.SG       | window        | wipe-PROG-1     |

‘I whistle and I am wiping the window.’ (16-07-01, 130)

In (14) and (15), the actions of ‘whistling’ and ‘wiping the window’ are apparently happening at the same time, however the subjects of the converbal clause and the main clause must be different, since (15) is ungrammatical. For *-ia* converbs the opposite restriction holds:

## (16) Simultaneity

|            |              |             |                |               |                 |
|------------|--------------|-------------|----------------|---------------|-----------------|
| <i>ami</i> | <i>filli</i> | <i>d-ia</i> | [ <i>ami</i> ] | <i>zanala</i> | <i>mus-r-am</i> |
| 1.SG       | whistle      | give-CVB    | 1.SG           | window        | wipe-PROG-1     |

‘I whistle and [I] am wiping the window.’ (16-07-15(1), 171)

## (17) Simultaneity

|             |              |             |            |               |                 |
|-------------|--------------|-------------|------------|---------------|-----------------|
| * <i>he</i> | <i>filli</i> | <i>d-ia</i> | <i>ami</i> | <i>zanala</i> | <i>mus-r-am</i> |
| 3.SG.IF.M   | whistle      | give-CVB    | 1.SG       | window        | wipe-PROG-1     |

‘He whistles and I am wiping the window.’ (16-07-15(1), 171)

Once again, we have simultaneous event and with coreference, as in (16), the clause combination is fine but non-coreference, as in (17), results in ungrammaticality. Thus, non-reduplicated *-ia* converb clauses require subject coreference with the finite verb clause, whereas non-reduplicated *-te* converb clauses disallow it.

#### 4. Theoretical implications: an RRG approach

In the following sections we explore how the syntactic model of Role and Reference Grammar (RRG henceforth) as described by Van Valin & LaPolla (1997) can be used to gain insights into Sylheti converb constructions. RRG is a non-generative approach which posits a layered clause structure (Van Valin & LaPolla 1997: 442) with three levels:

NUCLEUS: contains the predicate.

CORE: contains a nucleus and the arguments of the predicate

CLAUSE: contains the core and the periphery (adjuncts)

Clause combining is described using the concepts of ‘juncture’ (see 4.1) and ‘nexus’ (see 4.2). Briefly, juncture relates to the level at which clause combination takes place, i.e. nuclear, core, or clausal, while nexus refers to the kind of linkage between the clauses in terms of dependency and embedding. RRG recognises three cross-linguistic nexus types: i.e. co-ordination, subordination, and cosubordination. We explore and exemplify these concepts in the analysis of Sylheti in the following sections.

#### 4.1 Juncture

In RRG analyses, clauses may be combined at each of three levels of juncture, namely nucleus, core and clausal, as exemplified by the following English and French examples (Van Valin & LaPolla 1997: 442, 444, 447):

##### (18) Nuclear Juncture

(a) John forced open the door.

(b) John forced the door open.

##### (19) Core Juncture

|           |                   |             |                |            |                |
|-----------|-------------------|-------------|----------------|------------|----------------|
| <i>je</i> | <i>laisser-ai</i> | <i>Jean</i> | <i>mang-er</i> | <i>les</i> | <i>gâteaux</i> |
| 1SG       | let-1SG.FUT       | John        | eat-INF        | the.MPL    | cakes          |

‘I will let John eat the cakes.’

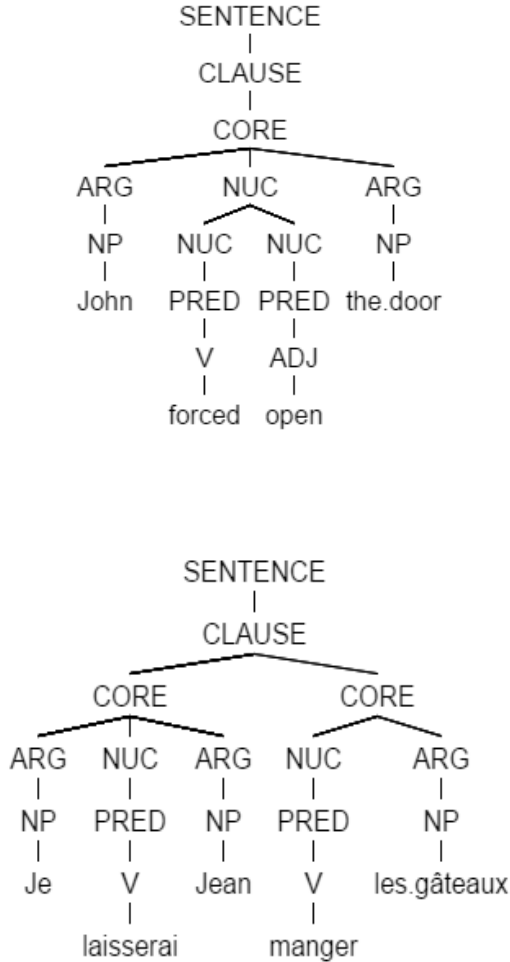
##### (20) Clausal Juncture

Mary called Fred yesterday, and she asked him to paint her room white.

In (18) *force* and *open* each constitutes a distinct predicate that are combined to act as a single nucleus taking the same set of arguments (Van Valin & LaPolla 1997: 442-44). Van Valin & LaPolla (1997: 442) suggest these nuclei ‘may occur adjacent to each other’ as in (18a) *forced open*, ‘or separated from each other by a core argument’ as in (18b) *forced the door open*. In (19) the sentence has two cores with two distinct nuclei: *Je laisserai Jean* and *Jean manger les gâteaux*, where *Jean* is semantically an argument for each nucleus (Van Valin & LaPolla 1997: 444). Finally, in (20) the sentence is made up of

two clauses: *Mary called Fred yesterday* and *She asked him to paint her room white*<sup>10</sup> (Van Valin & LaPolla 1997: 447).

Figure 1 gives RRG representations of the structures for these examples (adapted from Van Valin & LaPolla 1997: 443, 445, 448):



<sup>10</sup> Note that the second clause also contains a core juncture and a nuclear juncture.

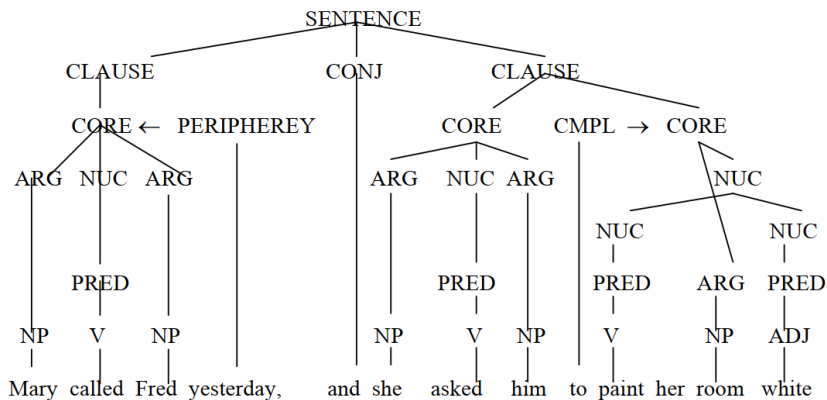


Figure 1. Layered structure of examples (18a), (19) and (20).

## 4.2 Nexus

RRG recognizes three possible structural relationships between clauses in a complex sentential construction, namely coordination, subordination, and cosubordination (Van Valin & LaPolla 1997: 448-454). In coordination, neither clause is dependent on the other and they are typically linked with an optional coordinating conjunction (Van Valin & LaPolla 1997: 441). In subordination, one clause is dependent on and embedded within the other (main) clause. Subordinate clauses can serve as arguments in the main clause (as in (22a) where *that it is raining* functions as the subject of the main clause) or as sentential modifiers introduced by a subordinating conjunction (as in (22b) *after she got home from work*, see Van Valin & LaPolla 1997: 442). Clauses in coordinate nexus may each be uttered independently and are finite, while subordinate clauses in subordinate nexus cannot stand alone, even though they may be finite (Van Valin & LaPolla 1997: 450). The following are English examples of coordination and subordination (Van Valin & LaPolla 1997: 444):

### (21) Coordination

John talked to Mary, and they went to the store, and...

### (22) Subordination

(a) That it is raining comes as no surprise.

(b) Sally talked to Bill after she got home from work.

RRG recognizes a third nexus relation called cosubordination which is characterised by dependency without embedding (Van Valin & LaPolla 1997: 448-455, 468).<sup>11</sup> While clauses in cosubordinate nexus do not exhibit structural dependency by acting as arguments or sentential modifiers, they do display what RRG terms ‘operator dependency’. RRG recognizes three types of operators whose scope covers a particular level of juncture:

NUCLEAR OPERATOR: aspect, external negation  
 CORE OPERATOR: modality, internal negation  
 CLAUSAL OPERATOR: tense, illocutionary force

Clauses in cosubordinate nexus will thus have a single clausal operator with scope over the whole sentence.

As Van Valin & LaPolla (1997: 455) point out, cross-linguistically the three nexus types are possible for each of the three levels of juncture, giving nine possible juncture-nexus types. Languages need not have all nine, and indeed most do not. Note that these juncture-nexus types are abstract linkage relations, and not grammatical construction types, so a given juncture-nexus type may be expressed via a single grammatical construction type in a particular language.

### 4.3 RRG analysis of Sylheti

In this section we apply the RRG concepts discussed in Sections 4.1 and 4.2 to the analysis of Sylheti converbs. Recall that in example (2) above an *-ia* converb occurs adjacent to the finite verb and has a manner interpretation. The two nuclei *doria* ‘run-CVB’ and *gese* ‘go.PREF.3.IF’ share the argument *ɸua* ‘boy’. They therefore seem to be acting as a single nucleus taking a single argument, which is definitional of nuclear juncture (cf. example (18a) above). We analyse the Sylheti structure of example (2) in RRG terms in Figure 2.

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<sup>11</sup> Diessel (2013: 342) similarly proposes that ‘adverbial clauses are dependent but non-embedded structures, which, in contrast to other types of subordinate clauses, do not serve as syntactic constituents of a superordinate clause’.

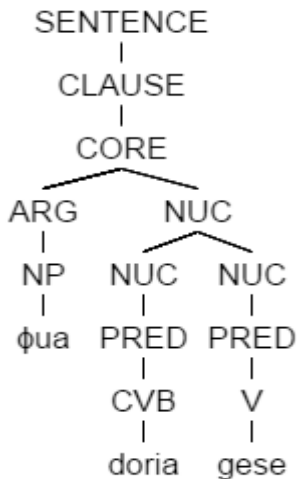


Figure 2. Possible clause structure for example (2)

Analyzing *doria gesese* as an instance of nuclear juncture explains why both *-ia* converbs in (23) do not have a manner interpretation.

(23) Manner/Anterior

|                |               |               |               |                |
|----------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|
| <i>bilai-e</i> | <i>xasa-t</i> | <i>dex-ia</i> | <i>dor-ia</i> | <i>ge-se-e</i> |
| cat-A          | cage-LOC      | see-CVB       | run-CVB       | go-PRF-3.IF    |

‘The cat saw the cage and ran away (Having seen the cage, the cat ran away).’ (S15 69)

Although there are two *-ia* converbs present, only *doria* is interpreted as describing the manner of *gese*. The two predicates act as one nucleus taking the single argument *bilai*. The other *-ia* converb, *dexia*, also selects for the same argument as its subject, but it is not acting as a single nucleus with *doria gesese*. We propose that the *bilai-e xasa-t dex-ia* clause is an instance of clausal juncture because it relies on the finite clause (containing *doria gesese*) for its anterior temporal interpretation. The suggested structure is given in Figure 3.



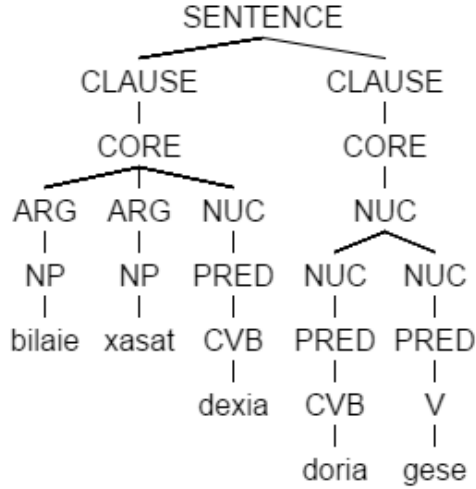


Figure 3. Possible clause structure for example (23)

Sylheti converb clauses seem to fall between coordinate and subordinate nexus, just as similar constructions (particularly adverbial clauses) in other languages do. The distinction between subordinate and coordinate clauses has been described as a dichotomy throughout the Western grammatical tradition (Haiman & Thompson 1984: 510), however Thompson et al. (2007: 237-238) argue that it is a continuum with ‘subordinate’ clauses at one extreme and ‘coordinate’ clauses at the other. Adverbial clauses are traditionally considered as subordinate, though they are, as Thompson et al. (2007: 238) propose, ‘in some sense “less subordinate” than the prototypes of the other two types [complement and relative clauses] on the continuum’. Others favouring a continuum analysis rather than a mutually exclusive view include Foley & Van Valin (1984), Haiman & Thompson (1984), and Van Valin & LaPolla (1997), among others.

Although more research on Sylheti coordinate and subordinate constructions is needed, the following evidence suggests that Sylheti converb clauses are cosubordinate structures when in clausal juncture.<sup>12</sup> Examples like the following can be analysed as clausal juncture with clearly coordinate nexus:

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<sup>12</sup> Slater (2003: 222-223) and Pellard (2012: 99-101), among others, come to similar conclusions regarding cosubordination and converb clauses in other languages.

## (24) Coordination

|              |             |              |            |              |
|--------------|-------------|--------------|------------|--------------|
| <i>ama-r</i> | <i>φuri</i> | <i>φutul</i> | <i>dia</i> | <i>xel-e</i> |
| 1.SG-POSS    | daughter    | doll         | with       | play-3.IF    |

|           |            |            |              |
|-----------|------------|------------|--------------|
| <i>ar</i> | <i>φon</i> | <i>dia</i> | <i>mat-e</i> |
| and       | phone      | on         | talk-3.IF    |

‘My daughter plays with dolls and talks on the phone.’ (16-07-15(1), 133)

In (24), the two clauses are in coordination: each can occur as an independent utterance and contain a finite verb marked for person/number/honorificity. They are furthermore linked via the conjunction *ar* which only links constituents (including clauses) to other constituents of the same type (Mishra & Bhattacharjee 2013: 91). This contrasts with Sylheti converb clauses, which are non-finite, cannot act as an independent utterance, and are never linked to other constituents with *ar*. Sylheti converb clauses, therefore, do not appear to be coordinate, based on these criteria.

Sylheti converb clauses do not appear to be subordinate either. Sylheti has several constructions that RRG would refer to as ‘true’ subordinate clauses, namely: relative clauses, sentential modifiers introduced by a subordinating conjunction, and clauses acting as arguments (cf. Van Valin & LaPolla 1997: 442, 452).

## (25) Relative Clause

|            |          |               |                  |                 |
|------------|----------|---------------|------------------|-----------------|
| <i>ami</i> | <i>o</i> | <i>beta-r</i> | <i>xota</i>      | <i>mat-r-am</i> |
| 1.SG       | DEM      | man-POSS      | ?? <sup>13</sup> | speak-PROG-1    |

|           |             |              |                 |
|-----------|-------------|--------------|-----------------|
| <i>ze</i> | <i>beta</i> | <i>bo-ia</i> | <i>af-r-a</i>   |
| REL       | man         | sit-CVB      | laugh-PROG-3.FL |

‘I’m talking about this man who is sitting and laughing.’ (16-07-15(2), 146)

## (26) Sentential Modifier

|              |               |              |                |                |             |                |
|--------------|---------------|--------------|----------------|----------------|-------------|----------------|
| <i>zebla</i> | <i>saimon</i> | <i>fawar</i> | <i>xor-r-a</i> | <i>bilai-e</i> | <i>tifu</i> | <i>φal-a-r</i> |
| while        | Simon         | shower       | do-PROG-1FL    | cat-A          | tissue      | fall-CAUS-PROG |

‘While Simon showers, the cat pulls down [toilet] tissue.’ (16-07-15(1), 148)

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<sup>13</sup> It is not clear what this word means.

(27) Argument<sup>14</sup>

|   |               |                |              |                   |
|---|---------------|----------------|--------------|-------------------|
| <i>tum-ar</i>   | <i>siloti</i> | <i>hika-ni</i> | <i>ama-r</i> | <i>bala lag-e</i> |
| 2.SG.IF-POSS  | Sylheti       | teach-VN       | 1.SG-POSS    | like-3.IF         |
| ‘I like your Sylheti teaching.’ (Sylheti lesson 17, 24) |               |                |              |                   |

Example (25) contains a relative clause introduced by the relative pronoun *ze*, which marks the dependent relative clause (Chalmers 1996: 35-36; Plettner 2007: 47). Although this clause is structurally dependent on the main clause, it is finite, with aspect and agreement inflection on the verb *lage*. Similarly, in (26), the clause introduced by *zebla* ‘while’ is also finite and marked with aspect and causal inflection. However, it cannot be used as an independent utterance, indicating its subordinate status. Finally, (27) is an example of a clause (headed by a verbal noun) acting as an argument of the predicate *bala lage* ‘like’.

Sylheti converb clauses, on the other hand, do not share these properties. There is no evidence of a converb clause being used to relativize a head noun, nor any examples of one acting as a sentential modifier introduced by a subordinating conjunction such as *zebla*, nor any instances of a converb clause occurring as an argument of a main clause predicate. Also, all these subordinate clauses seem to be structurally dependent on the main clause and can be finite (as (25) and (26) are), whereas Sylheti converb clauses are neither. By a process of elimination then, we should analyse Sylheti converb clauses as involving cosubordinate nexus.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has described, to the extent the corpus on which it is based allows, the syntax and semantics of converbs marked by *-le*, *-ia* and *-te* in Sylheti, and has pointed to relevant typological and theoretical implications of their analysis. We explored Sylheti converbs in relation to the definition proposed by Haspelmath (1995: 3) and with reference to four types of adverbial clauses. The utility of Role and Reference Grammar and especially its notions of juncture and nexus as a tool for analyzing these structures in Sylheti has been demonstrated. We have argued for Sylheti converbs being cosubordinate nexus structures, thereby raising questions about the claim by Haspelmath (1995: 3) that such constructions are always ‘subordinate’. Further research on Sylheti, and other Indo-Aryan languages, needs to be undertaken to elaborate and extend the description and analysis of converb constructions in greater detail.

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<sup>14</sup> Example from unpublished *Sylheti Language Lessons*, produced by the SOAS Sylheti Language Society, Lesson 17, page 24.

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