

Syntax of the World's Languages VIII

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What Do Serial Verbs Mean? A Worldwide Survey

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*What is a
serializing
language?*

*Is there such a thing as a
serializing
language?*

(Any language with serial verbs? Or what?)

Defining SVCs

- ⊗ Definitions of Serial Verb Constructions (SVCs) are **inconsistent** and **controversial** (cf. Zwicky 1990, Haspelmath 2016)
- ⊗ Some researchers have even rejected the concept entirely (e.g., Delplanque 1998, Paul 2008)
- ⊗ Traditionally associated with certain parts of the world and a certain ‘type’ of (‘serializing’) languages
- ⊗ One of the most popular definitions today is based on **prototypes** rather than strict criteria (Aikhenvald 2006)
- ⊗ A mix of **form, structure, and semantics...**

Defining SVCs

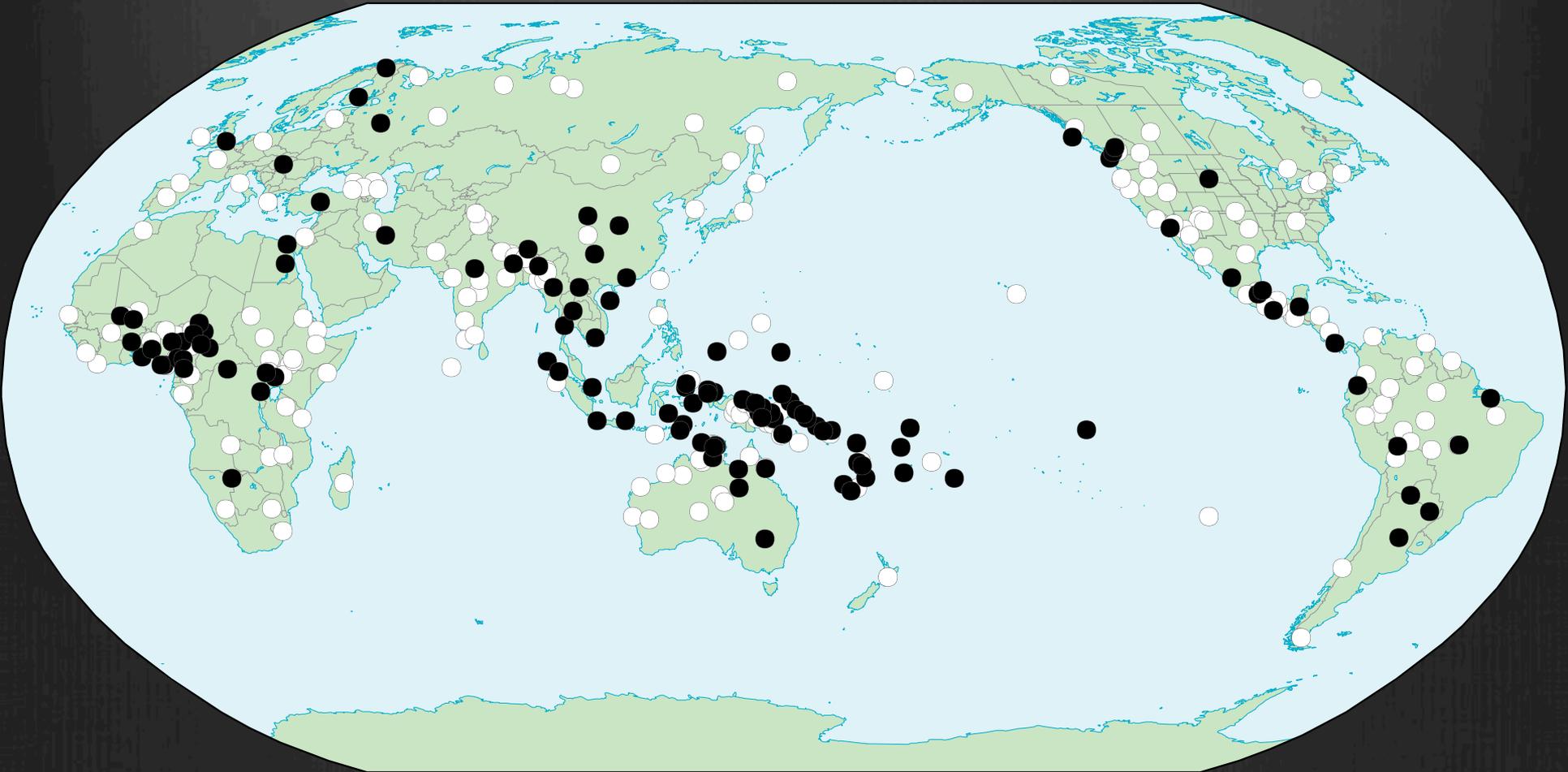
- ⊗ SVCs often defined **ostensively** or by **analogy** to other languages known to be ‘serializing’
- ⊗ Not surprising given the history of the term:
 - ⊗ First ‘discovered’ in West African languages (late 1960s)
 - ⊗ Soon spread by analogy to creoles and Southeast Asia (1970s)
 - ⊗ Picked up elsewhere: regionally specific traditional definitions
 - ⊗ *On history and definition, see Ross (forthcoming) & Lovestrland (forthcoming)*
- ⊗ Authors often uncertain if given constructions are ‘really SVCs’ and may be hesitant to apply the label
 - ⊗ Yet “SVCs” often go-to explanation for grammaticalization?

Our working definition

(Ross et al. 2015; Ross forthcoming)

- ⊗ Two or more juxtaposed verbs
 - ⊗ With no marker of dependency or linking element
 - ⊗ Expressing a single event in a single clause
 - ⊗ With shared values for Tense-Aspect-Modality and negation
 - ⊗ And shared arguments (subject and/or object)
- ⊗ *Applied consistently in worldwide balanced 325-language sample (following WALS methodology) to identify languages with SVCs...*

SVCs distribution



Black: SVCs attested (37%); White: not attested

SVCs attested in at least 120 languages based on available data...

Exceptions and outliers?

- ⊗ This definition-based distribution highlights SVC hot spots but is not entirely as expected based on previous research
 - ⊗ To some degree this might be due to traditional regional biases
- ⊗ **‘Exceptions’** (*→excluded here*)
 - ⊗ Many researchers have reported ‘exceptions’ to the definition of SVCs (*‘in my language...’*); see Ross (*forthcoming*)
 - ⊗ One by one in violation of all components of the definition
- ⊗ **Outliers** (*→included here*)
 - ⊗ Despite objectively meeting definitional criteria, some languages do not match intuitive sense of being “serializing” languages...

Serializing languages?

- ⊗ Many attempts have been made to identify languages with SVCs as a certain *type*, e.g., with typological correlations
- ⊗ Generative research has suggested *serializing parameters* (Muysken 1988, inter alia)
- ⊗ However, this line of inquiry has failed to consistently capture all languages traditionally considered *serializing*
 - ⊗ Or more restricted phenomena have been explained instead (e.g. Baker 1989, Stewart 2001, Zubizarreta & Oh 2007)
- ⊗ No clear foundation for the idea of ‘serializing’ languages but the idea persists, likely by analogy to often cited works...

Prominence of SVCs

- ⊗ Languages vary greatly regarding how many types of SVCs are found, and also the frequency of their use
- ⊗ Dixon (2006:338) reports wide range of frequency by sentence for languages in the Aikhenvald & Dixon (2006) volume:

Tariana	>70%
Ewe, Eastern Kayah Li, Dumo	50-70%
Goemai, Thai, Tetun Dili, Olutec, Cantonese	20-50%
Mwotlap, Toqabaqita, Lakota	5-20%
Khwe	<1%

- ⊗ Whether one type or many, frequent or rare, all attested SVCs are counted in the current survey...

Outliers

- ⊗ Outliers in the sample provide some insight into variation
 - ⊗ A number of languages in the sample do not closely resemble traditional ‘serializing’ languages yet have constructions that meet the definitional criteria to be considered SVCs
- ⊗ Also often *geographic* outliers as well (e.g. European)
- ⊗ May not have traditional **semantic types** of SVCs
 - ⊗ *The meaning of SVCs may shed some light on the topic...*

English

- ⊗ An especially marginal case for SVCs
 - ⊗ A number of candidate constructions, most excluded
 - For example: *go get / come see* (restricted to uninflected usage)
- ⊗ At least one type meets criteria, **perception SVCs**:
 - I saw him fall.* *I heard her sing.*
 - ⊗ Although not the most traditional type, SVC *by definition*
 - compare: *Kofi fringi a buku fadon.* ‘Kofi threw the book down.’
 - Kofi throw the book fall.*’ (Sranan, Sebba 1987:97)
 - ⊗ Consider also ‘*help (me) fix...*’ and ‘*make him fix...*’
- ⊗ More typical multi-verb constructions excluded due to form:
 - ⊗ *Go and get / sit reading / take the food and eat it ...*

Methodology

- ⊗ Determine the distribution of **four well-known SVC types**
- ⊗ Based on a sample of 100 languages with SVCs:
 - ⊗ 80 languages known to have SVCs from sample presented before
 - ⊗ 20 creole languages with SVCs (selected from APiCS)
- ⊗ Data from descriptive grammars, secondary articles (about SVCs or otherwise), texts, personal communication with speakers/researchers, etc.
- ⊗ Challenging because documentation is often limited for SVCs in general, and biased toward certain types as examples

SVC types

- ⊗ Various typologies of SVCs by semantic type have been proposed, and not all types accepted by all researchers
- ⊗ Several types stand out as apparently canonical according to most researchers and representative of ‘serializing’ languages
- ⊗ Foley & Olson (1985:41-48) propose some types more likely:
 - ⊗ *motion > posture > intransitive > transitive* (simplified)
- ⊗ Aikhenvald (2006:47-50) proposes a different version:
 - ⊗ *motion, posture, etc.* > *modal > valency-increasing > comparative ...*
 - ⊗ “Every serializing language has [the first type]” (Aikhenvald 2006:48)
 - ⊗ Blurred lines between *description* and *definition*!

Survey of 4 types

- ⊗ In order to compare the distribution of SVCs by semantic type, we have selected four common and well-known types:
- ⊗ **Motion SVCs**: typically involving a basic motion verb GO or COME, expressing motion sub-event direction of motion
- ⊗ **TAKE SVCs**: valency-increasing construction involving the lexical verb TAKE, function as instrumental, comitative, etc.
- ⊗ **Posture SVCs**: involving a basic posture verb like SIT, STAND, LIE, often grammaticalizing as durative aspect
- ⊗ **Comparative SVCs**: comparatives (=‘than’) with PASS, etc.

Results (summary)

- ⊗ All of these types occur independently in different groups of languages with SVCs, some more frequently than others
- ⊗ 5 languages have none: English, Fijian, Finnish, Madurese, Ngiyambaa
- ⊗ **Motion: 85/100** ⊗ **Posture: 40/100**
- ⊗ **TAKE: 40/100** ⊗ **Comparative: 20/100**
- ⊗ 6 languages have all types: Cantonese, Dagbani, Jabêm, Mandarin, Paamese, and Nigerian Pidgin, which will be used to illustrate these constructions...

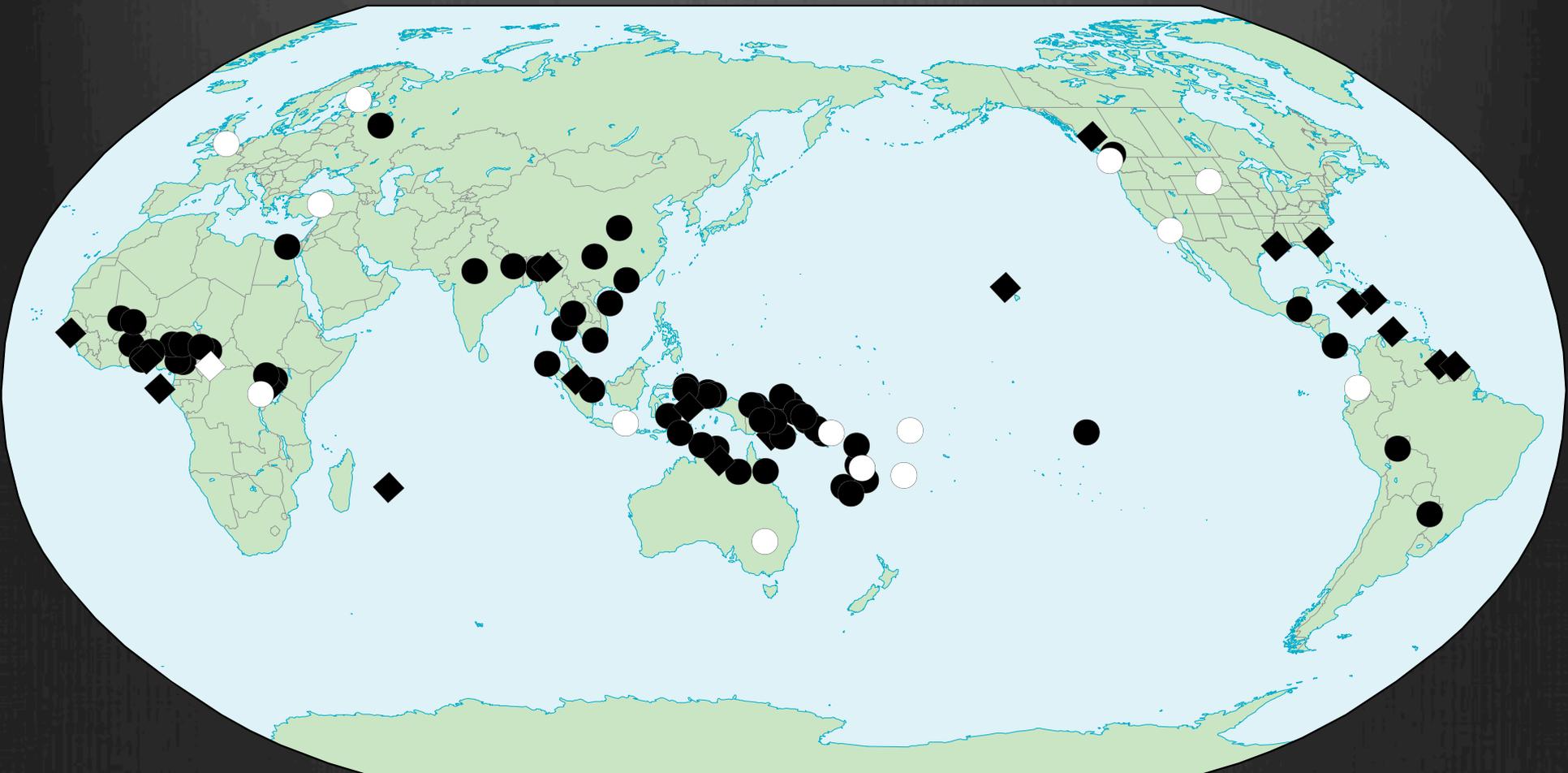
Motion SVCs

- ⊗ *“Every serializing language I have encountered includes a category of motion serialization, where a verb of motion is combined with some other verb in such a way that the motion verb comes first and the moving argument is the Agent of the second verb.” (Durie 1997:310)*
- ⊗ Several subtypes of Motion SVCs often not distinguished
 - ⊗ *See Lovestrland & Ross (forthcoming) for discussion of motion SVCs*
- ⊗ **GO/COME typically associated motion or directional:**

Warri women go bai gari
warri women go buy garri
'The women in Warri went and bought garri.'
(Nigerian Pidgin, Onovbiona 2012)

Im kari di nyam kom
3SG carry the yam come
'(S)he brought the yams.'
(Faraclas 1996:212)

Motion SVCs



Black: motion SVCs attested (85%); White: not attested

Diamond: creole; Circle: non-creole

Motion SVCs

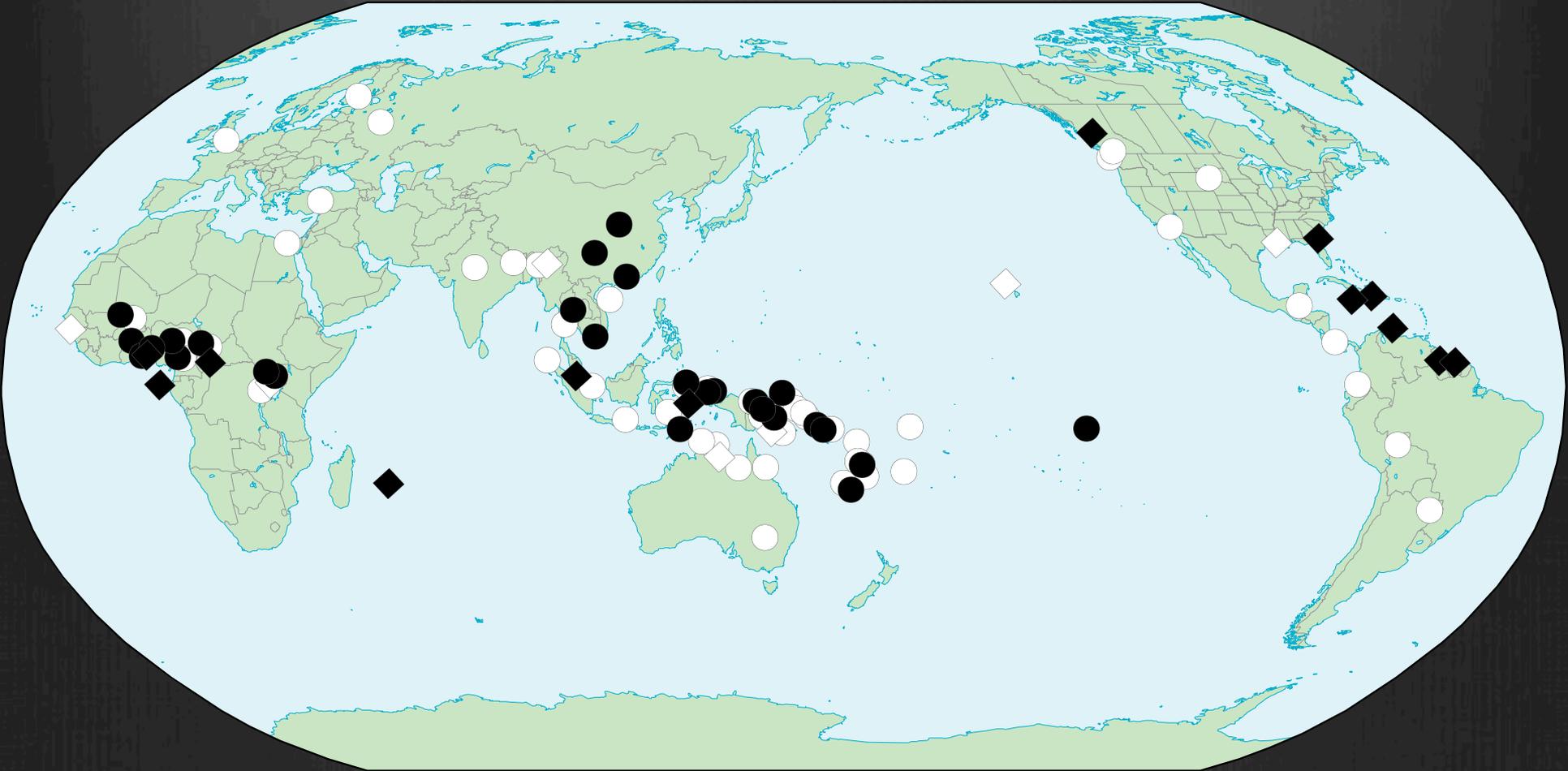
- ⊗ Overall, very common type, but not ubiquitous
 - ⊗ Exaggerated due to lumping different subtypes together
- ⊗ 25 languages have only this type:
 - ⊗ Most common individual configuration of types in a language
 - ⊗ Also frequently found in combination with other types
- ⊗ Most common subtype is directional (70/85)
- ⊗ Prior most common for associated motion (Lovstrand & Ross f.c.)
- ⊗ Limitation: Prior/Purposive motion difficult to distinguish
 - ⊗ Purposives do not strictly meet single-eventhood criterion
 - ⊗ 7 languages with Motion SVCs have only Purposive: 5 of those have no other surveyed type (but may have different SVC types)

TAKE SVCs

- ⊗ TAKE SVCs are a type of **valency-increasing** SVCs
- ⊗ Several subtypes based on role of object of TAKE
(See Shluinsky 2017 for overview of West African languages)
 - ⊗ **Instrumental**: TAKE an object and use as tool, etc.
 - ⊗ **Comitative**: object accompanies subject
 - ⊗ **Transitive**: purely valency-increasing, direct object marker
 - ⊗ **Transfer**: TAKE+directional (e.g. TAKE+COME = BRING)

A tek nayf kot di nyam. 'I cut the yam with a knife.'
I take knife cut the yam (Nigerian Pidgin, Faraclas 1996:73)

TAKE SVCs



Black: TAKE SVCs attested (40%); White: not attested
Diamond: creole; Circle: non-creole

TAKE SVCs

- ⊗ More regionally specific phenomenon than Motion SVCs
 - ⊗ Found especially in areas well-known for serializing languages: West Africa, Southeast Asia, Papua New Guinea/Oceania, Creoles
- ⊗ Only found in languages with at least one other type of SVC
 - ⊗ Seems to pattern with ‘serializing’ languages
- ⊗ Range of interpretations within/across languages, but similar argument-adding function for lexical verb TAKE
 - ⊗ Alternative lexical verbs (e.g. USE) found in other languages
 - ⊗ Dative-like constructions with GIVE also found (cf. Shluinsky 2017)
 - ⊗ Extent of usage varies (e.g. whether instruments expressed other ways)
 - ⊗ Serializing languages said to lack prepositions, or SVCs grammaticalize
 - ⊗ Compare also Chinese object marker *bǎ* (Chappell 2006)

Posture SVCs

- ⊗ Posture verbs SIT, STAND and LIE often combine with other lexical verbs as a sort of manner construction
 - ⊗ For Lao, Enfield (2002) called this *associated posture*
 - ⊗ Some detailed studies of languages, e.g. Hellwig (2003) on Goemai
- ⊗ Often grammaticalize as progressive/durative markers (*Kuteva 1999, Newman 2002, Heine & Kuteva 2002, inter alia*)
 - ⊗ For example, may combine with subject not literally in posture
 - ⊗ Either literal or grammaticalized semantics counted here

Im dè stanôp chop. ‘(S)he eats standing.’
3SG IMPF stand eat (Nigerian Pidgin, Faraclas 1996:213)

Posture SVCs

- ⊗ Some languages (8) have only this type
 - ⊗ Frequently found alongside Motion SVCs and other types
- ⊗ Less regionally defined than TAKE SVCs, but especially common in Southeast Asia and Papua New Guinea/Oceania
 - ⊗ Uncommon in creoles (or not commonly reported: typicality bias?)
- ⊗ Variation in degree of grammaticalization in reported data
 - ⊗ Some languages appear to have only literal posture expression
 - ⊗ Some have a range from literal to grammaticalized
 - ⊗ Some do not clearly have literal posture, might be better considered an aspectual auxiliary at this time

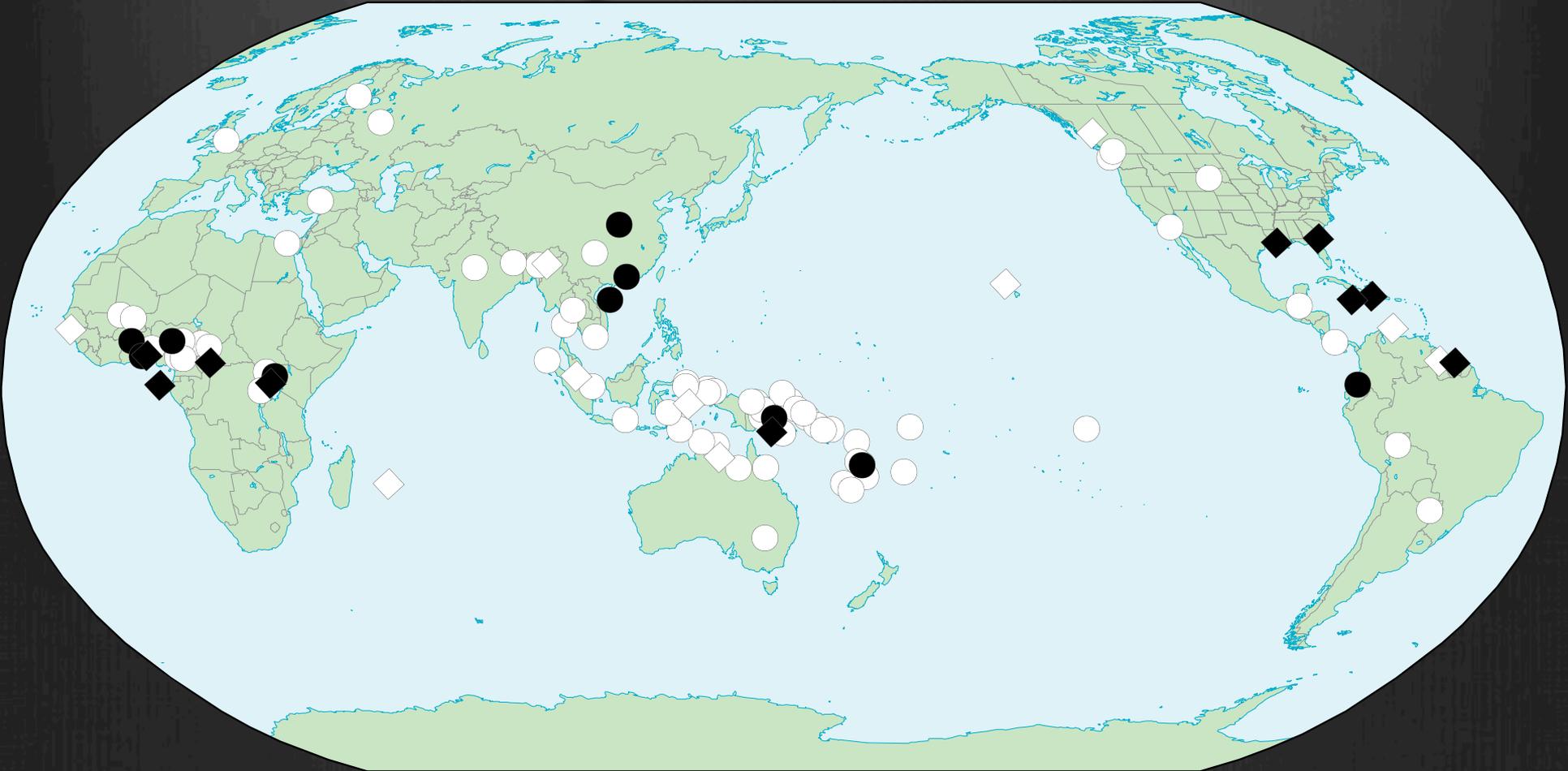
Comparative SVCs

- ⊗ Verb (PASS, EXCEED, etc.) introduces object of comparison
- ⊗ Conceptually might seem to be multi-clausal (cf. English *than*)
 - ⊗ But SVCs appear monoclausal: cf. ‘X passes Y in size.’
 - ⊗ Evidence of the semantic versatility of SVCs
- ⊗ Not extensively researched from a cross-linguistic perspective
 - ⊗ But see Schapper & de Vries (2018) on Melanesia
 - ⊗ And APiCS comparatives chapter includes SVCs (Michaelis 2013)

Nyam swit pas rays.
yam be.tasty pass rice

‘Yam is more delicious than rice.’
(Nigerian Pidgin, Faraclas 1996:11)

Comparative SVCs



Black: Comparative SVCs attested (20%); White: not attested
Diamond: creole; Circle: non-creole

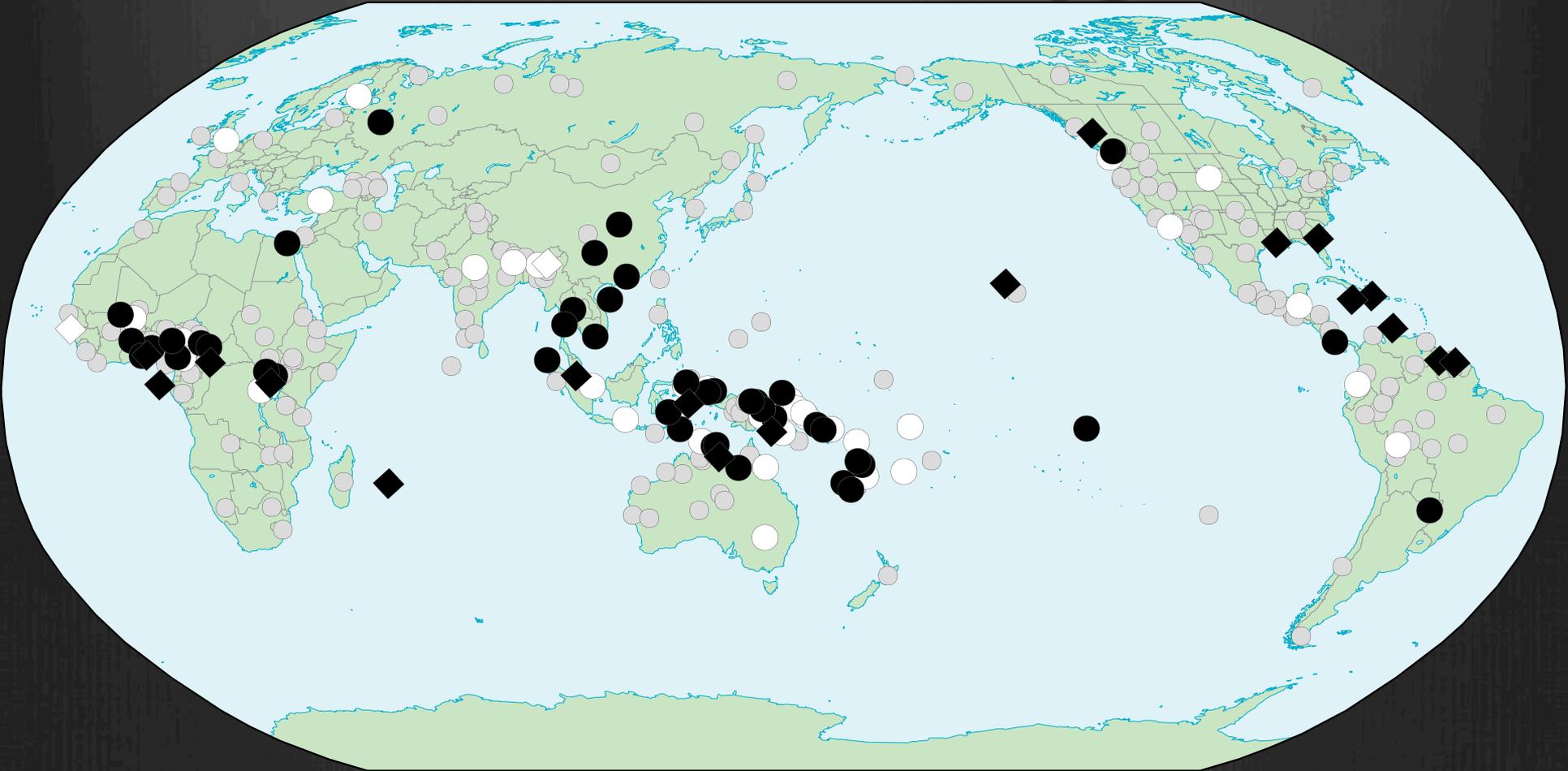
Comparative SVCs

- ⊗ More limited distribution than other types
 - ⊗ But still found in unrelated languages in different regions
- ⊗ Ecuadorian Quechua has only this type (Muysken 2011:149-150)
- ⊗ Most prominent in creole languages
 - ⊗ Possibly description bias (vs. availability of information in APiCS)
- ⊗ Like for TAKE SVCs, extent of usage varies
 - ⊗ May alternative with other strategies (see for example Caron 2017)
 - ⊗ Grammaticalization can lead to deverbal conjunction/preposition
- ⊗ Superlative SVCs also (rarely) found

Distribution of types

- ⊗ 5 languages had no surveyed types, while 6 have all four
- ⊗ 34 languages have only one type:
M(otion): 25 [T(AKE): 0] P(osture): 8 C(omparative): 1
- ⊗ 38 languages have two types:
M+T: 16 M+P: 17 M+C: 4 T+C: 1
- ⊗ 17 languages have three types
M+T+P: 9 M+T+C: 8
- ⊗ *When we focus on the languages with more than one type, they begin to resemble the traditional concept of 'serializing' languages...*

2 or more SVC types

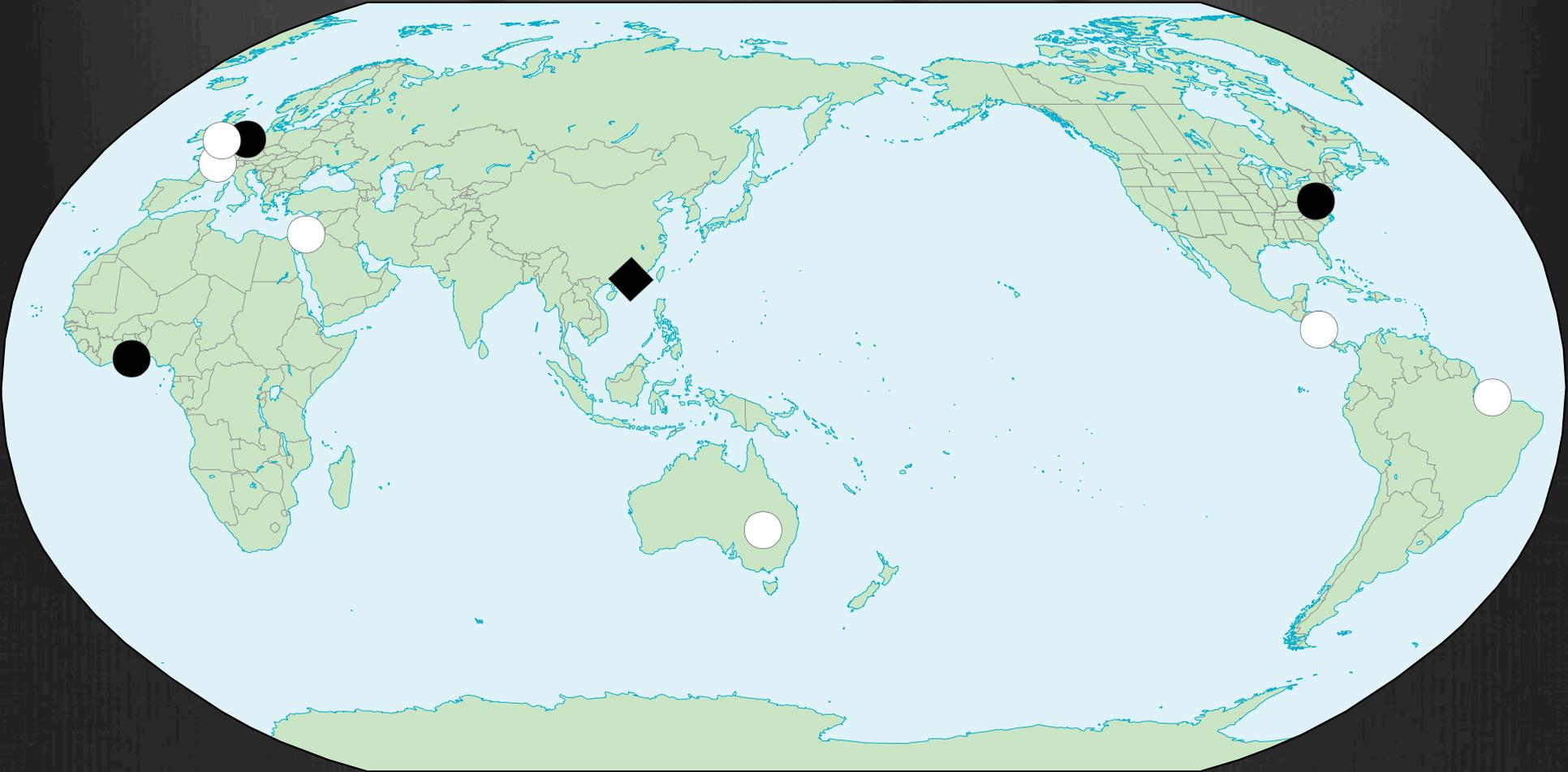


Approximation of 'serializing' languages: 2+ types (black, 61%);
small gray dots: languages from larger sample with no SVCs

Signed Languages

- ⊗ We also looked at preliminary data for signed languages
 - ⊗ SVCs widespread (found in 10/10 languages in the sample)
- ⊗ Similar semantic types found as well
 - ⊗ Motion SVCs found in all 10 (mostly directionals)
 - ⊗ In some ways atypical, e.g. complex path verbs not GO/COME
 - ⊗ TAKE SVCs found in 4
 - ⊗ Similar constructions, but defined more loosely: some languages have lexical TAKE, others have similar verbs (USE, etc.)
 - ⊗ Posture SVCs found in 1
 - ⊗ No Comparative SVCs identified in sign languages

Signed Languages



White circle: only Motion SVCs attested (6);

Black circle: Motion+TAKE (3); Diamond: Motion+TAKE+Posture (1)

Conclusions

- ❁ SVCs with similar semantics do recur in unrelated languages
- ❁ The myth of ‘serializing’ languages:
 - ❁ No semantic type is found in all languages with SVCs
 - ❁ Some languages with SVCs have none of the characteristic types
 - ❁ Traditional idea of serializing languages based on prototypes
 - ❁ Generalizations from systematic data are critical to accurate typologies!
- ❁ SVCs are a diverse class of constructions with shared features
 - ❁ Semantically, as shown here, and disagreement on definition
 - ❁ And structurally even in typical ‘serializing’ languages
(Schiller 1990, Hellan, Beermann & Andenes 2003, Foley & Van Valin 1984, *inter alia*)
 - ❁ SVCs really are *constructions* (form): equivalent semantic types for different-form multi-verb constructions (Ross forthcoming)

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