Abstract 104

Two Types of Quirky-case Subjects in Involitive Constructions in Sinhala: A Study under Theta System Theory

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Involitionality in Sinhala, as reflected in the verb morphology, usually has the subject marked with quirky (non-nominative) cases, which are either atin-marked or dative, as shown in (1) and (2).

(1) a. laməya atin kooppe biũduna. (Inman 1994: 82)
    child ATIN cup break. INV.PAST
    ‘The child (accidently) broke the cup.’

   b. kellə atin maalu ageetə pihenəwa. (Inman 1994: 100; De Silva1960:101)
    girl ATIN fish. ACC.PL very_well cook.INV
    ‘The girl can cook fish very well.’

(2) a. maṭə kawi kiyəwənəwa. (Inman 1994: 76)
    I.DAT.SG poetry recite.INV.PRES
    ‘I start reciting poetry (despite myself).’

   b. laməyaṭə anũduwa. (Inman 1994: 82)
    child:DAT cry.INV.PAST
    ‘The child cried (involuntarily).’

Common to these two types of involitive construction is the fact that both of them can alternate with the nominative-subject construction, encoding volitionality. Reversely, the volitive construction alternates with either atin- or dative construction, but not both. For instance, causative verbs, e.g., break and drown, select the atin construction but resist the dative one, whereas verbal predicates (e.g., recite and speak) and unergative predicates (e.g., cry and laugh) choose the dative construction instead of the atin one. Given this, it would be significant to syntactically discriminate between the atin construction and the dative construction. We thus explore the distinction under the Theta System Theory (Reinhart 2002; Marelj 2004) and come to the following conclusions:

(3) a. the atin construction: verb ([+m], [-c-m])(Sentient, Theme)

   b. the dative construction: verb ([c], [-c-m]) (Recipient/Benefactory, Theme)

The atin-marked subject is [+m], roughly equivalent to Sentient, and it is compatible with the [+c] feature. This can explain why atin-construction must be transitive as well as why it can convey implicit modality (e.g., potentiality). On the other hand, the [-c] feature can capture its occurrence in an intransitive construction. Semantically, the atin-marked subject can be a Cause, albeit involuntary, of an event, while the dative subject can never be a cause ([c]). Therefore, “involition” in Sinhala should be understood as either the underspecified feature of “cause” or the absence of “cause”.

Key words: atin-marked subjects, dative subjects, quirky-case subjects