

TRANSITIVITY AND VOICE IN SINHALESE

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Sinhalese is a member of the Indo-Aryan language family and is spoken by about 80 per cent of the population in Sri Lanka. We are here exclusively concerned with the spoken variety, which differs quite substantially from the written language.

In this paper we examine the syntactic distribution, and the semantic and pragmatic functions, of three basic forms of the Sinhalese verb. We shall attempt to show that in the sentences which we analyze, both case-marking and verbal-form, reflect Transitivity, as defined by Hopper and Thompson (1980), and in particular that the morphological form of the Subject NP is an indicator of different kinds and different degrees, of agenthood.

For each tense, a Sinhalese verb can in principle have two contrasting forms, A and P. In addition, it can create a causative form by a productive process of suffixation. These verb forms have in the more recent literature come to be labeled A, P and C, the labels reminiscent respectively of Active, Passive and Causative. Of these, the causative form, C, is the most straight-forward. It can be formed from practically every verb base by means of a productive morphological process which increases its valency by one. As for the A- and P-forms, the great majority of verbs have both, while a minority only have a P-form. Where both co-exist, the P-form is very much rarer than the A-form.

The morphological difference between A- and P-form is reflected in the formal structure of the entire clause. As a general rule, the A-form co-occurs with an animate subject in the Nominative Case, which is the unmarked form of the noun, whereas the P-form occurs with an inanimate subject, or with an animate subject whose case-making (Dative, Accusative or Postposition) is not primarily associated with subject function. We shall argue that the subjects of A-form are prototypical subjects having all the properties of Agents. Whereas the subjects of the P-forms are non-typical subjects and lower in agency. In fact, Gair (1970) had gone a good way towards a solution by dividing the verbal clauses of Sinhalese into two, termed Active and Impersonal, and differentiated by the systematic presence versus the systematic absence of a subject NP. Presumably he chose the term 'Impersonal' because in certain respects the clauses in question resemble impersonal constructions elsewhere, such as *me think*, *mich*