Topic-marking in Sinhala

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The topic-comment articulation is a left peripheral syntactic operation that serves a discourse function in natural language. The English construction referred to as topicalization involves the articulation in topic and comment as in (1).

(1) Your money$_i$, you should give t$_i$ to Nimal (not to Ajith)

As shown in (1), topic is a pre-posed constituent marked off separately by the 'comma intonation' and conveys old information. Some languages overtly realize topic with morphological encoding (Gungbe, Zulu, (Aboh: 2010) Japanese (Kuno:1973)), while in others it is phonologically null.

In Sinhala, topic is overtly realized in the particle nang (2).

(2) Nimal nang vibhage pass-una

       Nimal TOP   exam   pass-was

       'As for Nimal, he passed the exam'

This paper seeks to investigate the properties of the Sinhala Topic marker "nang" and suggest a structural position for it in the clause. The theoretical stand adopted in the paper is both the Minimalist Framework (Chomsky: 1995-) and the Cartographic framework (Rizzi, 1997). With respect to data, I relied on the native speaker grammatical judgments. The main conclusions in the paper are that topic occupies a distinct head position in the complementizer (C) domain as proposed by Rizzi (1997) for Italian. The absence of –e marking on the verb indicates that there is no Agree relation or feature transfer from C to a topic head, and, that the topic head does not modulate the properties of C. Nevertheless, contrastive topics indicate that a matching XP needs to be in the scope of TOP. This further indicates that TOP should constitute an independent probe. Further, the Sinhala contrastive topic marked utterance conveys a sense of incompleteness as suggested by Tomioka (2010), for Japanese and it also marks conditionality in Sinhala in addition to topic.

Key Words: Topic, Complementizer Domain, Probe