

THE NOTION OF SUBJECT AND SUBJECT POSITION IN SINHALA

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Abstract

The notion of subject in generative grammar has been defined in structural terms (Chomsky 1965, McCloskey 1997) along a number of properties. For example, the subject carries the Agent theta role, can act as a binder, takes a wide scope, subjects are either positionally and/or morphologically marked, and subjects are always nominal (McCloskey 1997). The developments in cartography have further decomposed subject properties along feature-encoded unique head positions (Pollock 1989, Cinque 1999).

Sinhala being a Subject – Object – Verb (SOV) language, Null Subject, thoroughly left-branching, many word-order variations, with Dative, Instrumental, and Locative subjects, volitive and involitive verbs, and the absence of agreement offers fertile ground for research. This paper aims to study the notion of subjecthood and the position/positions of the subject in the Sinhala clause with respect to the subject-related properties outlined above. In particular, it seeks to find answers to such questions as “Is the subject left-dislocated to Specifier of the Inflectional/Tense Phrase or does it stay in Verb Phrase (VP)? How many subject positions can be proposed for Sinhala and what are they? Can a Topic/Focus phrase host a subject? To what extent does Sinhala align with the theoretical claims made by other SOV languages in this regard?

The data for the study consist of the grammatical judgments of about 10 native speakers of Sinhala, including the researcher himself. Some of the major conclusions of the paper are that in Sinhala, the external argument moves out of VP and the motivation for this movement is Phi-feature checking and Nominative case marking. Further, it is also proposed that the Spec-positions of a number of functional heads as expounded in cartographic literature could serve as landing sites for the external argument. This is due to the morphological realization of the information structure related information such as modality, topic, and focus in Sinhala. As for the exact location of these head positions, Rizzi’s C (omplementizer) space (1997) is proposed. With respect to the typological alignment of Sinhala facts, it is shown that the conclusions regarding Sinhala are not Sinhala specific, but are supported by empirical facts from Maale, Gunbe, Lele, (Aboh 2002) and Hungarian (Kiss 2002). The study will contribute significantly to the body of empirical and theoretical literature related to the subjecthood and subject positions, notably in the absence of a well-articulated study on Sinhala in this area.

Keywords: Subject, Subject positions. Sinhala clause