Abstract 37

Subjects in Colloquial Sinhala

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In most languages, including in literary Sinhala, subject of a sentence appear in Nominative case. In colloquial Sinhala however subjects can appear in several different cases in both intransitive (I) and transitive sentences (T) as Gair (1998), Kariyakarawana (1992) and many others have observed: 1 a.

a. (I) *miniha duwanawa*
man-NOM run-PRES
PAST   'The man runs'

(T) *siri ada apata ballek (wa) dunna*
Siri-NOM today us-DAT dog-INDEF-ACC give
'Siri gave us a dog today'

b. (I) minihata divenava
man-DAT run-INVOL-PRES
'The man runs (involuntarily)'

(T) mata den aliyawa peenawa
Me-DAT now elephant-ACC see. PRES
'I see the elephant now'

c. (I) miniha-va ganagata wetevi
man-ACC river-DAT fall-OPT
'The man might fall into the river'

d. (I) ehee policiyen innawa
there police-INSTR be-(animate)
'There are police there'

(T) aanduwen eekata aadara denawa
Government-INSTR that-DAT support-PL give-PRES
'The government give support for that'

As seen above, notice nominative, dative and instrumental subjects occur with intransitive as well as transitive predicates. One other noticeable characteristic of Colloquial Sinhala is that equational sentences do occur without a copular (be) verb at all as in (2):

(2) (a) Gunapala mahatteya honda guruwarayek
Gunapala –mr-NOM good teacher-INDEF
Mr Gunapala is a good teacher'

There have been many attempts to bring these sentences under a unified analysis of syntax which explains their syntactic and semantic properties in a universal framework of phrase structure but it seem to pose serious problems to Case marking, INFL projection and Thera role assignment within a generative framework. This paper takes another look at the data under the Bio Minimalist framework that Chomsky (1995) proposes to minimise the syntactic machinery by subsuming syntactic properties under semantic and phonological cues which in essence determines the syntactic structure of the position of subjects in these clauses. In particular, we will argue that the Minimalist approach to such complex syntactico-semantic issues can reduce the burden of functional machinery and explain the learnability of non-nominative subjects in colloquial Sinhala.

Key words: bio minimalist programme, colloquial Sinhala, non-nominative subjects, syntax