

Questioning Questions and Wh-indefinites in Sinhala

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Many languages of the world such as Sinhala, Japanese, Chinese, Malayalam, Tlingit, etc make use of the same type of phrases in question and indefinite constructions (Audrey Li, 1992, Haspelmath, 1997, Hagstrom, 2001, Bruening, 2007, Jayaseelan 2005, Cable 2010, Slade 2011). When they are used in wh-questions, those phrases are referred to as wh-words or phrases and when they are used in indefinite constructions they are referred to as wh-indefinites. For example, as seen in (1), based on different types of syntactic and licencing conditions, only the clause final morpheme –e as in (1b) makes an indefinite construction (1a) different from a wh-question construction (1b) in Sinhala.

- (1) a. John monəwa-də kəæw-a. b. John monəwa-də kəæw-e.
 John what-də ate-A John what-də ate-E
 ‘John ate something.’ ‘What did John eat?’

At the same time, in many of these languages such as Sinhala, Japanese, Malayalam, the same particle used in indefinite and question constructions is also found in constructions that involve disjunction.

- (2) John bath-də maalu-də kəæw-e.
 John rice-də fish-də ate-E
 ‘Was it rice or fish that John ate?’

Thus, this paper investigates the common and distinct syntactic and semantic properties of wh-indefinite and question constructions in the Sinhala language. It attempts to show a link between wh-indefinite and wh-question constructions with respect to exhaustification of ‘the set of alternatives’ in terms of the nature of the exclusive disjunction found in both the types of constructions. It also investigates the syntactic structures of the two types of constructions with respect to different types of licensing and binding conditions and the different types of operators that serve to make them distinct types of constructions as indefinites and wh-questions. It will also study whether the same type of behaviour in the wh-indefinites and questions in relation to the ‘exclusive disjunction’ could be observed in other languages such as Japanese, Malayalam, Tlingit, etc.

Key Words: Wh-indefinites, Question Construction, Sinhala Language