

## **Finiteness and the Sinhala Facts**

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### **Introduction**

The term 'finite' derives from the Latin 'finitus' the perfective participle of the verb 'finio' 'limit, set bounds to, determine'. One of the meanings of 'finitus' is 'definite' or 'determined' in the sense 'referring to a particular person' (Nikolaeva, 2007, p.1).

This Latin basis of finiteness as a property of the verb together with the presence/absence of agreement (person and number) as its defining features has been adopted by most descriptive grammarians and European linguists. Another verbal category tense was added later with empirical evidence to support this claim. Huddleston (1988, p. 44) defines the finite verb as a verb 'limited by properties of person, number and tense'. Yet, even within the morphological criteria, controversy remains as to whether it is Tense or Agreement or both that are responsible for finiteness. The cross linguistic inadequacy of these morphological diagnostics has led many typologists to argue that finiteness does not display a clear-cut binary distinction as finite/nonfinite, it lacks universal status, but rather should be defined on a language particular basis (Comrie, 1976, Noonan, 1985). Trask (1993) captures the distributional criteria as 'independent clausehood', which is based on the assumption that nonfinite verbs occur exclusively or predominantly in dependent contexts (Trask, 1993, pp. 103–4). This contributes to the widespread view that only finite verbs are able to form an independent utterance.

Gair, J.W. (1998, pp.137-139) questions with respect to Sinhala the relevance of the term finiteness since both tense and agreement do not show a clear-cut binary distinction as finite/ nonfinite. He examines both phonologically realized and unrealized subjects, and control in infinitives. Kariyakarawana, S.M. (1998, pp.31-32) concludes that though Sinhala verbs do not agree with their subjects, there are other forms of agreement such as modal agreement, animacy agreement, focus agreement etc. Henadeerage (2002, pp.27-28) observes that there is no Person-Number-Gender (Phi) agreement in colloquial Sinhala. He further notes that despite Sinhala displaying a rich case marking system, still, case marking on arguments is based on the semantic relations and therefore, they do not show any evidence for grammatical relations.

### **Objectives**

The purpose of the present paper is to examine the finiteness phenomenon in Sinhala<sup>3</sup> language and to locate Sinhala finiteness facts in the typology of finiteness. In this

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<sup>3</sup> Indo-Aryan, Spoken in Sri Lanka, pro-drop, diglossic

endeavor, the paper will attempt to answer such questions as: (1) How is finiteness manifested in colloquial Sinhala? (2) What are its defining features? (3) Is finiteness a purely morphological property indicated on the verb or a syntactic property exclusive to certain syntactic domains? (4) To what extent do the Sinhala finiteness facts correlate with existing typologies of finiteness and thus provide empirical validity for such typologies?

### **Methodology**

Data for the present study consisted of the grammatical judgments of native speakers of Sinhala. Although the researcher himself is a native speaker of Sinhala, it was still necessary to rely on a rather larger corpus. Hence, a sample of 10 native speakers representing different age groups was selected. This included 03 children aged between 8-13, and 6 adults in the age group of 30-60. The researcher too was considered as a member of the sample. About 30 sentences were presented to them with different case marking, tense marking, and with modal particle “puluwan” with both Nominative and Dative subjects. This was necessary in order to judge tense, agreement, and independent clausehood of the sentences, in addition to testing their accuracy.

### **Empirical Evidence**

What the foregoing discussion unravels is that Tense, Agreement, and Independent Clausehood are the hallmarks of finiteness. The following section examines both the morphological and syntactic diagnostics of finiteness with respect to Sinhala.

### **Agreement, Tense and Independent Clausehood in Sinhala**

#### **Agreement**

The verb does not inflect for number/gender agreement in Spoken Sinhala (1).

- 1) Mama / api / Nimal nithrama poth kiyawanava  
I - Nom / we-Nom / Nimal - Nom always books read  
I / we / Nimal always read books

In the absence of agreement, now we are left with the other two diagnostics, namely, Tense and independent clausehood. The following section examines these with respect to data from Spoken Sinhala.

#### **Tense and Independent Clause Hood**

Sinhala verbs inflect for present, past, and the participle, which Gair (1998, p.119) describes as the three themes formed from the verb stem. The first two forms occur in independent sentences thereby making tense the most likely candidate for Finiteness (2-3).

- 2) Nimal kaareka soodana-va  
Nimal - Nom car-def wash (Prs)  
'Nimal is washing the car

- 3) Nimal kaareka seeduwa  
Nimal-Nom car-def wash (Pst)  
'Nimal washed the car'

## Problems

### Case Marking, Infinitives, and the Participle

It is generally observed that the finite verbs do not occur in case marked positions or are not assigned case. However, Sinhala verbs, while adhering to this principle, also reveal otherwise. One particular instance is the sentences with the postposition *passe* (after) which assigns dative case to its object (4).

- 4) Api bath kaeva - tapassekirikaeva.  
We - Nom rice eat - Dat after curd eat - Pst  
'After we ate rice, we ate curd'

Also the non-verbal predicator *starahai* (angry) and *kanagaatui* (sad) assign Dative case to their objects. They also take Dative marked tensed verbs (5-6).

- 5) Mama [Nimalgiya] - ta tharahai  
I - Nom Nimal - Nom go - Pst - Dat angry  
'I am angry that Nimal went'
- 6) Mata [eyamaeruna]-ta kanagaatui  
I - Dat he - Nom die - Pst - Dat sad  
'I am sad that he died'

As can be seen in the examples, the embedded sentences are finite, they have lexical subjects (square bracketed excluding the case marker for convenience) and the matrix verbs assign Nominative and Dative cases to the matrix subjects respectively.

The *-la* suffix marks the perfective aspect in Sinhala and occurs as a conjunctive participle (7). But more importantly, it also occurs in finite contexts in independent sentences (8).

- 7) Nimal Kolamba gihillaaendumgattha.  
Nimal - Nom Colombo - Loc go - Perf clothes bought  
'Nimal went to Colombo and bought clothes'  
'Having gone to Colombo, Nimal bought clothes'
- 8) Nimal ada gamee gihilla  
Nimal - Nom today village - Loc go - Perf  
'Nimal has gone to his village today'

The infinitive form of the Sinhala verb is formed by suffixing - nna and it does not occur in finite independent sentences<sup>4</sup>. However, it occurs with both lexical subjects and Null subjects in embedded contexts as in 9-10.

9) Nimal ennaissella mama vaedaivarakara

Nimal - Nom come - Inf I - Nom work finish do-Pst

I finished the work before Nimal came

10) Bath kannaissella ataseeduwa

I - Nom rice eat - Infbefore hand wash - Pst

I washed hands before eating rice'

### The Syntactic Expression of Finiteness

The syntactic expression of finiteness, as treated in Principles and Parameters framework (P & P) is that finiteness is an abstract clausal category that is only secondarily reflected on the verb. Thus, finiteness is a clausal Head represented by INFL which is positively/negatively specified for Tense or Agreement. This has consequences in other syntactic domains such as Case and subejcthood- where the subject of finite clauses receives Nominative case from finite INFL.

It was pointed out in the previous discussion that the Finite verb can occur in case-marked positions as well as case-marked in Spoken Sinhala. If we treat finiteness as an abstract clausal Head as in P & P, then once again Sinhala defies neat conclusions. In the absence of Agreement features on INFL, the question arises whether the INFL in Sinhala is weak- i.e. not positively specified for Agreement? This is a valid question to raise since according to P & P framework, INFL assigns nominative case to Spec IP, the external argument. But we have already noticed that the postposition *passe* (after) assigns different cases to its object, and non-verbal predicators like *kanagaatui*, (sad) and *tharagai* (angry) also assign case to their subjects. Consequently, differently case-marked subjects can occur in Sinhala. Therefore, as the Sinhala data show, this finite-tense-agreement correlation does not match well with the syntactic requirement of Nominative subject.

Also, Sinhala facts show that, among other things, lexical properties of the predicate determine the case of the external argument. For example, whereas *vaetuna* (fell) requires an Accusative subject, *therenava* (understand) takes a Dative subject.

Further, the occurrence of a Nominative subject with an infinitive verb can be illustrated with the modal *puluwan* (can). As shown below, *puluwan* occurs with embedded clauses yielding two interpretations, and two structures (11-14) one with a controlled empty category (11-12) and the other with a lexical subject (13-14).

11) Nimal - ta natannapuluwan

Nimal - Dat dance can

Nimal can dance (ability)

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<sup>4</sup> Except in imperatives

12) Nimal - ta<sub>i</sub> [inatanna] puluwan

Nimal - Dat dance can

Nimal can dance

13) Nimalnatannapuluwan

Nimal - Nom dance can

Nimal might dance (possibility)

14) [Nimal natanna] puluwan

Nimal - Nom dance can

Nimal might dance

As shown in (14) the possibility modal takes a sentential complement and this can be further justified with the similar (15).

15) [Nimal heta gaalle indalaenna]puluwan

Nimal - Nom tomorrow Galle - Loc from come - Inf might

Nimal might come from Galle tomorrow.

### Findings and Conclusion

With respect to the determining factors of Finiteness, which are Tense, Agreement and Independent clausehood as used in literature to discuss this feature in languages of the world, Sinhala data show a rather sketchy picture as indicated above. It lacks subject-verb agreement totally whereas Tense, the most likely candidate to mark finiteness is also not a firm diagnostic. Independent clausehood too behaves similarly. Syntactic expression of Finiteness also poses problems for a clear finite-nonfinite distinction. Hence, typologically, on the one hand Sinhala behaves like Japanese, which too lacks Phi-agreement, while on the other, behaves like European Portuguese where infinitives have overt subjects.

**Keywords:** Agreement; Infinitive; Finiteness; Sinhala; Tense

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