

Anticausatives in Sinhala: A View To The Middle

Several recent theories of causative/inchoative alternations have proposed an anticausativize analysis wherein inchoatives are derived from their corresponding causatives via some operation that eliminates the causer argument from a verb's argument structure, provided the causer is semantically unspecified for agentivity (Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1995, Koontz-Garboden 2009). Anticausative morphology in turn is often more broadly attested as a marker of so-called "middle voice", including most canonically inherently reflexive predicates such as grooming or body care verbs (Kemmer 1993), but also certain classes of passives and also so-called "middle constructions" (*This car sells easily*; Ackema and Schoorlemmer 1994), among numerous others. Kemmer (1993) offers one of the most expansive unified semantic analyses of middle voice as indicating "low elaboration of events", i.e. that aspects of the event are not fully elaborated in some way. The core case is low individuation of the agent and patient, explaining why reflexive morphology is one of the most common types of middle markers attested cross-linguistically.

However, Colloquial Sinhala represents an unusual puzzle for such an approach, since anticausatives are overtly indicated by involitive mood on the verb rather than a marker of reflexivization (or any detransitivization). Second, the difference between anticausatives and passives (such as they exist) is indicated among involitive forms by nominative/accusative case alternation for the subject, with both still being syntactically inchoative. Third, inherent reflexives and middle constructions are predominantly marked by light verb constructions, quite unlike the patterns for the other middles. These data collectively suggest that middles may not be a truly unified phenomenon.

I present joint work with Cala Zubair (SUNY Buffalo) on the underpinnings of middles in Sinhala and suggest they do share a unified core, albeit obscured by peculiarities of Sinhala's verbal morphological system, building on the analysis of Sinhala anticausatives of Beavers and Zubair (2013). I first propose that in Sinhala the volitive vs. involitive mood contrast reflects a grammaticalized way of indicating agentive subjects vs. subjects unspecified for agentivity. I then argue that the operation that derives anticausatives — "causer suppression", which removes a verb's causer subject syntactically but leaves it as part of the verb's truth conditional content — derives a verb type whose subject cannot be resolved as a grammatical agent. Thus anticausative roots are unable to be inflected for volitive mood, leaving involitive mood as the only option. Involitive morphology is therefore not itself a marker of anticausativization, but is instead epiphenomenal. The distinction between canonical vs. passive-type anticausatives in Sinhala arise from how the suppressed causer is interpreted: as coreferential with the expressed patient (canonical anticausative, as per Koontz-Garboden 2009) or existentially bound (passive, as per Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1995), thus suggesting that the semantics of anticausatives may be more varied than prior studies suggest

This analysis in turn offers some insights into inherent reflexives and middle constructions in Sinhala. Although Beavers and Udayana (2015) show (focusing on Indonesian) that a causer suppression analysis can be extended to cover these middles in other languages — with inherent reflexives patterning with anticausatives as reflexive and middle constructions with passives as existential-binding — the interaction of causer suppression with the (in)volitive mood in Sinhala plus grammaticalized agentivity with certain verbs conspire to prevent causer suppression from directly deriving these other two types of middles on their canonical readings. Light verb constructions instead serve as a way around the prohibition. Thus although middles are not wholly unified in Sinhala, the disunity is suggestive of a broader connection between the different subtypes. It also suggests that the phenomenon may play out differently in different languages due to idiosyncrasies of a given language, deriving a richer typology of possible middle markers than typically assumed.

References

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