Passive Use in Modern Sinhala

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Considered as part of performance, language use has generally been regarded as a factor outside the domain of theoretical linguistics (within the Chomskyan paradigm), whose goal is the description of linguistic competence. This paper looks at the Passive Voice and its use in modern Sinhala and presents some evidence from passive use that may be of heuristic significance to linguistic theory. Two assumptions, by no means novel, underlie the observations made in this paper. One is that cross-linguistic evidence has a bearing on theoretical issues. The other is that evidence from linguistic performance contributes to the formulation of linguistic descriptions of greater adequacy.

Modern Sinhala[1] is clearly diglossic, revealing considerable syntactic, morphophonemic, and lexical distinctions between the colloquial and literary levels.

At the literary level, the language preserves, though not intact, the older, more elaborate, syntactic and phonological systems. Contrastively, colloquial Sinhala reflects the drift of the language, generally towards simplification, in its current syntax and phonology.

One significant syntactic distinction between the two levels is the absence of the Passive construction and, consequently, the structural relationship between Active and Passive Voice at the

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[1] Sinhala is an Indic language spoken in the Republic of Sri Lanka.

colloquial level.

The literary Passive can be adequately described in trans-formational terms. Syntactically and semantically there is an intuitively clear relationship between these and their Active counterparts; e.g. [2]

(1)   a.   səbəlu[3]   saturan   wænəsu:hə

            soldiers- enemy-   destroy-pt-
            PL+Nom   PL-Acc   3p-pl-Active

           'The soldiers destroyed the enemy'

      b.   səbəl-un wisin   saturo   wanəsənu   læbu:hə

            soldiers- by   enemy-PL destroy-Pcpl get-pt-
            Pl-Acc   3p-pl
                                P a s s i v e

           'The enemy was destroyed by the soldiers'

These structures can be generated and related to each other through a transformational rule such as (2).

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[2]

Pl = Plural	Nom = Nominative
Acc = Accusative	Pt = Past tense
3p = Third person	Pcpl = Participle
tns = Tense	p = Person
n = Number	g = Gender
loc = Locative	pres = Present tense
sg = Singular	Indef = Indefinite
Int = Interrogative	voc = Vocative
ger = Gerund	Dat = Dative
Msc = Masculine	Ins = Instrumental

[3] Since many morphemes are portmanteau in native and numerous morphophonemic changes underlie the overt forms no attempt has been made to indicate morpheme boundaries.

(2) SD $\begin{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} NP_{1Nom} \end{bmatrix} & \begin{bmatrix} & \begin{bmatrix} NP_{2Acc} \end{bmatrix} & \begin{bmatrix} V_{Active} \end{bmatrix} & \end{bmatrix} \end{bmatrix} \end{bmatrix}$ $\Longrightarrow$
S   VP   VP S

SC $\begin{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} NP \ wisin \\ 1Acc \end{bmatrix} & \begin{bmatrix} & \begin{bmatrix} NP_{2Nom} \end{bmatrix} & \begin{bmatrix} V_{Passive} \end{bmatrix} & \end{bmatrix} \end{bmatrix} \end{bmatrix}$
S   VP   VP S

This transformation applied to a phrase marker that is isomorphic with those that underlie Active structures produces a systematic change of voice. It alters the deep structure grammatical relations that existed between subject, verb and other NPs. The change of voice is morphologically realized in the passivized verbal construction (Pcpl + get + tns-p-n-g), and the altered case relations reflect the switch in grammatical relations. The Agentive postposition *wisin* 'by' marks Agent.

Although no NP reordering is involved in the Passive Transformation in Sinhala, this rule is comparable with (3) below, which is the standard TG Passive Transformation.

(3) SD $\begin{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} NP_1 \end{bmatrix} & \begin{bmatrix} & [V] & \begin{bmatrix} NP_2 \end{bmatrix} & \end{bmatrix} \end{bmatrix} \end{bmatrix}$ $\Longrightarrow$
S   VP   VP S

SC $\begin{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} NP_2 \end{bmatrix} & \begin{bmatrix} & [V+be+en] & \begin{bmatrix} & by \ NP_1 & \end{bmatrix} & \end{bmatrix} & \end{bmatrix} \end{bmatrix}$
S   VP   PP   PP VP S

The basic similarity of the two transformation rules, (2) and (3), for Sinhala and English respectively, appears to support the cross-linguistic applicability of a passive transformation.

Yet the Passive rule (2), and the structures it generates, such as (1b), are totally absent at the colloquial level in Sinhala.

At this level, Active structures alone suffice in the communicative task. Allowing for surface structure distinctions, the structure (1a) would be realized on colloquial Sinhala as the

structure in (4) below:

(4)   sebəlu   haturan-(wə)[4] wænəsuwa

      soldiers- enemy-pl-Acc   destroy-pt-
      pl- Nom   Active

       'The soldiers destroyed the enemy.'

Word order is relatively free in both colloquial and literary
Sinhala and passivizing is not necessary for reasons of focus,
emphasis or topicalization as has been claimed for English Passive
use.

It must be noted that even in literary use the Passive struc-
tures are extremely low in frequency of occurrence. Passive use
becomes obligatory at the literary level only in the pragmatic con-
text when the agent is unknown or obvious from the context. In such
a context, literary Sinhala uses a truncated Passive structure.

(5)   dæn kadukərəye: boho: te: wawənu læbe:

      now hillside-   much   tea- grow- get-pres
           loc   Nom pcpl   3p-sg

                              ————————————————

                           P   a   s   s   i   v   e

       'Nowadays much tea is grown in the hills.'

In such contexts colloquial Sinhala uses a truncated Active
form:

(6)   dæn kadukəre: hug̃ak   te: wawənəwa

      now hillside- much-   tea- grow-pres
           loc   indef   Nom

                           ————————————

                          A   c   t   i   v   e

       'Nowadays much tea is grown in the hills.'

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[4] /wə/ = Accusative (Patient) marker in colloquial Sinhala.

In the structures (5) and (6) above, though superficially deleted, an Agent—indefinite, unknown, or understood—is perceived as being actively involved in the action specified by the verb. This accounts for the synonymy between these two structures despite the fact that syntactically they are different.

Truncated Actives and Passives are synonymous and form paraphrase sets. However, they are mutually exclusive at the two levels. Surface structure constraints, such as verbal concord requiring overt subjects, rule out truncated Actives at the literary level. This constraint is absent at the colloquial level, where the availability of the truncated Active structures makes the equivalent Passives redundant.

It is interesting to note that even in English, the Passive structures have been regarded as 'optional stylistic variants or embellishments that are a linguistic luxury' (Green 1966). Sledd (1959) regards them as 'devices that mark one as educated' and Evans and Evans (1957) consider the choice of the Passive voice to be a 'stylistic determination to be made for the sake of effective prose.'

These and many similar statements are based on the view that the Passive structures are redundant in use, and that they are more complex stylistic variants of Active structures in sophisticated use. Evidence from Passive use in Sinhala clearly supports this view.

The tenability of such a view is further enhanced by the results of an investigation by Goldman-Eisler (1968) into the spontaneous use of the Passive voice. Their study of the occurrence of the Passive voice in the speech of a cross-section of English speakers, from academics to schizophrenics, has shown that the Passive voice occurred in spontaneous speech only about 7 - 10% of

the time (compared to 80% for the Active voice). They also found
that the use of the Passive voice decreased relative to diminishing
intellectual and education levels. The Passive voice is much higher
in frequency of occurrence in writing and seems to increase in fre-
quency relative to the degree of formality of the text (Prideaux,
1980).

Viewed as optional, more complex variants of the Active struc-
tures, the low frequency of occurrence (or the total absence, as
in colloquial Sinhala) of Passive structures is not surprising.
The full and truncated Passive structures discussed so far clearly
parallel Active structures in being Agentive, i.e. they entail an
Agent, understood or unknown or overtly expressed, DOING the action
specified by the verb.

Note, however, the structures in (7) a, b, and c, below.
Despite the surface similarity, only (7a1) is unambiguously agentive
and relatable to a structure like (7a2). (7b1) is ambiguous as
to Agency—were they trapped accidently or by someone as in (7b2)?
The structure (7c1) implies no agency and has no relatable Active
counterpart.

(7) a 1. Ted was mugged in the street.

     a 2. Somebody mugged Ted in the street.

     b 1. They were trapped in the quagmire.

     b 2. Somebody trapped them in the quagmire.

     c 1. I was caught in the turmoil.

     c 2. ?Somebody caught me in the turmoil.

It seems that a distinction between Agentive Passives, full
and truncated, which entail a relationship with Active structures,
and Agentless Impersonal Passives, which entail no such relation-
ship, is relevant to the question of Passive use. Speakers
appear to make the distinction systematically, for a significant

disclosure of the Goldman-Eisler report was the fact that the
Passive, when it did occur in spontaneous speech, was generally
the Agentless Impersonal subset. It is also interesting that many
languages of the world have only Impersonal Passives.

The indications are that it is the Agentive Passives which
are truly redundant in spontaneous use. This is definitely the
case in Sinhala. Agentless Impersonal structures relating to events
are obligatory in the communicative task.

The semantic distinction between *DOING* (ACTION) and *HAPPENING*
(PROCESS)[5] can be used as a valid criterion for distinguishing Agen-
tive and Agentless Passives. This distinction is not overtly mani-
fest in English, where the passivized verbal form and the 'by-
Agentive' phrase are both ambiguous as to Agency. Choices made in
language use, however, indicate the validity of this criterion.

In Sinhala the distinction between ACTIONS and PROCESS is per-
vasive and is morphologically marked by stem alternation in the verbs,
e.g.

(8) ACTION   PROCESS
     kapa   kæpe   'cut'
     mara   mære   'kill'
     wawa   wæwe   'grow'
     ari   ære   'open'
     adi   æde   'pull'

ACTION verbs entail the semantic notion of DO while PROCESS
verbs entail that of HAPPEN. In certain verbal derivatives, which
are functionally similar to ACTION and PROCESS verbs, the verb stems

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[5] The terms ACTION and PROCESS are borrowed from Chafe (1970).
I have, however, disregarded, in the limited use in this paper,
the distinction in terminology that Chafe makes between ACTION——
Intransitive Active, and ACTION PROCESS——Transitive Active classes.

/kərə/ 'do' and /we/ 'happen' are overtly evident as the second member of the compound.

(9)   ACTION   PROCESS
          wina:səkərə   wina:səwe   'destroy'
          kaḍəkərə   kaḍəwə   'break'
          poliškərə   polišwe   'polish'
          wiwurtəkərə   wiwurtəwe   'open'

Verb stems that form paraphrase sets with the compound derivatives are also not uncommom in the language. Note the synonymy between the examples in (9) and (10).

(10)   ACTION   PROCESS
          wanəsa   wænəse   'destroy'
          kaḍa   kæḍe   'break'
          madi   mæde   'polish'
          ari   ære   'open'

The psychological reality of the DO/HAPPEN dichotomy and the pivotal nature of the (two classes of) verbs exemplifying this dichotomy is evident in the following dialogue:

(11) mokə-də   laməy-o   me: gaha-∅   kæpuwe
      what-Int   child-voc this tree-Acc   cut-pt-ger
           'Why did you cut this tree, child?'
      ane: no:na   kæpuwa   nemei,   kæpuna
      oh   lady-voc   cut-ACTION   not   cut-PROCESS
           'Oh lady, it was not cut, it got cut.'
      Literally, 'lady, cutting was not done, cutting happened'

In Sinhala the verb is selectionally dominant and is central to syntax. The syntactic and semantic structures specified by the two classes of verbs, ACTION and PROCESS, may be schematized as in

(11a) and (b) below.

(11)a.
$$\left[\begin{array}{ccc} NP_{1Nom} & NP_{2Acc/Dat} & V_{ACTION} \\ Agt & Pat/Exp & \end{array} \right]$$

b.
$$\left[\begin{array}{cc} NP_{1Nom/Dat} & V_{PROCESS} \\ Acc & \\ Pat/Exp & \end{array} \right]$$

NPs in non-nuclear relationships with the verb, such as those of location, instrument, etc., are ignored in the highly simplified schema in (11a) and (b).

It seems relevant to point out that the structure (11a) specified by ACTION verbs is what undergoes the Passive Transformation (2).

(12)a. kolla   gasə   kapuwe:yə

        boy-NP$_1$ tree-NP$_2$ cut-pt-3p-sg-Msc-ACTION

        'The boy cut (down) the tree.'

b. kolla   wisin   gasə   kapənə   ladi

     boy-NP$_1$ by   tree-NP$_2$ cut-pcpl get-pres-3p-sg

                              P A S S I V E

        'The tree was cut (down) by the boy.'

The Impersonal Agentless structures specified by PROCESS verbs, (11b), do not passivize since they do not meet the structural description.

(13) a. gaha   kæpuna

          tree-NP_1 cut-pt-PROCESS

          'The tree was cut (down)'

There are, however, structures like (13b) below which appear to be passivized.

(13) b. kolla atin   gaha   kæpuna

          boy   hand-Ins tree-NP_1 cut-pt-PROCESS

          'The tree was cut (down) by the boy (accidently).'

But this is not the case. No change of grammatical relations has taken place in this structure relative to the PROCESS structure (13a). The NP *atin* phrase, when used, indicates an animate NP causally but unwittingly involved in an event or happening. In this sense it is not Agentive but instrumental. The postposition *atin* clearly indicates lack of volition or intent on the part of the the participant whereas the postposition *wisin* in the literary Passive structures indicate volitive active participation in an ACTION. The literary Passive is merely a syntactic variation of the Active structures.

The description in this paper is of necessity incomplete and ignores many sub-classifications and irregularities within the two verb classes. Its main purpose is to demonstrate the fact that Sinhala exemplifies the existence of two types of Passive structures which may be called syntactic or Agentive and semantic or Agentless. The former are totally absent at the colloquial level and occur rather infrequently in the literary language.

The Agentive Passives appear to be adequately generated and described transformationally, Rule (2). The Agentless Passives on the other hand are more basic and are best accounted for lexically as in (11b).

Some grammarians like Kumaranatunga do not recognize the
literary Passives as true Passive structures since they are based
on Active participles and relate to ACTIONS. The verbs called
PROCESS in this paper are considered to be the true Passive forms.

The recent origin[6] of the literary Passives, their marginal
nature and their limited, sophisticated use, reveal them to be
truly 'optional stylistic variants or a linguistic luxury.' The
Impersonal Agentless Structures called PROCESS in this paper are
more basic and widespread in both literary and colloquial use.
We saw a similar division of labour, so to speak, between the
Agentive and Agentless Passives in English too, though not to the
same extent as in Sinhala.

The evidence from Sinhala supports separate analyses for these
two types of 'Passives'. The semantic distinction between ACTIONS
and PROCESSES, i.e. between DOING and HAPPENING, was seen as a
useful criterion for determining the two 'Passive' types. Is this
criterion language-specific, or can it be extended to cross-lin-
guistic analyses? This seems to me to be an interesting question
and worthy of further investigation.

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[6] The Passive construction in literary use seems to be an 11th
or 12th century innovation (T. Somananda 1962).

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