

Stability and Change in Sinhala Verbal Constructions

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This study explores the historical evolution of light verbs [LVs] in Sinhala, focusing particularly on *la* (“put/place”) and *pa* (“show”), with a concern for the broader implications of diachrony of light verb constructions in Indo-Aryan [IA] languages, and aspects of their stability and change over time (see Hook 1991, 1993; Butt&Lahiri 2002, 2013; Butt 2010; Slade 2013, 2016, 2020, 2021). Sinhala provides an excellent opportunity (a window from the 8th-c. to the present day) to observe historical changes, particularly the transition from semantically active light verbs to auxiliary-like grammatical markers, as well as demonstrating features of long-term stability in LV systems.

As in other IA languages, V-V [verb-verb] LV constructions in Sinhala (both Old and Modern) involve the collocation of a V1 in an “absolutive” form (where the “absolutive” elsewhere functions as a conjunctive participle, usually in the sense of “having X’ed”) with a V2 consisting of a “light verb” use of a verb which elsewhere occurs with full verb uses, e.g. Mod. Sinh. *yannava*, which as a full verb means “go”, and as a LV contributes to the V1 an intensive/completive sense (e.g., *tē pōcciyā biñduna* “the tea pot broke” vs. *tē pōcciyā biñdila giya* “the tea pot busted all up”, where *biñdila* occurs in the “absolutive” and outside of V-V constructions means “having broken”).

In the Old Sinhala of the Sihigiri Graffiti [8th-10th c.], *la* and *pa* functioned as active light verbs within V-V constructions, contributing aspectual/Aktionsart senses often emphasizing completion (Paranavitana 1956; Gunasekara 1891; Karunathilake 2020). Paranavitana (1956) & Slade (2024) argue that the modern Sinh. absolutive *-la* and impolite imperative marker *-pa* represent reanalyses of earlier LV collocations with *la* and *pa*. Here we offer further evidence attesting to the reanalysis of *la*, but point out complications for the origin of the imperative-marking *-pa*.

In the Sihigiri Graffiti, *la* is found as a full verb (*ran-vanu nuyun layi* “the golden-colored one puts/places her eyes”); as well as in a LV usage, contributing a completive/intensive sense to the main verb) (*sita bændæ lannā seyi* “as if to hold fast my mind”, lit. “bind and place”); and already in Old Sinhala there are constructions where *la-* appears in collocation with another verb in the absolutive form, and is itself in an absolutive form (which sometimes looks like the ‘bare stem’ form *la*), where it plausibly could already have been re-analysed as a marker of the absolutive, but it could also still potentially be a light verb in these case, just one that happens to be in an absolutive form. Since *la* as a LV in Old Sinhala seems to contribute a completive or intensive sense, its LV contribution may have been missed by speakers in these conjunctive participle constructions (which, when interpreted with a ‘past’ sort of reading, may make the ‘completive’ contribution of the LV harder to distinguish) and *la* in these constructions thus began to be re-analysable as a grammatical marker of the absolutive/conj. participle.

As Sinhala progressed into the Middle period (~10th–15th c.), *la* continues to exhibit use as a LV (e.g., *kavuru nam hæki veti vaṇā liya* (“Who indeed can praise?” *Kusa Jathaka Kāvya*)), and more frequently appears where its role seems to be that of a pure grammatical marker of the absolutive: in works such as *Sandeshā Kāvya* and prose texts such as *Amavatura*,

la increasingly appears as a marker of the absolutive (e.g., *nuvaradora daṁbaatta hiṅḍuvā-lā ehi siṭi minisunaṭa kiyā-lā eṭuḷunuvara vanha* “having placed the Damba branch at the city gate, having told the people who were there, they entered the inner city”, Amavatura). While *la* is well established as the usual marker of the absolutive in modern Sinhala, the old (*la*-less) absolutive form, though less easily distinguishable due to morphophonological changes, still appears in modern literary Sinhala, primarily in more formal contexts, and even in modern colloquial Sinhala in formations with the LV *gan-* (see further below).

In Old Sinhala *pa-* (“show”) originally functioned as a full verb, carrying its basic meaning of “to show” or “to display,” as evidenced in Sigiri Graffiti (*daha pāema hekita-t*, “though it is possible to show anger”). As Sinhala evolved, *pa* underwent a semantic shift and began to be used as a light verb as seen in Middle Sinhala texts like Pūjāvāliya (*kaṭa dalvā pā-lū* “opened [his] mouth wide”), where *pā* (< *pa* “show”) and *lū* (< *la*) both function here as a light verbs. A significant development is observed earlier in the Sigiri Graffiti, where a LV use of *pa* appears in the imperative form *pan* (*selen eḷa-pan siṭa taṭa*, “By deceitful means, drive down (his) mind to you”). Despite this early occurrence in Old Sinhala, the use of *pan* in the imperative remains relatively rare in Middle Sinhala texts, though possibly more prevalent in colloquial or regional dialects. Further complicating this development, Fenger&Weisser (2022) and Geiger (1938) suggest that the imperative *pan* may have derived from the verb root **piyan* (“to close”), which appears to occur in other imperative formations (see Geiger 1916): under this account the earlier LV uses of *pa-* (and indeed *pa-* itself) would be irrelevant to the impolite imperative *-pa* morpheme.

In contrast to the spotty attestation of *pa-* as a LV, *gan-* (“take”) has frequent LV uses from Old Sinhala onwards, contributing a self-directed (sometimes self-beneficial) sense (*nāga gan Sihigiri*, “ascend Sihigiri yourself”, lit. “having risen, take Sihigiri”), which use persists into the modern period, where Modern Sinhala LV collocations with *gan-* also even maintain the old (non-*la*-marked) absolutive form of the V1 (*gunapāla kāmaka hadā gatta* “G. made himself a meal”), in contrast to other LV constructions which typically employ the “new” *la*-marked absolutive for the V1 (e.g., Mod. Sinh. LV *de-* “give”: *gunapāla mahatteyaṭa kāmaka hadāla dunna* “G. made the boss a meal”).

In Modern Sinhala, while the full verb counterparts of *la-* and *pa-* (*lanava* for “put/place” and *pānava* for “show”) persist, they no longer function as productive LVs. In the case of *la*, we see a clear picture of a LV where particular uses of V-V collocations where *la* as the V2 itself appears in absolutive form (which, due to morphophonological change, is often form-identical to the bare stem) were ripe for re-analysis as grammatical markers of the absolutive/conjunctive participle itself (where again morphophonological change rendered the old absolutive form more opaque and difficult to distinguish from other forms).

While *la* seems to persist to display LV uses after the point at which some LV uses of *la* have been re-analysed as grammatical markers of absolutive participles, its use as a LV declines, and another verb with the full-verb sense of “put/place” begins to appear as in LV in V-V collocations: *dā/dama* [so the V-V *biṅḍa lanava* > *biṅḍa damanava* “to break”]. By the modern period *dama-* is well-established as a LV and an early LV example appears in the Pūjāvāliya (13th-c.): *jaṭā maṅḍulu kapādamā budun dāka baṇa asā* (“having cut off

matted hair, seeing the Buddha, and listening to the sermon”; *kapā-damā* lit. “having cut, having put”, with the V-V sense of “having cut off”).

Taken together, the data examined here illustrate the potential of both change and stability in LV systems. In Mod. Sinh. *gan-* as a LV makes much the same semantic contribution as in the 8th-c., and even has resisted morphological reformation in that it (unlike e.g. *de-* “give”) continues to select the “old” absolutive form for its V1 collocate. *Pa-* has long since disappeared as a productive LV (and may be implicated in the impolite imperative formations with *-pa* of Mod. Sinh.), as has *la-*, where the “new” absolutive forms in *-la* derive from re-analyses of particular types of earlier LV constructions with *la-*. At the same time, the overall system seems to have “repaired” itself through the recruitment of another verb meaning “put/place” (*da-/dama-*, attested in full verb use since the 8th-c.) as a LV with not dissimilar functions to that displayed by earlier LV uses of *la-*.

Butt&Lahiri (2002, 2013) emphasise the tight connection between LVs and their full verb counterparts—suggesting that light verbs do not undergo change independent of that experienced by the full verb, and point to features attesting to the stability of LV systems over time, but the claim of the inability of light verbs to undergo independent change has been questioned (e.g., Hook & Pardeshi 2005, Slade 2013). Evidence from Sinhala speaks to surprising persistence of LVs and resistance to change overall, but also shows evidence of LV forms arising, changing in frequency, disappearing, or even being reanalysed as auxiliaries, without equivalent change to their full verb counterparts.

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