

Anticausatives in Sinhala: involitivity and causer suppression

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Abstract Many recent theories of causative/inchoative alternations adopt an anticausativization analysis, wherein the inchoative is derived from the causative 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; Chierchia 2004; Koontz-Garboden 2009). We explore the properties of such an analysis for causative/inchoative alternations in Colloquial Sinhala, which are overtly indicated via a volitive/involitive stem contrast on the verb. We argue that the alternation arises from a causer suppression operation that deletes the causer syntactically but preserves it semantically, albeit formally marking it as unresolvable for agentivity. This prevents the verb from occurring in certain contexts requiring agentivity of a syntactically active argument, including the volitive stem, although such a reading may be derived pragmatically. The patient in turn shows a case alternation that we argue reflects two ways the suppressed causer can be interpreted—via reflexivization or existential binding. These data, we argue, support an anticausative analysis as elimination of causers unspecified for agentivity. They also expand the typology of ways agentivity is encoded and left unspecified, how causer elimination can occur, and what types of overt morphology can indicate the alternation.

Keywords Lexical semantics · Anticausatives · Causative/inchoative alternations · Reflexives · Agentivity · Volitionality · Sinhala

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