

The Subtractive Plural Morpheme in Sinhala

Plural marking is considered a prime example for the principle of constructional iconicity (Mayerthaler 1988), which is accepted as the cause of some well-known universals by different linguistic schools (Haiman 1985, Newmeyer 1998). This talk presents the subtractive plural morpheme used for Sinhala inanimates which consistently violates this principle. Subtractive plural marking has not been found in other languages so far.

Sinhala inanimates are divided into six classes. Five of them use a subtractive, counter-iconic morpheme for plural marking. The last segment of the singular form is stripped as can be seen in Table 1. Class *vi* behaves differently because of phonological constraints which do not permit a final *d*, *t*, or *r*.

	<i>i</i>	<i>ii</i>	<i>iii</i>	<i>iv</i>	<i>v</i>	<i>vi</i>	
singular	-VCa	-Vya	-Vva	VCCa	eka	Xa	(X= <i>d,t,r</i>)
plural	-VC	-V	-V	VC{ <i>i</i> ^u }	∅	Xaval	
segment lost	-a	-ya	-va	-C-	eka	gain of val	
<i>examples:</i>							
singular	pota	kuḍaya	vaartaava	kekka	bas eka	para	
plural	pot	kuḍa	vaartaa	keki	bas	paraval	
gloss	book(s)	basket(s)	report(s)	pole(s)	bus(ses)	street(s)	

Table 1: Plural marking on Sinhala inanimates (based on Jayawardena-Moser 2004, Karunatilake 2004)

The subtractive strategy for number marking is extremely rare cross-linguistically and only hypothetically mentioned in Corbett (2000). While having some superficial similarity to a singulative system, the Sinhala system cannot be analyzed as such and is fundamentally different from singulative systems like Imonda (Seiler 1985) or Arbore (Hayward 1984).

The principle of constructional iconicity would predict that an increase in semantic content, as in the plural, should be mirrored by an increase in phonetic substance (Mayerthaler 1988, Wurzel 1989, Dressler et al. 1987). While the majority of the world's languages comply, this is not the case in Sinhala, where an increase in semantic content is matched by a *loss* in phonetic substance. Sinhala plural marking shows that while cognitive motivations may shape number systems all over the world, systems in diametrical opposition to the standard cognitive explanations do also exist and supports the value of statistical universals compared to absolute universals (Dryer 1997).

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