

A Critical Overview on Scrambling in Colloquial Sinhala: Theory, Observations and Open Questions

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ABSTRACT

Within the framework of broader theoretical and typological literature on word order variation, this review examines the phenomenon of scrambling in Sinhala. Although the earlier generative accounts tended to regard scrambling as an optional and semantically vacuous process, more recent research provides strong evidence that Sinhala scrambling is better understood as A'-movement motivated by discourse-related features such as focus and topic. Drawing on theoretical diagnostics, cross-linguistic comparisons, corpus-based analyses, and psycholinguistic experiments, this review synthesizes findings on the nature of Sinhala scrambling, its semantic and pragmatic effects, and its relationship to the distinction between A- and A'-movement. It also attempts to highlight unresolved issues, including the motivation for the SVO order, and maps the directions for further inquiry. In studying scrambling, Sinhala therefore emerges as a crucial test case for understanding the interaction of syntax, information structure, and typological parameters.

Keywords: Scrambling; Sinhala; A'-movement; information structure; focus

INTRODUCTION

Scrambling, as defined by Ross (1967) pertains to the flexible variation in word order, a topic that has been pivotal in theoretical linguistics, especially concerning SOV languages like Japanese (Saito, 1992; Miyagawa, 1997, 2001), Korean (Lee & Santorini, 1994), Hindi (Mahajan, 1990), Persian (Karimi, 2003), and Turkish (Öztürk, 2005). This syntactical phenomenon appears as unrestricted alteration of the elements in the sequence of sentence often deviates from the expected standard or default word order. This feature prompts essential inquiries about the grammatical structure of a language: Is scrambling merely an optional and semantically vacuous process, or is it limited to specific discourse-related contexts? Does it involve syntactic movement? If so, can it be accounted for non-movement theories? Also, how does scrambling relate to universal principles: the Extended Projection Principle (EPP) (Chomsky 1981, 1995) and the differentiation between A- and A'-movement in syntactic theory?

Sinhala, which is the national language as well as one of the official languages of Sri Lanka and a member of the Indo-Aryan branch of the Indo-European language family, provides a particularly illuminating example. With approximately 15 million native speakers and an additional four million second-language users -including Tamils, Muslims, Malays, and Burghers-, Sinhala has both typologically significant and sociolinguistically important diversified speech community. Its syntax permits all six logically possible permutations of subject, object, and verb. On this ground, Sinhala is a prime candidate for investigating the phenomenon of scrambling. Also, Sinhala's rich case morphology and complex focus-marking system offer breeding ground, in particular, for testing theoretical claims about the triggers and consequences of scrambling.

The aim of this article is threefold: to review the theoretical literature on scrambling across languages; to examine how Sinhala scrambling aligns with or diverges from cross-linguistic patterns; and to evaluate whether Sinhala scrambling is semantically vacuous, syntactically driven, and whether it involves A-movement, A'-movement, or both. Moreover, this article highlights, by placing Sinhala data within the global contexts, both the convergences with well-studied scrambling languages and the unique challenges that Sinhala presents to the current debate.

With particular focus to Sinhala, this article, in general, synthesizes theoretical, typological, and empirical research on scrambling. It consolidates diagnostics from generative syntax, cross-linguistic comparisons, and psycholinguistic evidence to argue that Sinhala scrambling is best analyzed as A'-movement with discourse-driven functions. By doing this, it underscores its contribution on understanding the interplay between syntactic movement, information structure, and typological variation. It further identifies unresolved questions—such as the motivation for the SVO order—that can serve as focal points for future research.

METHODOLOGY

This review is based on a systematic examination of theoretical and empirical studies on scrambling, with a particular focus on Sinhala. Literature was identified through searches in academic databases, online repositories, and conference proceedings. Foundational works such as Ross (1967), Chomsky and Lasnik (1977), Mahajan (1990, 1994), and Miyagawa (2003) were surveyed to establish the broader theoretical background. Sinhala-specific contributions—most notably by Hettiarachchi (2015, 2022), Kishimoto (2015, 2018), Chou and Hettiarachchi (2013), and studies on corpus and processing (Tamaoka, Kanduboda, & Sakai, 2011; Yamashina, 2022)—were examined. The review method has three steps: first, it tries to identify relevant theoretical debates on the nature of scrambling; then, attempts to synthesize Sinhala data and analyses with cross-linguistic findings; and last, highlights gaps and open questions to guide future research. This approach ensures both a comprehensive overview of the field and a focused evaluation of Sinhala's contribution to scrambling theory.

Puzzle

Sinhala exhibits a wide range of such free word order changes. In particular, it shows an extremely flexible scrambling which allows multiple constituents to scramble simultaneously. As presented by Kariyakarawana (1998, p. 16), Sinhala has all logically possible six types of word order variations in subject, object and verb combination:

- 1 seenə loku aliyek dækka → “Sena saw a big elephant” (SOV: canonical)
- 2 loku aliyek seenə dækka (OSV)
- 3 seenə dækka loku aliyek (SVO)
- 4 dækka seenə loku aliyek (VSO)
- 5 dækka loku aliyek seenə (VOS)
- 6 loku aliyek dækka seenə (OVS)

Table 1. Word-order variations in Sinhala

Order	Example (Sinhala)	Gloss & Translation	Analysis
SOV	seenə loku aliyek dækka	Sena-NOM big elephant-ACC saw	Canonical
OSV	loku aliyek seenə dækka	Big elephant Sena saw	Object fronting (A')
SVO	seenə dækka loku aliyek	Sena saw big elephant	Puzzle (possible V-movement)
VSO	dækka seenə loku aliyek	Saw Sena big elephant	Verb to C (A')
VOS	dækka loku aliyek seenə	Saw big elephant Sena	Verb to C + object higher
OVS	loku aliyek dækka seenə	Big elephant saw Sena	Object fronting + verb final

Sinhala is canonically an SOV language, but alternative orders arise through scrambling. According to syntactic theory, scrambling is a movement operation, which requires theoretical motivation (Chomsky, 1993, 1995, 2000). The fundamental question is: what type of movement produces these orders, and what parameters permit this much of flexibility?

Observations

There are some word order changes in Sinhala which can be identified as A-movement, while others are better understood as A'-movement. This syntactic feature parallels to Japanese scrambling, where A-movement is typically triggered by the EPP, and A'-movement by focus features (Miyagawa, 2003). Certain patterns, however such as the shift from SOV to SVO remain theoretically puzzling and warrant further investigation.

Movement in Sinhala

In examples such as *loku aliyek seenə dækka* (OSV), either the subject or the object may move to Spec-TP (an A-position), driven by the EPP.

vP: [Subj seenə [v' V dækka Obj]]

↑move Obj to Spec-TP (A-position)

TP: [Obj loku aliyek [T' T vP]]

Movement in Sinhala

Variations like *dækka seenə loku aliyek* (VSO) and *dækka loku aliyek seenə* (VOS) involve focus interpretation, suggesting movement of the verb or object to a position higher than Spec-TP. These patterns align with A'-movement.

VSO: *dækka seenə loku aliyek*

[FocP V+dækka [TP Subj seenə [vP t_V Obj loku aliyek]]]

VOS: *dækka loku aliyek seenə*

[FocP V+dækka [TopP Obj loku aliyek [TP Subj seenə [vP t_V t_Obj]]]]

SOV to SVO in Sinhala may involve mixed head movement and information structure makes persistent puzzle which is not fully explained by current theories.

Literature

Literature shows that more recent scholarship on syntax has explained and rectified some issues in relation to the nature of scrambling in Sinhala. Hettiarachchi (2015, 2022), as one of key researchers on scrambling in Sinhala, provides extensive findings showing that OSV word order results from syntactic A'-movement, rather than base-generation. Tests such as reconstruction and parasitic gap licensing further confirm this analysis. This positions Sinhala alongside Japanese and other scrambling languages where movement is discourse-motivated (Miyagawa, 2003).

Also, more importantly, it is explained that Sinhala scrambling is not semantically vacuous. Scrambled constituents frequently carry discourse functions such as focus or topicalization (Hettiarachchi, 2015). While Yamashina (2022) demonstrates an interchange between focus particles and scrambling, showing that syntax and morphology can function as alternative strategies for encoding information structure, Kishimoto (2015, 2018) emphasizes the discourse-pragmatic role of scrambling, particularly towards focus concord constructions.

In Sinhala, long-distance scrambling, which behaves like A'-extraction, is also possible. Kishimoto (2018) explains that such type of scrambling is subject to island constraints, further reinforcing the A' analysis. Tamaoka, Kanduboda and Sakai (2011), in their experimental work, confirms that while Sinhala permits all six logically possible word order variations, canonical SOV is processed most efficiently and it confirms that scrambling is marked and pragmatically conditioned. This conclusion is well supported by quantitative corpus evidence of distributional patterns linked to focus marking (Yamashina, 2022).

Sinhala also displays A-movement in subject raising for case licensing, independent of scrambling phenomena (Chou & Hettiarachchi, 2013). So, the typology of syntactic movement in Sinhala is dual: scrambling = A'-movement, while subject raising = A-movement.

Prospects

However, there are several key issues related to scrambling in Sinhala remain unresolved:

- 1 The precise motivation for the SVO pattern in Sinhala.
- 2 The nature of the interaction between focus particles and scrambling.
- 3 The full typology of long-distance scrambling in discourse contexts.

Future research should combine syntactic diagnostics, corpus-based analysis, and psycholinguistic experimentation to provide a more comprehensive account of scrambling in Sinhala.

Table 2. Sinhala scrambling: open questions, possible approaches and expected contributions

Open Question	Possible Approach	Expected Contribution
Motivation for SVO order	Structural diagnostics; V-movement tests	Clarify theoretical puzzle
Interaction with focus particles	Corpus + pragmatics analysis	Syntax–semantics–pragmatics interface
Long-distance scrambling typology	Island tests; cross-linguistic comparison	Position Sinhala in A' typology

CONCLUSION

Studying scrambling in Sinhala makes a significant contribution to the broader theoretical discussion in word order variation and syntactic movement in general. Evidence from binding, reconstruction, parasitic gaps, and island effects strongly supports an A'-movement analysis of OSV as well as long-distance scrambling. Also, experimental and corpus-based findings demonstrate that scrambling is not semantically vacuous, but rather a discourse-sensitive operation that interacts with focus particles and information-structural constraints. At the same time, the presence of case-driven A-movement in subject positions indicates a layered movement system in Sinhala. Unresolved issues—such as the motivation for SVO order—highlight Sinhala's importance as a testing ground for refining theories of scrambling and understanding the complexity of syntax–semantics–pragmatics interface.

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