



A LINGUISTIC STUDY OF THE VERB PHRASE IN THE SINHALA LANGUAGE

B. L. Madushani*

Department of Linguistics, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka

A verb phrase (VP) is a syntactic unit centred on a verb, and typically includes auxiliary verbs, adverbs, objects, and complements. It plays a central role in sentence construction by expressing actions, states, and associated grammatical categories such as tense, aspect, mood, and agreement. Cross-linguistically, VP structures offer valuable insights into the syntactic and morphosyntactic systems of individual languages. This study investigated the structure and patterns of verb phrases in Sinhala, an Indo-Aryan language spoken by the majority population of Sri Lanka. Sinhala verb phrases are morphologically rich, exhibiting verb-final word order, extensive verbal inflection, and auxiliary constructions to encode complex tense-aspect-modality distinctions. The study adopted a qualitative descriptive approach, analyzing both secondary sources and naturally occurring colloquial speech. The corpus comprised ten Sinhala newspapers, ten short story books, and informal conversations across different dialectal and stylistic registers. The research focused on syntactic composition, auxiliary usage, negation, adverbial modification, and verb serialization. The findings revealed nine core structural patterns in Sinhala VPs: (1) simple verb alone, (2) verb with noun phrase, (3) verb with a single adverb, (4) verb with an adverbial phrase, (5) auxiliary verb with noun phrase, (6) auxiliary verb with adverb, (7) VP with particle phrase, (8) auxiliary verb with adverbial phrase, and (9) auxiliary verb with both noun and adverbial phrases. These patterns reflect the syntactic versatility and morphosyntactic complexity of Sinhala and illustrate stylistic variation between formal and informal discourse, particularly in the placement of auxiliaries, modifiers, and particles. This study contributes to the understanding of Sinhala verbal syntax and provides a foundation for comparative research in South Asian linguistics and syntactic typology.

Keywords: colloquial Sinhala, modality, morphosyntax, syntax, verb phrase

**Corresponding Author: lakshikamadushani199811@gmail.com*



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B. L. Madushani

Department of Linguistics, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

The verb phrase (VP) is a central component of sentence structure in all natural languages, functioning as the predicate that conveys the main action or state described in a clause. Typically headed by a main verb, VPs may also include auxiliary verbs, adverbs, objects, and complements. The internal structure of the VP is crucial in expressing grammatical features such as tense, aspect, modality, voice, and polarity. From a linguistic perspective, the study of verb phrase structures contributes to our understanding of syntactic theory, morphosyntactic typology, and cross-linguistic variation.

Sinhala, an Indo-Aryan language spoken by approximately 16 million people in Sri Lanka, presents several typologically distinctive features in its verbal system. Sinhala is a head-final and morphologically rich language that demonstrates a complex system of verbal inflections, auxiliary verb constructions, and verb serialization. Unlike many Indo-Aryan languages, Sinhala makes extensive use of periphrastic constructions involving auxiliaries to mark nuanced distinctions in tense, aspect, and modality. In addition, the language permits the flexible use of particles, negation, and emphatic expressions within the VP. The main objective of this study is to provide a comprehensive linguistic analysis of the structure and function of verb phrases in the Sinhala language, focusing on both formal written and informal spoken registers. The study aims to classify the structural variations of VPs in Sinhala and to explore how morphosyntactic elements interact in different communicative contexts.

Research Objectives:

1. To identify and describe the major structural patterns of verb phrases in Sinhala.
2. To analyze the syntactic role and placement of auxiliary verbs, adverbs, particles, and complements within the VP.
3. To compare VP usage in formal and informal contexts to identify stylistic and functional variations.
4. To examine how the morphosyntactic features of Sinhala VPs distinguish them from those in other Indo-Aryan languages.



Research Questions:

1. What are the core structural types of verb phrases used in Sinhala?
2. What are the syntactic and morphosyntactic features that make Sinhala verb phrases distinct?

Through this investigation, the study seeks to contribute to the broader field of South Asian linguistics by offering insights into the structure and usage of Sinhala VPs. The findings may also serve as a comparative basis for future typological studies involving South Asian languages, especially in the domains of predicate structure, inflectional morphology, and syntactic variation.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design, employing content and discourse analysis. The written corpus consisted of ten Sinhala newspapers and ten Sinhala short story books, ensuring representation of formal registers and narrative styles. The spoken corpus included naturally occurring informal conversations recorded across various regions and age groups, capturing dialectal and stylistic variation.

All data were manually transcribed, and verb phrase constructions were extracted and coded based on syntactic composition, auxiliary usage, adverbial modification, negation, and serialization patterns. A manual coding scheme was informed by conventional phrase structure principles and standard Sinhala grammatical frameworks (Gair, 1998; De Silva, 2004). Secondary linguistic sources were consulted for interpretation. Ethical standards were maintained by anonymizing speakers in the spoken corpus.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data were subjected to a qualitative structural analysis. VP constructions were categorized based on the presence and arrangement of syntactic components such as auxiliaries, noun phrases, particles, and adverbials. Patterns were cross-referenced with examples from established Sinhala grammars to ensure analytical consistency. Differences across formal written and informal spoken registers were examined, with token frequencies noted where relevant to highlight prevalent patterns.

Nine major structural patterns of Sinhala VPs emerged from the analysis, reflecting syntactic flexibility and morphosyntactic richness.

1. Use of a Simple Verb Alone (VP → V)

In this simplest form, the verb phrase contains only the main verb, which carries the



full semantic and grammatical weight.

Examples:

නංගී දිව්වා (The younger sister ran)

අම්මා ගියා (Mother went)

අක්කා කෑවා (Sister ate)

This structure is frequently used in spoken Sinhala and narratives, particularly when the subject is known from the context.

2. Verb with a Noun Phrase (VP → NP + V)

Here, a noun phrase functions as the object or complement within the VP.

Examples:

මල්ලි කෑම කනවා (Younger brother eats food)

නංගී පොත බලනවා (The girl is looking at the book)

ළමයි ගීත ගයනවා (Children sing songs)

This is a typical transitive structure and is common in both written and spoken Sinhala.

3. Verb with a Single Adverb (VP → Adv + V)

In this pattern, an adverb precedes the verb, modifying the action.

Examples:

ලොකු නංගී වේගයෙන් දුවනවා (The older girl runs fast)

අක්කා ලස්සනට නටනවා (Sister dances beautifully)

පොඩි ළමයි හිමින් ලියනවා (Little children write slowly)

Adverbs add expressive nuance and reflect speaker intention or mood.

4. Verb with an Adverbial Phrase (VP → AdvP + V)

Adverbial phrases, often indicating time or manner, provide greater detail than single adverbs.

Examples:

අපි ඊයේ අවස ගෙදර ගියා (We went home yesterday evening)

ලොකු නංගී ගොඩක් වේගයෙන් දුවනවා (The older girl runs very fast)



පොඩි ළමයි ගොඩක් හිමිත් ලියනවා (Little children write very slowly)

This construction is especially common in narrative and descriptive discourse.

5. Verb as a Copula with a Noun Phrase (VP → N + be)

Here, a linking verb (copula) connects the subject with a complement noun.

Examples:

අපේ අම්මා ගුරුවරියක් වෙයි (Our mother is a teacher)

මිනිසා ගොතෙක් වෙයි (The man is a fool)

This structure is central to predicate nominal constructions in Sinhala.

6. Auxiliary Verb with an Adverb (VP → Adv + be)

Auxiliary or copula verbs combine with adverbs indicating location or state.

Examples:

මගේ පාසල මෙහි තියෙනවා (My school is located here)

සමන්ගේ බල්ලා අතන ඉන්නවා (Saman's dog is there)

This pattern reflects stative expressions and spatial relations.

7. Verb with a Particle Phrase (VP → PrepP + V)

This structure includes a prepositional or particle phrase within the VP.

Examples:

ආච්චි බංකුව උඩ වාඩිවුණා (Grandmother sat on the bench)

බල්ලා මේසය යට ඉන්නවා (The dog is under the table)

Prepositional phrases provide locative or directional context, a common feature in descriptive settings.

8. Auxiliary Verb with an Adverbial Phrase (VP → AdvP + be)

A copula verb combines with a detailed adverbial phrase to indicate quality or condition.

Examples:

සමන් ඉතා කඩිසර වෙයි (Saman is very energetic)

ඒයාගෙ වැඩ හරිම කලාවට වේ (His/her work is very artistic)



This structure emphasizes states or attributes in formal and evaluative contexts.

9. Auxiliary Verb with Both Noun and Adverbial Phrases (VP → NP + AdvP + be)

This complex VP contains both a noun phrase and an adverbial phrase with an auxiliary verb.

Example:

ඇඳුම් මේ දවස්වල හුණක් ලාභ වෙයි (Clothes are very profitable these days)

These nine VP structures show that Sinhala verbal syntax is deeply layered and context-sensitive. Auxiliary verbs such as වෙයි, ඇත, and ඉන්නවා are critical in expressing stative, progressive, and habitual aspects. Moreover, the placement of adverbs, use of particles, and inflectional endings reflect the discourse function (e.g., emphasis, focus, formality) and speaker intent. In informal conversation, structures tend to be elliptical and simplified, while formal and written registers use more complete, fully inflected VPs. This stylistic variation reveals how register, modality, and pragmatics shape Sinhala verb phrase construction in real-world usage.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Sinhala verb phrases manifest diverse and distinctive syntactic configurations, reflecting both the morphosyntactic richness and the influence of context (formal vs. informal). The nine identified patterns contribute to a better understanding of how Sinhala speakers construct verbal expressions and how auxiliary structures operate within the language's syntactic system.

Future research can expand on these findings by examining regional dialects or by comparing Sinhala VP structures with those of other Indo-Aryan or Dravidian languages in Sri Lanka.

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