

## OHU AS AN HONORIFIC PLURAL PRONOUN

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The Sinhala language, owing to diglossia, exhibits two main codes: Spoken Sinhala and Literary Sinhala. Modern Literary Sinhala also differs from Classical Literary Sinhala both structurally and semantically. One of these differences relates to the use of the third person pronoun *ohu*. In Modern Literary Sinhala *ohu* is a singular masculine pronoun, semantically equivalent to the English third person masculine pronoun, *he*. Classical Sinhala, however, reveals a very interesting irregularity of usage. For it uses *ohu* as a plural when it functions as the subject of a sentence and as a singular when it does not.

Sinhala is a language in which substantives inflect for case.<sup>1</sup> Pronouns, which form a subclass of substantives, show a contrast of five cases. Thus in Modern Literary Sinhala, the pronoun *ohu* is inflected in the following way:

	singular	plural
Nominative:	<i>ohu</i>	<i>ovuhu</i>
Accusative :	<i>ohu</i>	<i>ovun</i>
Dative :	<i>ohuṭa</i>	<i>ovunṭa</i>
Genitive :	<i>ohuge</i>	<i>ovunge</i>
Instrumental :	<i>ohugen</i>	<i>ovungen</i>

Classical Sinhala presents a slightly different scatter of case inflections, in which *ohu* functions both as the nominative plural and as the accusative singular:

	singular	plural
Nominative :	<i>hē</i>	<i>ohu</i>
Accusative :	<i>ohu</i>	<i>ovun</i>
Dative :	<i>ohuṭa</i>	<i>ovunṭa</i>
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*Amāvatura*, The Flood of Nectar, a Sinhala classic written in the twelfth century by *Gurulugōmi*, "the earliest example we have of connected prose writing in Sinhalese",<sup>2</sup> follows this classical usage.

In sentences in which *ohu* functions as the subject, and thus in the nominative case, it co-occurs with a plural verb as the predicate of the sentence:

**ohu** *bōmaeṇḍae hindae budu vae dhamsak pavatvati* (14)<sup>3</sup>

**ohu** *.mahat pirivarin vadit* (20)

**ohu** *mae mā karā eti* (45)

**ohu** *rāl kumarahu paeviji ko!o* (47)

In sentences in which *ohu* functions as an accusative it does not show any agreement or concord with the predicate:

*eyin ekek ohu marayi* (131)

*to ohu karā no yā* (96)

**ohu** *visin raja nassi* (113)

*ho ohu daekae putrasanā ka!ā* (113)

All contemporary writers, except a few purists who have taken *Amāvatura* as their model of ideal Sinhala grammar, use *ohu* as a singular masculine pronoun in all structural contexts. How did this change come about?

Three factors seem to have caused the shift of *ohu* from a nominative plural to a nominative singular. The present paper is an attempt to inquire into these three factors.

Firstly, it will be observed that Classical Sinhala usage exhibits an irregularity; the use of a pronoun as a plural in the nominative and as a singular elsewhere. No other substantive in Sinhala shows such an irregularity of usage. Hence it was natural for modern writers, who were not well versed in the Classical idiom, to transform this into a regular usage by making *ohu* function as a singular in whatever case.

Secondly, Classical Sinhala also reveals another stylistic peculiarity. Although *ohu* was recognised as the nominative plural, it was used in the large majority of contexts, not to express the plural sense of 'more than one' but the singular sense of 'one'.

Sinhala, both classical and modern, retains a style of usage in which an animate noun, plural in form, can be used to denote, semantically, 'one' being. This usage is resorted to when writer wishes to convey his sense of respect and honour towards the person denoted by that noun. This class of 'plural' substantives, that denote a 'single' person, has been designated 'honorific plurals' (*gauravārta bahu vacana* in Sinhala). But for the 'singularity' of meaning, the honorific plural noun shares all other syntactic features that govern the use of other plural nouns. For instance, the honorific plural noun, when it functions as the subject of a sentence, agrees with its predicate in terms of the category of 'number'. The honorific plural noun *buduhu*, or its variant, *budhu*, denotes the Buddha and when it functions as the subject of a sentence takes a plural verb as its predicate:

**buduhu**... *kesdā dī vadāḷaha* (33)

**buduhu**... *devenendan budsaraṇa dahamsaraṇa pihitvūhae* (33)

**budhu**... *e pā no gathu* (33)

**budhu**... *“ek veva”yi ituhu* (33)

The pronoun *ohu* shares partial membership of this subclass of substantives: a plural noun in form but denoting ‘one’ person. *Amāvatura* abounds in instances in which the ‘honorific plural’ *ohu* has been used to refer to a single person. The signifier of *ohu* in the following sentences is a single person:

sentence	signifier
<b>ohu</b> , <i>“maharaja ..daen budu vannata yemi” vadāḷaha</i> (22)	<i>the Buddha</i>
<b>ohu</b> ... <i>“budu vae misae no naegemi” sivurangavara itā vaedae hunhu</i> (26)	<i>the Buddha</i>
<b>ohu</b> <i>rāl kumarahu paeviji kolō</i>	<i>the Buddha</i>
<b>ohu</b> <i>bosatanange rūpa sampat daekae... satuḷ vae sennaṭa vanhae</i> (14)	<i>the Rishi named Kuludevul</i>
<i>“maharaja, mama tavuspāṇange bala danmi, ohu musavā no kiyati”</i> (64)	<i>an ascetic</i>
<b>ohu</b> ... <i>naengi giyō</i> (76)	<i>the Bodhisatva named Mātanga</i>
<b>ohu</b> ... <i>budun karā eḷabae... gaman vaenūhu</i> (41)	<i>the minister named Kāludayi</i>
<i>siḷ daruvo sūpanasdenek, “ohu paeviji vūhae” asā... paeviji vae rāt vūhu</i> (36)	<i>the prince named Yasa</i>
<b>ohu</b> <i>“bala putae, kum kiyahi?.” yi kiḷu</i> (116)	<i>the mother of king Ajasat</i>

A study of such sentences would also reveal that *ohu*, though a plural pronoun in form, denotes a single person, male or female, for whom the writer showed respect. In other words, the pronoun *ohu* carries two distinctive semantic features: ‘singular’ and ‘respect’. In the course of several centuries, *ohu* underwent a semantic change which caused not only the loss of the feature ‘respect’ but also the addition of the feature ‘male’. Thus *ohu* in contemporary Literary Sinhala denotes a single person, a male for whom the writer has a neutral attitude.

The third factor that triggered this change was the ambiguity of the use of the case suffix *hu* in Classical Sinhala. This ambiguity arises from the fact that *hu* is used not only as a plural suffix but also as a singular; not only as a nominative suffix but also as a non-nominative. The following examples from *Amāvatura* show this ambiguity:

- (a) **hu** as a singular nominative suffix:  
*anek dev putak-hu naeta* (281)  
*ek rajak-hu du kīyehi no givissi* (46)
- (b) **hu** as singular non-nominative:  
*saedaehae aeti kula putak-hu visin* (100)  
*has gana pirivara lada mahahas rajak-hu seyin* (41)  
*to miyan aetulu kotae bera sadana minisak-hu vaennehi* (114)  
*pirisidu vannata yanuyem saendalak-hu ditimu* (71)
- (c) **hu** as a plural nominative suffix :  
*minis-hu bana asā satu vae . . puluvuṭhu* (66)  
*aetaem-hu . . ekat pas vae hunha* (100)  
*tā ge ratae sora-hu bohohae* (103)  
*ta ge ratae sora-hu bohohae* (103)  
*devbamba-hu . . natu natu vu desehi palaehae* (27)
- (d) **hu** as a plural non-nominative suffix :  
*rakavalaē sīti minis<sup>h</sup>hu daekae* (113)  
*sakviti raja-hu hun tan* (221)  
*deviyo mara-hu ge rūpa no dakitvayi* (227)

The *hu* suffix in *ohu* can be, thus, either the plural nominative suffix or the singular non-nominative suffix. In order to counteract this ambiguity, modern writers tended to use *ohu* as a singular pronoun in all cases.

Since classical writers used *ohu*, in the nominative case, more as an honorific plural denoting 'one' rather than as a typical plural denoting 'more than one', they also resorted to the addition of some other noun or phrase, unambiguously denoting 'more than one', after *ohu* to express its plural sense. One such phrase, that is frequently used in *Amāvatura* is *haema dena*, meaning 'all';

- ohu haema dena . . budun kerehi mae vusūhu* (40)  
*ohu haema dena nīrōga veti* (84)  
*ohu haema dena no satuṭu veti* (104)  
*ohu haema dena . . sakvaḷa gaba piri sītiyāhae* (226)

The plural nominative pronoun in Modern Literary Sinhala is *ovuhu*, which has replaced *ohu* of Classical Sinhala. The modern pronoun was not, however, completely unknown in Classical Sinhala. *Amāvatura* records a few instances in which the nominative plurals *evhu*, *evuhu* and *ovhu* occur.

- evhu pudannaṭa nisi vatak aeraevūhu* (33)  
*evhu . . dā nidan kaḷaha* (33)  
*evuhu . . rāē rāē gaman yet* (300)  
*mese ovhu soḷos dahas sataḷos denek vūhu* (197)

Venerable Kodagoda Gnānāloka, who edited *Amāvatura*, has also noted that in a few instances the pronoun *ovuhu* was found in place of *ohu*.

**ohu . . mi pinḍu piligannaṭa ayajiyaha (33)**

A footnote notes that *ohu* in the above sentence had *ovuhu* in certain manuscripts.

The use of *ohu* in Classical Sinhala exhibits a partial resemblance to the use of 'He' in English, where writers of religious literature make a distinction between 'he' (with a small letter) and 'He' (with a capital letter). They use 'He' even in the middle of a sentence, when the pronoun refers to God or Jesus Christ. Buddhist writers also follow this style by using 'He' to refer to the Buddha. This 'He' may be referred to as an 'honorific pronoun' since it conveys the reverence that the writer has towards the religious personage denoted by this pronoun. In Classical Sinhala, however, *ohu* was made to denote both the honorific pronoun 'He' as well as the plural, 'they'.

#### Footnotes

1. Gair, James W., *Colloquial Sinhalese Clause Structures*, Mouton, The Hague, 1970.
2. Reynolds, C. H. B. (ed), *An Anthology of Sinhalese Literature up to 1815*, George Ane and Unwin Ltd., London, 1970.
3. Pages refer to the edition of *Amāvatura* by Ven. Kodagoda Gnānāloka, Gunesena and Co. Colombo, 1959.