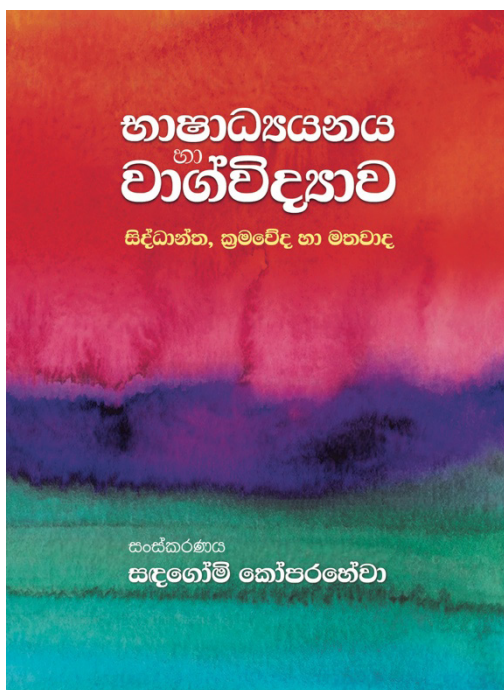


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Symposium¹

For the Symposium section in this issue, *UCR* interviewed Senior Professor Sandagomi Coperahewa, Chair Professor of the Department of Sinhala at our University, on his newly published linguistics textbook in Sinhala. The textbook contains 24 chapters, is written entirely in Sinhala and is published locally by Godage Publishers. *UCR* presents this interview because of our keen interest in dissemination of research in Sri Lankan languages. With this interview, we hope to encourage explicit discussions on the possibilities as well as the challenges facing Sri Lankan academia and the possible futures of scholarly publishing in the country, including in relation to research on and dissemination in Sri Lankan languages.

¹ *The Symposium section is published with the purpose of contributing to debate and discussion on aspects that broadly fall within the mandate of the UCR and need not be scholarly in form and register. They are often keynote lectures at academic events, general reflections on matters relevant to interdisciplinary research, academic publication or higher education. As such, the material published in this section are general and not subjected to anonymized peer-review.*



Interview on editing and publishing an encyclopaedic textbook in Sinhala

Your publication *භාෂාධර්මය හා වාග්විද්‍යාව: සිද්ධාන්ත, ක්‍රමවේද හා මතවාද* [The study of languages and linguistics: Theories, Methodologies and Ideologies], published this year, is very special since this is the first encyclopaedic textbook for linguistics in Sinhala that we know of.

What is a linguistic textbook, and could you compare it with the other forms of academic publications in your field?

Publishing a textbook on linguistics has been an idea that I have had for a long time. My academic connection to the Sinhala language goes back to my childhood, deeply shaped by the influence of my late father, Sandadas Coperaheewa, who was a devoted member of the Hela Havula (1941) movement founded by Cumaratunga Munidasa. My childhood passion for language studies continued during my undergraduate years at the University of Colombo in the early 1990s, inspired by the teachings of Professor J. B. Disanayaka who trained in modern linguistics. After joining the Department of Sinhala as a lecturer, I focused my attention on the sociolinguistics of Sinhala, particularly in the areas of language policy and planning, the politics of language, and modern Sinhala usage.

My first book on language, *භාෂානුරාගයේ දේශපාලනය* (1999), examined the politicization of language loyalty in Sri Lanka and was based on my BA dissertation.

Later, I continued to publish several books on modern Sinhala usage, grammar, and communication which catered to a Sinhala readership interested in Sinhala language and linguistics. I realized that most Sinhala publications on linguistics focused either on the nature of language in general or specifically on the structure of Sinhala, highlighting the need for a comprehensive textbook in Sinhala.

The teaching of linguistics in Sinhala first began at the Department of Sinhala, University of Ceylon, Peradeniya, in the 1950s with Dr. M. W. Sugathapala de Silva, who also took the initiative to publish two Sinhala books on language study from a linguistic perspective. With the establishment of the first Department of Linguistics at the University of Colombo in 1968 (later transferred to the University of Kelaniya in 1972), Sinhala linguists such as Professor J. B. Disanayaka, Professor K. N. O. Dharmadasa, and Professor W. S. Karunathilake published significant works explaining the nature and structure of the Sinhala language from a linguistic point of view. For instance, Professor Disanayaka's research focused on Sinhala folk usage (Jana Vahara) and grammar, Professor Dharmadasa's work explored sociolinguistics, and Professor Karunathilake's studies centered on historical linguistics. However, there has been no Sinhala textbook that comprehensively introduces the important aspects of language—including sounds (phonetics), structure (syntax), and meaning (semantics)—as used in academic settings, to provide a general introduction to linguistics. The present volume titled *භාෂාධර්මයන් හා වාර්ගිකවාද: සිද්ධාන්ත, ක්‍රමවේද හා මතවාද* [The study of languages and linguistics: Theories, Methodologies and Ideologies] aims to fill that gap in Sinhala linguistic scholarship.

What was your aim in publishing a linguistic textbook in Sinhala at this particular moment in time?

It was during my undergraduate days at the University of Colombo in the early 1990s that I was first introduced to the field of modern linguistics. My teachers were Professor J.B. Disanayaka and Professor Tissa Jayawardhana. Even then, I realized the need for a textbook on linguistics written in Sinhala. The idea of compiling a comprehensive textbook on linguistics took shape during my postgraduate studies at Lancaster University, UK, where I had the opportunity to read a wide range of linguistic textbooks in English. Later, as a lecturer in language and linguistics, I yet again recognized the need for a comprehensive Sinhala textbook covering the subject, aimed at both students and teachers.

Although the first Department of Linguistics in Sri Lanka was established in 1968 (at the University of Colombo) and more than fifty years have since passed, it is a pity that there has been no Sinhala textbook that systematically introduces the different branches of the discipline to students. Most of the pioneering Sinhala scholars in language studies had the opportunity to pursue their postgraduate education in British or American universities, where they received effective academic training

in the field. For example, Professor J.B. Disanayaka completed his master's degree in linguistics at the University of California, where he studied under Professors John Gumperz and Dell Hymes. Similarly, Professor K.N.O. Dharmadasa received training in sociolinguistics at the University of York, UK under Professor R.B. Le Page.

This trend continued until the early 1980s, when graduates of the University of Kelaniya began completing their doctoral studies abroad. By 2020, most of the senior academics in the field had retired, and there emerged a clear need to compile a textbook on linguistics with contributions from both senior and younger scholars. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 created an opportunity to work from home, which I utilized to develop a plan for compiling this textbook. The primary aim of producing a single textbook was to provide students and teachers with a foundational resource — an introduction to the core areas of linguistics — for the benefit of the Sinhala readership.

What are the advantages of an edited volume of this nature in comparison to a single-authored textbook on linguistics?

My initial plan was to compile a handbook on linguistics in Sinhala by myself, following the model of standard linguistic textbooks in English. However, I soon realized that a comprehensive textbook in linguistics covers a wide range of topics in the fields of language and linguistics, making it challenging for a single author to undertake and that it is also beyond my expertise. This textbook contains 24 chapters written by 16 contributors, each addressing areas within their respective fields of expertise in modern linguistics.

The present volume brings together contributions from several scholars, each specializing in different subfields (e.g., phonology, sociolinguistics, syntax). This academic diversity enables readers to access a broader range of theoretical and methodological perspectives than a single author could typically provide. Compared to single authored work, an edited volume tends to include chapters written by active specialists in the field and contributors often come from different academic traditions, schools of thought and institutions. As a result, such volumes usually provide interdisciplinary viewpoints. For instance, this volume includes chapters written by linguists representing four generations of Sinhala linguistic scholarship, trained at various UK and US universities at the postgraduate level, and affiliated with the Universities of Colombo, Peradeniya, Kelaniya, and Sri Jayewardenepura.

What is the process you followed in planning, soliciting chapters, etc? What decisions did you have to make along the way?

The process of compiling this linguistic textbook in Sinhala involved several key stages. First, I identified the overall scope and objectives of the book—to

provide a comprehensive introduction to the main branches of linguistics, suitable for university students, teachers and general readers interested in language studies. Then I focussed on the content and structure of the volume. I divided the book into sub disciplines in linguistics such as phonetics and phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, and historical linguistics. It contains 24 chapters covering major fields in language study and linguistics. A special feature of this textbook is that it explains the subject area with special reference to the Sinhala language.

As the subject matter was wide-ranging, I decided that an edited volume with contributions from specialists would best ensure academic depth and accuracy. When selecting chapter contributors, I considered their academic training in language and linguistics, as well as their experience in teaching and publications within the field. For example, the writers I invited from the Department of Linguistics, University of Kelaniya, are among the most senior academics in the discipline—such as Professor Daya Wickramasinghe (sign language), Professor Asoka Premaratne (historical linguistics), Professor R. M. W. Rajapaksha (phonetics and phonology), and Professor W. M. Wijeratne (morphology). Accordingly, I invited selected scholars with expertise in each subfield to contribute chapters, providing them with guidelines on content, length, and referencing style to maintain uniformity.

Throughout the compilation process, I had to make several editorial decisions—such as balancing theoretical content with examples relevant to Sinhala. I also reviewed each contribution for clarity, linguistic accuracy, and consistency of style before finalizing the manuscript. Finally, each chapter was sent to the respective author for proofreading before publication.

What are some challenges that an editor of such an edited volume faces when publishing in Sri Lanka and when publishing on the Sinhala language?

As an editor, I faced several challenges concerning the editorial process: time, funding, and publication. In Sri Lanka, academic publishing in Sinhala—especially in the humanities and social sciences—lacks institutional and commercial support. In an edited volume, contributors often differ in style, theoretical orientation, and orthographic conventions. The editor must standardize these differences to ensure coherence and readability while respecting each author's scholarly voice as there are no copy editors in Sri Lankan publishing houses.

Funding for academic publications in Sinhala is limited, with minimal institutional grants or commercial interest. However, Mr. Sirisumana Godage (Godage Publishers) accepted my proposal to publish a 500-page textbook and also agreed to pay a small honorarium to the chapter contributors. Time is also a challenge in the context of Sri Lankan academia, with limited university vacations and heavy administrative burdens. I served as the Head of the Department of Sinhala

for six years, from 2019 to 2024 — the period during which I worked on this edited volume. However, I had allocated the first few months of my sabbatical year in 2025 to finalize the work with the publisher. Another challenge is that the potential readership for a Sinhala-language linguistics textbook is relatively limited—mainly university students and teachers—making wide circulation difficult. Nevertheless, it is encouraging to note that after the launch of the book, there was a strong demand for the textbook among the intended readerships.

What resources are necessary to successfully produce such a textbook? What was available and what else would be desirable?

Producing a linguistic textbook in Sinhala successfully requires several key resources: human, physical, and financial. These include access to up-to-date linguistic research and reference materials in both Sinhala and English, collaboration with subject specialists, editorial and peer-review support, adequate funding for typesetting and publication, and technical resources for layout and printing. In my case, I had access to essential academic resources such as standard linguistic textbooks in English. As I mentioned earlier, during my postgraduate studies in the UK, I had the opportunity to refer to many standard linguistics textbooks in English, and I purchased some of them for research and writing purposes. I also benefited from my own teaching and research experience in the Department of Sinhala during the last 27 years which provided a strong foundation for content development. In future projects, it would be highly beneficial to have institutional support for collaborative writing, and dedicated editorial teams familiar with linguistic terminology in Sinhala. For example, to produce such a textbook, academics in relevant university departments need to work collaboratively with scholars from other universities. Currently, this kind of collaboration is lacking in our university system – specially in the field of humanities and social sciences.

Academia does not have the same standardized guidelines or the space for scholarship in Sinhala as it does for English. For example, there are few peer-reviewed journals, no academic publishers, etc. How do you navigate this issue as an author and now as an editor?

The lack of standardized academic infrastructure for scholarship in Sinhala poses a real challenge. There are few peer-reviewed journals, and limited editorial or peer-review mechanisms comparable to English academia. As an author and now as an editor, I have tried to navigate this gap in several ways in my academic career. I always follow recognized international academic conventions for structure, citation, and referencing, even when writing in Sinhala. In 2006, I compiled a book titled ගාස්ත්‍රීය ලේඛනයක මූලාශ්‍රය දැක්වීමේ විධික්‍රම , which explains the methods of citing sources in academic writing for the benefit of Sinhala scholarship. It was the first

Sinhala book on this subject. In preparing this textbook, I frequently referred to similar publications in English. During the editorial process of this textbook, I also reviewed the drafts and held informal discussions with the chapter writers regarding the content, style, and word length, and received their feedback. I also try to create models of good academic practice in Sinhala — through careful terminology development, clear definitions, and analytical writing — so that students and future researchers have reliable examples to follow. As an editor, I see this situation not only as a limitation but also as an opportunity to build a culture of scholarly writing in Sinhala. By mentoring contributors, maintaining editorial standards, and encouraging collaboration across universities, we can gradually establish a more formal academic culture for Sinhala scholarship.

What changes do you think Sri Lankan academia needs to make to bring Sinhala scholarship to a higher standard?

If Sri Lankan academia aims to elevate Sinhala scholarship to a higher standard, the first step is to train young scholars in the field by providing them with exposure to high-quality postgraduate programs, either locally or abroad, preferably in the UK or USA. The training of human resources in academia is important not only for teaching but also for writing, research and publishing. During my own postgraduate studies in the UK, I was exposed to a wide range of high-standard research in sociolinguistics and publications in the field of language studies. Similarly, there is a need to cultivate a stronger culture of rigorous research in Sinhala studies, supported by senior academics who have published high-standard scholarly works in the field. This includes promoting critical inquiry, encouraging publication in peer-reviewed journals, and supporting interdisciplinary projects that connect linguistics, literature, sociology and history. Currently, there is a tendency among young academics to present their work at research symposiums in universities and elsewhere; however, they rarely devote themselves to academic writing and publishing in their field of study. At the same time, the publishing houses should adopt a peer-reviewed and copy-editing process for the publication of Sinhala scholarly works.

What institutional reforms do you think are required for supporting academic publication in Sri Lanka and/or in the region?

For many years, we have been discussing how to support academic publishing within the Sri Lankan context. To strengthen academic publication in Sri Lanka, several institutional reforms are needed. First, all university academics in the system should undergo training in the academic publication process as part of their staff development courses. Especially in the field of humanities and social science scholarship in Sri Lanka, most academics pay little attention to standards of academic publishing in Sinhala. Second, universities and other higher educational institutions

should establish dedicated academic publishing units or university presses with professional editorial and peer-review systems to ensure quality and credibility. Currently, some universities have set up their own presses to meet internal printing requirements. However, there is no dedicated university press focused on academic publishing. This is a new initiative that the UGC could consider — establishing a University Press of Sri Lanka under the purview of a UGC standing committee. Third, research funding and publication grants must be made available to support scholars writing in local languages, recognizing publication as a key output in academic evaluation. Fourth, there should be collaborative efforts among universities to share expertise in editing, reviewing, and distribution, particularly for disciplines such as linguistics and the humanities that often lack commercial publishing support. We need to promote a culture of high-standard academic publishing in Sinhala with the support of scholars.

As you know, UCR has an inter-disciplinary mandate. Could you reflect on the relevance of your work, including this publication, to other disciplines?

My training in sociolinguistics has provided me with the scope to study the Sinhala language from an interdisciplinary perspective. Most of my earlier works on Sinhala studies relate to the fields of history, sociology, and political science. The recently launched linguistic textbook in Sinhala contributes directly to UCR's interdisciplinary mandate by bridging linguistics with several other fields in the humanities and social sciences. While its primary focus is on the study of language, the book also situates linguistic study within broader cultural, historical, and sociological contexts of language use in Sinhala. It offers insights into how language relates to biology, communication, computer science, history, identity, and language policy — areas that intersect with disciplines such as literary studies, sociology, anthropology, and history. For example, chapters on linguistic anthropology, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, corpus linguistics, psycholinguistics, and sign language connect language with other related disciplines. In this sense, the publication not only strengthens the study of linguistics itself but also supports interdisciplinary scholarship that links language to society, culture, and knowledge production in the fields of humanities and social science disciplines Sri Lanka.