

SLM *yang*: the vanishing relativizer?

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Rather than being postnominal as they are in Standard Malay (SM), relative clauses in Sri Lanka Malay (SLM) conform to the head-final syntax characteristic of the Lankan adstrates, i.e. Sinhala and Muslim Tamil (Slomanson, 2006: 152-3). What is unclear is whether they need a special marker, as they do in SM in the shape of *yang*. According to Saldin (2001:64-5), quoted by Slomanson, SLM relative clauses do require a dedicated marker: its shape is *nya* and it occurs in preverbal position. The data elicited from two native speakers of a Colombo variety of SLM paint a different picture.

The marker at issue appears to have a shape identical to SM *yang*, at least in slow speech:

- (1) *dé yang minum cuma té itu pé-harga mahal*
3SG *yang* drink plain tea DEF POSS-price high
'The tea that he drank is expensive.'

It is much in doubt, however, whether *yang*, or reduced forms thereof, is a *bona fide* relativizer.

In the first place, *yang* is by no means compulsory in garden-variety relative clauses such as the one in (2), with present-tense marking:

- (2) *dé ada-minum cuma té itu pé-harga mahal*
3SG PRS-drink plain tea DEF POSS-price high
'The tea that he drinks/is drinking is expensive.'

Both speakers find (2) impeccable. However, they disagree as to whether *yang* can occur in front of *ada*. Speaker A would tolerate it — as he would accept it, tellingly, in front of *su* and *anti*, which mark past and future tense, respectively. Not so speaker B, who happens to be fifteen years younger. This suggests that while still conceivably a candidate for the status of relativizer in speaker A's speech, *yang* may be in the process of evolving into a marker of past tense.

An equally intriguing fact, among many others in the data that have been collected is preverbal *yang*'s ability to show up in constructions where it cannot possibly be construed as a relativizer. For instance, *yang* is obligatory in all three of the following sentences:

- (3) *journalist-atu yang interview-kan ini orang-pada-nya*
journalist-INDEF *yang* interview-VBLZR DEM human.being-PL-ACC
'It was a journalist (and no one else) who interviewed these people.'
- (4) *berapa orang-pada laparan-ka yang mati ?*
how.many human.being-PL hunger-LOC *yang* die
'How many people died of starvation?'
- (5) *dé atas-nang yang pi-sampé sé-dang suka hati*
3SG top-DAT *yang* go-reach 1SG-DAT like heart
'I'm glad she reached the top.'

That the embedded clause in (5) cannot do without *yang* is just as remarkable as the fact that *yang* cannot co-occur with *su* in (6) or "substitute" for it:

- (6) *sé kira dé atas-nang su-pi-sampé kata*
1SG figure 3SG top-DAT PST-go-reach COMP
'I think she reached the top.'

Whether or not the variety of SLM under study ever felt the need for a "true" relativizer and whether or not *yang* ever fitted the bill with any degree of systematicity, there is strong empirical evidence, we propose to argue, that it is well on its way to becoming a past tense marker restricted to presupposed or defocused clauses.