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## Emergence of Tamil as Epigraphic Language: Issues in Tamil Historical Linguistics<sup>1</sup>

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“I am, however, of the opinion that it may not be quite safe to use this grammar [tolkāppiyam] as an absolute yardstick for measuring or estimating the chronology and the historical evolution of forms [of the *śaṅgam* texts]”  
(L. V. Ramaswami Aiyar, 1938:749)

The language of inscriptional Tamil is very intriguing despite its complexity for many reasons including its properties such as extensive code-mix between Indo Aryan and Tamil, adaptation of different scripts and so on. The Tamil epigraphic routines or more specifically the Tamil epigraphic culture developed mostly under a pan-Indian cultural, historic and sociolinguistic context and model. The raise of Tamil as epigraphic language should be seen as a dynamic process. As can be seen from palaeographic, lexical, syntactic and semantic features, a separate variety of epigraphic Tamil evolved constantly alongside of the literary varieties. Much of the credit goes to many pioneering epigraphists and scholars for their continued contribution to the development of the fields of Indian and Tamil epigraphic studies for more than a century despite the lack of encouragements from the scholarly circle, whose attention was paid mostly to Tamil literature and history. However, the linguistic study of Tamil inscriptions is in a nascent stage. In this present work on the emergence of Tamil as inscriptional language, I would like to present succinctly, from a historical linguistic point of view, two aspects: 1) the process of Indo-Aryanisation and 2) a few salient syntactic features of inscriptional Tamil.

### Language of Tamil Inscriptions and Historical Linguistics

Given the diversity of Tamil corpus spread over the course of two millennia, Tamil has a lot to contribute to the field of historical linguistics in general. Every language changes over the time during the process of its transmission, and the structure of language, has thus become a case of constant and continued evolution. Generation after generation, as we can notice in the case of Tamil, new words are coined or borrowed, the meaning of old words drifts, morphology develops or decays, the syntactic structure has changed over time and in short the ‘Modern Tamil’ language as a whole has become different completely or partially while compared to that of *Saṅgam* literature, for instance. Otherwise we would not need a special training to read and interpret our old *Saṅgam* literature. A closer look at the language of *Saṅgam* shows how it has become distant and different from the ‘Modern Tamil’, and that they are not mutually intelligible. This is equally true with the language of Tamil inscriptions. These natural and progressive changes in the language defy the adequacy of the traditional grammars for the description of the language of the literary and inscriptional texts. We are forced to re-create grammar and lexicon based on the type of corpus we are encountered with.

The Tamil epigraphic language has never existed as a monolithic and hermetically closed entity. Thus it is crucial to consider the Tamil epigraphic language, on the one hand, with more sociolinguistic implications, and on the other, with historical linguistic methods. Each

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<sup>1</sup> It is a great pleasure to be able to contribute to this volume that celebrates and honours the service of a dear friend Professor L. Ramamoorthy

kind of text - oral or written, inscriptional or literary - in fact has its own underlying grammatical structure. Whatever be the linguistic 'model' or 'methodology' selected to analyse the vast Tamil corpus, it is important to study each kind of corpus – text separately and within a given chronological frame. Indeed, the linguistic study of Tamil epigraphic texts requires appropriate and specific analytical tools.

The Dravidian comparative linguistics, in the last few decades, has arrived at excellent results at the different levels of language change: phonology, morphology and etymology. However, the field of historical syntax remains to be explored in detail. In order to make the following discussion clear, and to lay emphasis on the need for the study of historical linguistics, let me start by the following quotations:

According to Andronov, the comparative Dravidian linguistics is just 'anti-historical' or 'unhistoric': "Moreover, concentrating on the reconstruction, that is the pre-history of certain elements of accidence, they ignore their history, i.e., the historical evolution of the four literary languages." (Andronov 2001:12). Similar sentiments can be observed in the writings of Bh. Krishnamurthi, expressed slightly differently.

Bh. Krishnamurthi, on his part, deplores the lack of historical data in comparative Dravidian studies: "Even for the literary languages, we do not have any study of syntax of the language of the classical texts. Therefore, it is not easy to make a systematic study of comparative syntax and make statements applying the comparative method." (Krishnamurthi, Bh. 2003:420).

K.Rangan, in his evaluation of syntactic studies in Tamil has sounded the alarm about the general lack of interest in Tamil syntax. "The rise and fall of interest in the area of Tamil syntax have been witnessed for more than three decades. The field of Tamil syntax at present is not experiencing a period of excitement. Different models have been applied to the data of Tamil language. The models are short-lived and they disappear with the same speed with which they appear in the linguistic scene. The interest to bring counter-examples to prove or disprove the hypotheses dominate the research activities rather than the in-depth description of Tamil language". (K. Rangan 2000:58).

It is interesting to note that, more than half a century ago, V.I. Subramoniam had invited the Tamil linguists to take into account the Tamil epigraphic source: "The neglect of Tamil Epigraphy by Tamil linguists is sad indeed. Linguists of Tamilnad confine themselves to such fields like literature, history, philosophy and so on, but never paid any attention toward epigraphy. The language of literature is refined, embellished and archaic. The Changes that occur in the day to day speech seldom find a place in literature. The linguist who is content with the study of literary language is like a zoologist satisfied with the analysis of an old fossil of a living specimen". Further he explains: "The language of Epigraphists is not literary Tamil. Nor is very colloquial. It can be considered as the the standard spoken tongue of the day with minor dialectal peculiarities of the place where the epigraphs were incised" (Subramoniam V.I., 1954: 137).

Last but not the least, Y. Subbarayalu explains in clear terms why handling of inscriptional texts needs an intensive textual analysis? "Whatever conceptual framework is used to understand past history from inscriptions, intensive textual analysis should precede their interpretation. Several terms in old inscriptions are likely to be obsolete now (Subbarayalu, 2002-03). Some of them are not even found in the old literary or lexical works and so only the contexts of their occurrence can clarify their purpose. Sometimes a comparative study of

Kannada inscriptions may help to clarify passages in Tamil inscriptions and *vice versa*. It takes time to get accustomed to the language of the inscriptions, which have some peculiar grammatical features. But there is no short cut; diligent reading is the only method available.” (Y.Subbarayalu 2006:54). The above quotations suffice to highlight that the study of Tamil and Dravidian syntax, both diachronic and synchronic, and the Dravidian epigraphic corpus need due attention from scholars.

### **Epigraphic Tamil and Tamil Linguistics**

Tamil epigraphic corpus is not only a neglected source in the study of Tamil historical linguistics but is also subject to serious social and linguistic prejudice. After T.P. Meenakshisundaran’s ‘History of Tamil Language (1963), number of devoted scholars on Tamil ephigraphy is very minimum in number. The works of scholars such as S. Agesthalingom and S.V.Shanmugam; K. Kanapathypillai; A. Velupillai, K.V.Zvelebil stand alone in this vast area of research. One of the reasons may be that the traditional Tamil scholars did not hold the inscriptional Tamil in high esteem as it is not ‘the language of literature’, hence stigmatised as less pure, and deliberated not worthy of scholarly attention.<sup>2</sup> They considered this variety of epigraphic Tamil closer to the ‘spoken Tamil’. This opinion has gained ground even among the linguists. While describing Tamil inscriptions, T. P. Menakshisundaran has stated “In these records we have more of the colloquial language as it was current in the varying ages to which the records belong”. (1965:7). Zvelebil, in his *Introduction to the historical grammar of Tamil* proposed three language varieties: “Centamil or ‘standardized literary language’, the ‘inscriptional language’, the ‘hybridized, Aryanised Buddhist and/or Jaina Jargon” (1970:15-16). As for Zvelebil “...the inscriptional language, most probably nearer to the spoken language, best represented in its beginning stages by middle and later Pallava inscriptions, and later by the Chola inscriptions, akin to somewhat to the language of early and middle bhakti poetry” (1970:16). In this respect, A. Velupillai’s work goes a step further by introducing a dichotomy namely ‘standard vs not-standard’ dear to Tamil linguists particularly in the case of diglossic nature of Tamil.<sup>3</sup> All the senior scholars might be certainly right in their findings but what is puzzling for the reader is that he is left with so many different complex linguistic assumptions like ‘colloquial language’, ‘standard vs non-standard’, ‘hybridized jargon’, ‘language of bhakti poetry’ etc., for which no empirical evidence is available.<sup>4</sup>

### **Indian Epigraphic culture and Language contact**

The development of Sanskrit, few Middle Indo Aryan and the four major Dravidian languages as inscriptional language is very interesting from historical sociolinguistics point of view. For

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<sup>2</sup> See for instance the following passage of M. Raghavaingar in Tamil, translated by Y. Subbarayalu “Generally inscriptions cannot be rated high on the basis of the Style of their language. By their very nature of writing on stone, they abound in Orthographical and grammatical errors. Hence it would be rare to find Tamil Scholars taking an interest in studying the inscriptions. [...]” and the comment by Y. Subbarayalu “This passage reflects the exact attitude of the majority of Tamil scholars towards inscriptions which have been approached by them with some scorn.”(Subbarayalu 2006: 49-50).

<sup>3</sup> “The language used in most of the Pandiya inscriptions was rather close to the standard Tamil. It preserved classical form in a large measure. On the other hand, as a whole, language was not standardised in the Pallava Kingdom” (A. Velupillai, 1980:172).

<sup>4</sup> The ‘unstandardized’ form of epigraphic language is not only said of the Tamil inscriptions, it is also noted in the case of inscriptional Prakrits: “The inscriptional Prakrits are diverse and largely unstandardized. Much more than is the case with the literary Prakrits of later times, the morphology and especially the orthography of the inscriptional dialects is unstandardized and inconsistent, to the extent that it is not unusual to find the same word spelled several different ways within the same inscription. (Solomon 1998:72).

instance, contrary to the literary sources, the Prakrits were the first language of inscription as can be seen from the Ashokan edicts. In early Indian inscriptions the Prakrit, Middle Indo-Aryan (MIA) were the only languages from about 3rd century B.C. for at least two centuries. Sanskrit became the language of inscriptions only after the advent of Guptas to power at Pataliputra. In North India, Prakrit was replaced by Sanskrit in the 4th century A.D. This period is characterised by a highly diverse situation of language contact. Till the medieval period, “bilingual” inscriptions became prevalent throughout India. The invocatory, genealogical, and concluding portions will be in Sanskrit, while the “functional” portion recording the specific details of the gift, transaction and other details, would be in the other language. (Sircar 1965: 39-60; Solomon 1998: 72- 109). A quick look at the inscriptions in different Indian languages shows, without doubt, that the process of Sanskritisation is a linguistic and cultural norm and Sanskritisation legitimizes the promotion of regional languages as epigraphic language.

### Contact between Tamil and Indo-Aryan

Indo-Aryanisation should be recognized as an assertion of cultural heritage (Sridhar 1981). The Sanskritisation is a scalar process. The non-literary languages spoken in the Indo-Aryan region seem to have undergone a greater amount of structural (morphological, syntactic) influence. Whereas the literary languages of the South have been influenced predominantly on the lexical level. The copper-plate charters of the Pallavas, the Cholas and the Pandyas were written in both Sanskrit and Tamil languages till 12th A.D. The rate of borrowing from Indo-Aryan depends on the type of Tamil inscriptions. For instance, in the earliest Tamil-Brāhmi inscriptions (4 BCE-4 CE), the amount of IA borrowing is estimated to be more than 50% (I. Mahadevan 2014, K. Zvelebil 1970), whereas in the Hero-stone inscriptions it is around one percent. But the temple inscriptions and in copper plate charts the amount of IA borrowing is surprisingly high. I will present below a few examples to illustrate the process of Indo-Aryanisation<sup>5</sup> and de-Indo-Aryanisation of Inscriptional Tamil and its sociolinguistic implications.

The royal titles and epithets are in many instances Indo-Aryanised. Here are two examples of titles of Chola kings.

***pāṇṭiya kulāśani*** ‘Destroyer of the Pandya dynasty’

pāṇṭiya+ kula+ aśani: Pandya + royal family, dynasty + thunder bolt

This expression literally means ‘the one who is like a thunderbolt to the Pandya dynasty’

***pāṇṭiya kulāntaka*** ‘The one who destroys the Pandyas’

pāṇṭiya+ kula+ antaka: Pantya + royal family, dynasty + : one who puts an end

We notice code mixing at the morphological level. This kind of code mixing is very commonly noticed in the Tamil inscriptions.

***prāptiyinālē*** ‘profit gained from assets (interest)’

prāpti ‘acquisition, gain, profit’

-in-: augment

-āl-: instrumental case

-ē-: emphatic morpheme.

Phonological & morphological adaptation in Tamil of Indo-Aryan borrowings has been discussed in many previous works. (Shanmugam S.V. 1968). The following instance is attested in the earliest stone inscription of Pulankurichchi (450 CE).

<sup>5</sup> The term Indo-Aryanisation is preferred to Sanskritisation as we come across borrowings from Prakrits, Pali and Sanskrit.

**attikōyattār**: officer of regiment of elephants, derived from *hastikosa*: ‘officer of regiment of elephants’.

*hastikosa* > *attikōyam*, in this case the phonological adaptation of the IA borrowing into Tamil is carried out exactly according to the Tamil phonological rules.

-tt-: oblique case morpheme

-ār: plural and honorific suffix.

Any linguistic form appearing in writing can be assumed to have been in use for some time, at least one or two centuries, in the (spoken) language.

The last example illustrates the formation of a ‘compound verb’. This compound verb is formed on an IA base ‘*śilā-lekha*’ which means ‘writing on a stone’, an inscription on stone, to which two Tamil verbs are added.

**slālekhai ceytu kuṭuttōm** ‘we made engraved on stone’. The same expression is also available in Tamil: **kallil veṭṭi kuṭuttōm** ‘we made engraved on stone’.

De-Indo-Aryanisation, is an important and interesting sociolinguistic phenomenon found in Tamil inscriptions. This involves the creation of new terms in Tamil and can be considered as a reverse process of replacing Indo-Aryan loan words. These include royal titles and as well names of gods and deities.

We come across the term **kōnēriṇmai koṇṭāṇ**, a title used in the royal orders, which is used to replace the king’s name. This term signifies the ‘peerless king’, ‘the king who has no equal’.

Kō+nēr+iṇmai+koṇṭāṇ: ‘king+matchless+acquired’. Presumably, the Tamil expression *nēriṇmai* is a loan translation of the Sanskrit term *atulya* ‘unequal, incomparable’.

In general, the Indo Aryan terms for the gods or deities are always borrowed directly and used in Tamil. Contrary to this conventional practice, we come across the creation of terms in Tamil by loan translation. For example, the term *naṭarāja* is not used in Tamil inscriptions. Instead we notice either *āṭavallāṇ* ‘the one excellent in dance’ or *kūttāṇṭavan* ‘the god of the dance’. Another striking example is ‘*ardha nārīśvarā*’, this expression is not found in Tamil inscriptions, instead we notice an interesting form by loan translation ‘*peṇṇōr pākaṇ*’ made of both Tamil *peṇ* and Indo Aryan *bhāga*, *pākaṇ* derived from < *bhāga*. ‘Person who has anything at his side; partner’ (Tamil Lexicon). These attestations clearly indicate the fact that the linguistic processes namely Tamil purism and Tamilization etc., have not been nothing new and they have been in place from the medieval inscriptional periods onwards (Murugaiyan 2004).

‘Indo-Aryanisation’ and ‘De Indo Aryanisation’ or more explicitly ‘Tamilization’ are the two concurrent processes of historical developments in the evolution of Tamil as inscriptional language. The higher rate of IA borrowings in the Tamil inscriptions has given rise to a special style of epigraphic *maṇipravāḷa*. Again, what is sad to notice is that while the Tamil scholarly tradition recognizes only the *vaiṣṇava maṇipravāḷa* (Venkatachari K.K.A 1978) but a great amount of epigraphic *maṇipravāḷa* is left unnoticed. It is further unfortunate to note is that this *maṇipravāḷa* style is legitimised in *vīracōḷiyam*, a traditional Tamil grammar of 11<sup>th</sup> century CE.

The process of ‘Indo-Aryanisation’ and ‘de-Indo-Aryanisation’ or Tamilization should be regarded in their social context and are part of historical developments in the evolution of Tamil as inscriptional language, like all other Indian languages. The earliest Tamil inscriptions (both stone – Pulanguricci inscription- and copper plate charts – Pallankoyil copper plates-) show clearly that the contact between Tamil and Indo-Aryan was already in a well advanced stage. The extent to which a given language has been influenced by Indo-Aryan depends mainly on the cultural and political motivations of the users of receiving

language. As I had mentioned above, a good piece of rationalisation would be the case of Tamil Hero-Stone inscriptions, where up to 9<sup>th</sup> century CE, the IA loan words amount hardly more than one percent. Tamil social dialectologists have to fight long and hard for the acceptance of language variation free from normative and prescriptive judgements.

### **Syntactic Features of Tamil Inscriptions**

Inscriptions are the primary historical sources and they contain records of various types: donation and land grants to the temples and village assembly, land sale deeds, tax remissions, decisions made by the village assembly, desertion of village by cultivators, irrigation, revolt by cultivators and artisans, etc. (Karashima 1996; Subbarayalu 2001). These records are highly informative in nature and very precise. The authors of these inscriptions have used specific grammatical tools to make these records precise and un-ambiguous. A detailed linguistic analysis shows clearly that the syntactic structure of these inscriptions are based on two major principles: 1) information structure and 2) pragmatics. Any natural language can offer a variety of possibilities to express the same information. All such options are not made available in our traditional grammars. Another major problem is that the linguistic changes that have occurred in Tamil during the last two millennia are not recorded systematically in our traditional grammars. So is the need for anyone to devise an appropriate grammatical tool while trying to account for the syntactic structure of Tamil inscriptions or even the Sangam texts (Murugaiyan 2012).

In the Tamil epigraphic texts the morphological case morphemes genitive, locative, ablative are not systematically used. Dative is the only exception. The accusative case is used only to mark the grammatical object but the donated objects are never marked in accusative case. Many body-part nouns are used as postpositions. As to the verbal forms, the finite forms are very rarely used. On other hand adverbial participles and adjectival participles are most commonly used. This gives a completely different picture of the predicate structure (Murugaiyan A 1998). The commonly recognised SOV word order is not relevant in the inscriptional Tamil. On the contrary, the word order is not triggered by grammatical features, but mostly controlled by pragmatic features. In the following pages I will try to show a few selected features of the syntactic structure of the inscriptional Tamil.

### **Earliest Tamil-Brāhmi Hero stone – Pre Early Old Tamil Structure?**

The oldest written records in Dravidian are the Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions, covering a period of more than seven centuries from *ca.* 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE to 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. They provide strong chronological evidence for the evolution of the Tamil language. The following inscription dating 3<sup>rd</sup> BCE was discovered at Pulimān kōmbai, Teni district in 2006. This inscription is of great historical importance by its content and also by its linguistic structure. A detailed description of this Tamil Brāhmi inscription is given by K. Rajan et al. (*āvaṇam* 2006:1-5).

1. *Kal*
2. *pēṭu tīyaṇ antavaṇ*
3. *kūṭal ūr ākōḷ*

which means “This is the memorial stone (erected in honor) of Pēṭu Tīyaṇ Antavan during the process of cow-lifting at Kūṭalūr”

A quick examination of these inscriptions would indicate the absence of case markers and copula or other verbal forms. The word order is completely inverse while compared to that of Modern Tamil. This type of inscriptions can be interpreted successfully mainly by the semantic features of the lexical items. I. Mahadevan in the same volume suggested a new reading as follows ((*āvaṇam* 2006:6-8):

1. *kūṭal ūr ā kōḷ*

2. *peṭu tīyaṅ antavaṅ*

3. *kal*

And commented that, “the word order is confusing” and according to him a verb is needed to complete the sentence and hence suggested that “*Pēṭu*” should be replaced by the verb *peṭu* / *paṭu* ‘be deceased’.

One can easily understand I. Mahadevan’s highly justifiable point of view. But the problem with his linguistic judgement is it is based mainly, on the one hand, on rules prescribed by traditional grammars like *Tolkāppiyam* and on the other hand, through the intuition of the grammar of Modern Tamil. But his analysis is not doing any justice to the historical evolution of the Tamil language during the past two thousand years and more.

This and many other early Tamil-Brāhmi inscriptions depict a pre-Sangam analytic structure as explained clearly by Pilot-Raichoor (Pilot-Raichoor 2012). The earliest structure of Tamil (Dravidian) language was typologically analytical. There was a typological shift from analytic to the present agglutinative structure during pre-Sangam period. M. Varadrajana was probably the first who argued in favour of analytic type in old Tamil and explained how “certain verbal forms in certain moods had no accessory notions of persons, gender and number [...]” (M. Varadarajana 1957: 22).

Ten years later, Zvelebil based on his works on the early Tamil texts clearly posited the idea of a typological shift (Zvelebil, K., Glasov, Y. Y., and Andronov, M. (1967). « It can be supposed that the period preceding the Early Old Tamil (EOT) stage was in a state similar to “isolation” while the EOT period [the first historically attested stage of development] had a transient character with disappearing traces of isolation, typical features of agglutination and nascent features of inflection”. According to this hypothesis, the pre Old Tamil represented both an old system of isolating type and also features of agglutinative type as found in Modern Dravidian languages.

Finally the credit goes to Pilot-Raichoor, who had established without doubt that Proto - Dravidian was most probably an isolating language and explained the typological shift from analytic to agglutinative type in Dravidian based on Tamil-Brāhmi data. “The Tamil-Brahmi data give evidence for both the isolating<sup>6</sup> or ‘analytical’<sup>7</sup> tendency of the previous stage and the development of the process of agglutination. Data found in these records converge with data from other sources of Old Tamil to signal the emergence of a new type of grammar, caught in its formative stage, with a great variety of constructions which will later on be reduced to more regular constructions in derivations and morphological paradigms.” (Pilot-Raichoor 2012:285).

The Tamil language of Pulimāṅ Kōmbai inscription represents the grammar of the pre Early Old Tamil stage. It is misleading to analyse this text according to the agglutinative type of grammar of Modern Tamil. However, the Pulimāṅ Kōmbai Tamil-Brāhmi inscription reveals two historical linguistic facts: 1) the whole syntactic structure reflects the pre Early Old Tamil stage and 2) the word order is pragmatically governed and respects the principle of information structure or information packaging.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> In an ‘isolating’ language, “each word consists of one morpheme. That is, each lexical root is a word and each grammatical element is shown as a distinct word (not as an affix)” Dixon 2010/1:226).(cf. Pilot-Raichoor 2012)

<sup>7</sup> In modern typology, other classificatory parameters are used. One of them is a scalar evaluation of the complexity of the words: from “analytic’: smallish number of components –root(s) plus grammatical elements— per word” to “synthetic: largish number of components per word” (Dixon 2010/1:226). ).(cf. Pilot-Raichoor 2012)

<sup>8</sup> This type of word order is seen even in later Sangam texts. See for instance in *Cilappatikāram* : eḷḷunar pōlum ivar eṅ pūṅkōtaiyai / mock-3pl like they my flower garland.acc/ ‘these people would mock at my flower garland (heroine)’ Cilap.1.10.231

### Accusative Case and Object of donation

Another interesting feature of inscriptional Tamil is the differential use of the accusative case marker. This differential use is not taken care of by our traditional grammars. In the inscriptional Tamil, the accusative case is used only to mark the grammatical objects but not used to mark the donated object (Murugaiyan 2008). Let us consider the following examples:

SII.2.5.p56.11

.....ivvūrai                      ūṭaruttup pōy    puṭavūrkkup    pāyum                      vāykkāl .....  
 .....deic.village.acc            cross.go.adp    other villages.dat    irrigate.rp                      channel  
 ‘... canal which crosses through the village and irrigates other village...’

The above example is from an inscription describing the donation of rice fields from different villages. The village has already been mentioned in the text and is established as topic of the clause. The noun *ūr* ‘village’ marked in accusative prefixed with the deictic particle is an argument of the two place predicate *ūṭaru* ‘pass across’. This noun *ūr* marked in accusative is in fact the definite direct object and form part of the discourse narration, and can be considered as backgrounded event. This clause is subsidiary or a framework to the propositional content ‘canal which irrigates the other villages’ expressed in the main clause. The noun phrase ‘vāykkāl’ canal, is the subject argument of two verbs ‘cross through’ and ‘irrigate’ respectively. The object ‘*ivvūrai*’, though referring to a direct object is not the complement of a verb expressing a donation.

SII.1.42.p68.3-19

mahāsabaiyōm [...] taṭi 5nāl    kuḷi 200                      iṇṇāyaṇārkkku [.....] kuṭutto\*m....  
 great assembly.1.pl [...]    land 5.inst    kuzi.unm 200                      deic.Godd.dat [...]    give.past.1.pl  
 “we members of the great assembly.... gave... to the God 200 kuḷi consisting of 5 rice fields”

This inscription describes a gift of land made by the members of the village assembly. In this example we have an ‘unmarked SOV’ constituent order and this is not very frequent in inscriptional Tamil. This ‘unmarked order’ shows no pragmatic function. The sentence contains a finite verb and shows agreement with the subject argument. It is interesting to note the inversion of the numeral quantifiers, 5 and 200 respectively, at the level of the noun phrases, thus giving rise to the phenomenon of quantifier floating. This inversion of numeral quantifiers is in correlation with the principles of pragmatic word order where the new information is placed at the focal and final position of the utterance.

SII.13.63.p29.8-10

cōḷa milāṭuṭaiyāṇ    vaitta    nuntāviḷakku    oṇṇrukku    vaitta    āṭu    toṇṇūrṛāru...  
 PN                                      put.rp    perpetual lamp    one.dat                      give.rp    sheep    96  
 “Sōḷamilāṭuṭaiyāṇ had given 96 sheep for (burning) a perpetual lamp he had bestowed”

This inscription records a gift of 96 sheep for burning a perpetual lamp. In 8, there are two clauses which are arranged in a sequential order. First, Sōḷamilāṭuṭaiyāṇ gave a perpetual lamp, and second, for this perpetual lamp he offered 96 sheep. The perpetual lamp is part of the two clauses. In the first event, an object of donation, it is in focus relation. In the second event, a beneficiary marked in dative case, it is in topic relation. In the second clause, the object of donation ‘96 sheep’ constitutes the new information and is the focus of the clause. Right dislocation of the donated object goes in symmetry with the floating of quantifier. The numeral quantifier is on the right side of the noun it qualifies instead of preceding it.

In the above example, the donated object, unmarked for accusative,<sup>9</sup> is placed on the right of the predicate in the focus position. The object of donation is typically encoded in this dislocated noun phrase, extracted from its basic OV position through a relativization process. This right detachment triggers also the phenomenon of quantifier floating, where the quantifier is placed on the right side of the noun head. These changes bring structural symmetries which are used by the information structure to enhance the reading of the inscriptions. The dislocation of ‘object of donation’ is clearly the result of a discourse strategy. The variation in the order of constituent could be better explained in correlation with factors like historical changes or as a combination of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic (discourse) factors. This type of structure is common in inscriptional Tamil and may be considered as a specific grammatical technique to mark the donated object.

### **Word order variation in inscriptional Tamil**

Change or variation in word order type is one of the most important areas in the study of historical linguistics. Several studies on historical data have shown that variation in word order is a common feature and argued that this variation in many of the languages may be dependent on the information structure (IS) : Icelandic, Old and Middle English, Greek, German, Hebrew, Vedic Sanskrit, Chinese for instance. Inscriptional Tamil is not an exception to this word order changing process. The idea of a basic word order typology is primarily based on the syntactic relations between the verb and its nominal arguments (subject and object). This means that the concept of basic word order is essentially syntactic. On the contrary, in some languages word order is established exclusively on pragmatic grounds (Thompson 1978, Mithun 1992).

We can roughly identify two different views on the word order in Old Tamil: (1) Zvelebil claims in general a SOV word order, but adds “if not disturbed by stylistic or emphatic shifts...” (Zvelebil, K. 1997:43), (2) Andronov suggests a free word order (1991) and in a more recent work Suzan Herring proposes SOV as the basic order (Herring 2000). Regarding the word order in the earliest records T.P.Meenakshisundaran noticed that “the subject [...] followed the predicate very frequently in ancient times, so frequently, indeed, that it cannot be rejected as mere poetic inversion. This syntactic structure represents an old state of affairs, when the subject did not always precede the predicate as it frequently does in Modern Tamil” (1965:3). This statement reminds us of the typological shift mentioned above. A sample analysis of word order in inscriptional Tamil shows that the variation in constituent order depends on the pragmatic factors and we will focus our attention only on verbal clauses, both finite and non-finite (Murugaiyan 2015). The place of different constituents in these propositions, in turn, are controlled by information structure and other contextual considerations. The term information structure is used to refer to various ways in which information, including propositional information and real-world knowledge, is linguistically encoded. In my previous analysis, I used the saliency parameter as the major pragmatic factor. By salient information we mean ‘important or key piece of information that the author of the inscriptions wished to convey his audience or readers. (Mithun 1992).

āvaṇam, Pulanguricci inscriptions (450 CE) [VS]

*kēṭṭu*      *vantu*      *kūriṇāṇ*      *ōlai eḷutuvāṇ*      *ramaṇ kārikaṇṇāṇ*

<sup>9</sup> However, according to Tolkāppiyam (col-72), the objects that are weighed, measured, counted, received take the accusative case marker. If we analyse this pattern based on the above rule of (tol.col.72), this may be considered ‘ungrammatical’. But the grammatical function of the accusative case is replaced by the relativization process which renders the donated object definite.

*listen.adpl*      *come.adpl*      *say.past.3.ms*      *writer*      *pn*

‘Raman Kāri kannan, the writer took notice came and reported [the order]’

In the above example, a verbal phrase occupies the clause initial position and the agent noun phrase is at the clause final position. The finite verb is preceded by a set of adverbial participles, describing a series of sequential actions. The writer and his identity (the proper noun), the salient pieces of information, are at the clause final position. Among the two nominals, the name of the writer *rāmaṇ kārikaṇṇaṇ*, unpredictable to the audience, is at the right most part of the clause and occupies the highest position in the saliency hierarchy.

S.I.I.17.262 (0600 CE) [VSN]

*aimpatē*      *aṇacaṇan*      *nōṛra*      *cantirananti ācirikar*      *nicīṭikai*  
57      *fasting*      *endure.rp*      *pn*      *memorial*

‘This is the memorial of Santirananti Asirikar, [who] fasted for 57 days [and gave up his life]’

The above example constitutes itself an inscription. While we read an inscription, the context and the location in which the inscription is situated become crucial to understand the meaning. In this example, the most important or salient information ‘*nicīṭikai*’ (memorial) is placed at the focal position, which is normally position of predicate.

Type of inscription	Verb final	Verb non-final	Total
Pulanguricci	06	09	15
Pallankoyil	15	05	20
Hero stone	46	34	80
Total	67	48	115
Percentage	58.26%	41.73%	

According to my pilot survey, the constituent order in inscriptional Tamil is neither free nor strictly adhering to SOV, but is sensitive to pragmatic factors (saliency or newsworthiness). Various word orders are exhibited, but none of them stands out as being significantly more frequent than any other order (Murugaiyan 2015).

### Pronominalised nouns / Appellative verbs

Finally, I would like to draw our attention on the extended use of pronominalised nouns known as *kuṛippu viṇai* in Tamil grammatical tradition also known as appellative verbs in Dravidian linguistics. The pronominalised nouns are widely used both as arguments and predicate in inscriptional Tamil. From a historical perspective, this particular form is very significant in the sense that it exhibits a turning point in the typological shift in Tamil from an isolating to an agglutinative language as mentioned above.

This *pronominalised noun* (PNN) is formed by affixing the Person Number and Gender (PNG) marker to any stem (STEM + PNG). These PNN forms in 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> persons are attested in many Classical Tamil verses with distinctive grammatical functions as argument or predicate.

*nāṭu* > *nāṭaṇ* “the one from/ possesseur of *nāṭu*” > *nāṭaṇai* “you chief of the *nāṭu*”

Whereas, in Modern Tamil, the PNN forms as occurred in 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person nouns have almost fallen into disuse and those in 3<sup>rd</sup> person, though are in use, this, however, tends to be generalised and lost their Person distinction. On the contrary, in Tamil inscriptions the PNN seem to be frequently used. A detailed analysis of the data from the inscriptional Tamil reveals not only that PNN are used in wider grammatical contexts and preserve their multifunctionality (like arguments and predicate) but also the proper nouns are pronominalised, probably, unique feature in the Tamil pattern.

In the inscriptional Tamil we notice any noun, common noun, numerals and proper noun can be pronominalised.

## SII. 12. 55

nāl-v-ōm “we four”

tontāviḷakk.erippōm.āṇōm [...] innalvōm .....  
 perpetual lamp burn.nonpast.1pl. oblige.past.1pl deic.four.1pl  
 “We four [...] are obliged to lit a perpetual lamp”

The pronominalisation of common nouns are attested in Tamil and in many other languages. However, in the inscriptional Tamil we notice the pronominalisation of proper nouns. This seems to be an innovation in epigraphic Tamil and not noticed in other Tamil literary texts.

## SII.3.16

[...] eḷutiṇēṇ innakarak kara[ṇa]tt[ā]ṇ nārāyaṇa[ṭai]kalavaṇeṇ  
 Write.past.1s deic.town accountant nārāyaṇa[ṭai]kalavaṇ.1s

I, Nārāyaṇa Aṭaikalavaṇ, the accountant of this city, I wrote

The technique of pronominalizing nouns is a characteristic feature of omnipredicative languages. In omnipredicative languages different parts of speech behave similarly syntactically.

## CONCLUSION

In the above pages, I tried to present a few salient features of the inscriptional Tamil based on my previous works. It would be impossible to present here all the characteristic elements of epigraphic Tamil that are pertinent for the historical linguistics. The most interesting aspect would be the presence of archaic characters in the Tamil-Brāhmi inscriptions. Many of the points discussed as above are either not attested in the traditional grammars of Tamil or not observable in Modern Tamil. In few cases, what had been considered as ‘ungrammatical’ in epigraphic Tamil by scholars are simply based on the relics of the old structures as defined in the traditional grammars and suggest a failure to understand the distinctive features of inscriptional Tamil. To summarise, it may not be an exaggeration to presume that every aspect of the grammar of inscriptional Tamil is different from the variety of Modern Tamil and also from the other known ‘varieties’ of Tamil. The ‘grammars’ of inscriptional Tamil is motivated, among other things, mainly by the principles of information structure or information packaging. Thus, a careful study of the inscriptional Tamil, particularly on the grounds of its distinctive and salient features, would surely help to understand better on the typological changes that underwent during the transition of language change from Classical Tamil to Contemporary modern Tamil.

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