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Identifying Basic Constituent Order in Old Tamil:
Issues in historical linguistics with Special Reference to
Tamil Epigraphic texts (400-650 CE)¹

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Abstract

Why and how languages change over time have been the major concerns of the historical linguistics. The Dravidian comparative linguistics in the last few decades has arrived at excellent results at different levels of language change: phonology, morphology and etymology. However the field of historical syntax remains to be explored in detail. Change or variation in word order type is one of the most important areas in the study of historical linguistics and language change.

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). We are not sure to what extent the Greenbergian six-way typology (SOV/OSV/SVO/OVS/VSO/VOS), can be applied in the case of Old Tamil, despite its proved pertinence for several world languages. We need a vast empirical study before reaching any definite conclusion in the case of Old Tamil. In this paper on Tamil epigraphic texts, we will show that the constituent order is neither free nor strictly of SOV type and the variation in constituent order is motivated by pragmatic factors.

Introduction

Every language changes with time in the process of its transmission. This change leads to a new grammar. 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

¹ This is a revised version of the paper presented at the World Classical Tamil Conference, Coimbatore, India, 2010.

texts. Considering previous works on Old Tamil, one has to admit that each kind of text, inscriptional or literary, in fact has its own underlying grammatical structure.

After T.P. Meenakshisundaram's path-breaking 'History of Tamil Language (1965)', we notice a number of linguistic studies on 'Old Tamil' both of Sangam and epigraphic corpora (Agesthalingom and S.V.Shanmugam, V.S.Rajam 1992, A.Velupillai 1976, K.V.Zvelebil 1967). These studies have made important contributions in the area of Old Tamil linguistics. However, much remains to be said on morphosyntax and syntax of Old Tamil.

Word order in the Dravidian family of languages, as well as in Tamil, has traditionally been described as SOV. But we need more detailed empirical studies before considering definitively what the basic word order is in Old Tamil. After Greenberg's publication of six-way typology of SOV/OSV/SVO/OVS/VSO/VOS (Greenberg 1963), there has been an increasing interest among scholars on word order typology. These studies have resulted in considerable advancement in understanding the word order typology and have addressed a general question of to what extent the Greenbergian six-way typology can be applied to all languages (Lehman 1973, Dryer 1997). In the case Old Tamil, particularly in the language of Tamil inscriptions its pertinence is yet to be proved.

Data and Methodology

Data for this study were taken from three different types of Tamil inscriptions. We have analysed a total number of 37 inscriptions dating from 450 to 650 CE from our 'kalvettu database'. Among them 35 are Hero stone inscriptions, one stone donative inscription (pulanguricci) and one copper plate chart (pallankoyil copper plate). In our present analysis we keep them distinct because we cannot consider them as a homogenous whole and each type may belong to a specific 'genre'.² One should be aware of the fact, that in general the inscriptional text is composed of 'complex sentences'. A same nominal argument may be part of argument structures of different verbs and may have different functions, like 'agent' and 'patient' depending on the event with which it is associated. Because of the complex nature of the argument structures of the inscriptional text, each text is segmented into contextually meaningful information units. Each information unit, representing an action verb and the participant(s), functions as a simple clause. In our present analysis, each complex clause is

² Copper plate charts and the stone (temple) inscriptions are both donative inscriptions and one may assume that these two types of inscriptions are of the same genre. But as we are not aware of any detailed analysis of the language of these two types of inscriptions, we prefer to consider them as two distinct 'genres'.

again divided into simple clauses. Our corpus is linguistically limited as it contains mostly declarative sentences whereas interrogative and negative sentences are very rare or almost inexistent. This limitation is naturally due to the content and nature of the epigraphic text.

The inscriptional text by definition is a legal document/deed, and is unambiguous, hence is different from other poetic or narrative texts for instance. In order to avoid any kind of confusion in our analysis, we stick to the following precautionary maxims: 1) the Tamil historical linguistics has to be studied from within the attested texts respecting regional and chronological constraints, 2) the totality of the Tamil inscriptional corpus does not constitute a single and homogenous genre and 3) the study of inscriptional texts requires appropriate and specific analytical tools.

Word order in Tamil epigraphic texts

The widely recognized constituent order for Dravidian family of languages is SOV (Zvelebil 1987, Herring Susan 2000, Bh. Krishnamurthi 2003). However, scholars have overtly recognized variation in the SOV order but have not made a detailed attempt to discuss about this variation (Zvelebil 1967.71, 1997.43) except Herring (Herring 2001). In her valuable work Herring has made two important remarks: 1) “[w]ord order is conditioned by the poeticality of the text..., and 2) SOV was the norm in Old Tamil...” (Herring 2001.199). Our data on inscriptional Tamil do not seem to coincide with her remarks. But, to our knowledge, no detailed study has been carried out on the syntactic structure of the Tamil epigraphic corpus. Our present study, carried out on a small corpus, is only a pilot survey while considering the vast amount of epigraphic texts available in Tamil.

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 and Mithun 1992). A commonly accepted cross-linguistic generalization is that word order is of two types: Pragmatic Word Order (PWO) and Grammatical Word Order (GWO). For instance, in ‘pragmatic word order’ languages like Czech word order is used for pragmatic purposes, i.e. to signal the information status of sentence constituents. In other words, the position of different constituents is conditioned by information structure and many other contextual factors. English, on the other hand, is a ‘grammatical word order’ language, which means that word order is used for grammatical purposes, i.e. to encode the grammatical relations within a

sentence -subject vs. object- (Thompson 1978). Many languages, in their historical development and in the process of grammaticalisation have shown shift in the word order from pragmatic to grammatical word order, i.e. from topic to subject.

In Tamil epigraphic texts we notice frequent constituent order variation. Our primary concern in this paper will be 1) to show that among several constituent order patterns noticed in our corpus no one order stands out as being significantly more frequent than any other order, and 2) to account for the constituent order variation in our corpus. We will concentrate in this paper only on the order of major constituents, the event (verb) and the nominal arguments participating in the events: the agent (subject) and the patient (object). There is a close correlation between the type (genre) of epigraphic texts and the clause types. To put things simply, we can say that the temple inscriptions, on donation, contain lengthy and large number of information unit, whereas the memorial stone inscriptions contain, generally speaking, short texts and the number of information unit is relatively less. In addition, the constituent order may vary depending on the number of arguments participating in the event.

Order of constituents in Tamil inscriptions (450-650 CE)

In this section, we will present the different types of constituent order in inscriptional Tamil of the early period. We have analysed three types of inscriptions as are available in our 'kalvettu database' for the selected period. The present analysis will be relying more on Hero stone inscriptions, as they represent 95% of our present corpus. Mithun has suggested several criteria for defining the basic word order (Mithun 1992). In our present analysis we choose frequency as principal criteria. Dryer considers "a particular order as basic in a language if it is at least twice as frequent in texts as the order or orders it contrasts with" (Dryer 1997:75). In this count, V represents all verbal forms whether finite or non-finite and the post-verbal N is the salient or newsworthy information but is not part of the argument structure of the verb in the clause.

Frequency of constituent order in Pallankoyil copper plate (0550 CE)

Zvelebil has contributed a detailed analysis on the Pallankoyil copper plate (Zvelebil 1964). In our present corpus this is the only inscription that shows an overwhelming evidence for verb finality and responds positively to Dryer's frequency criteria (Dryer 1997). The verb final clauses (75%) occur three times more than the non verb-final clauses (25%). However, this unique case does not justify a dominant [SV, OV =] SOV order in inscriptional Tamil.

No	type	occurrence	Percentage
1	SOV	5	33.33%
2	SV	4	26.66%
3	OV	4	26.66%
4	OV	2	13.33%
Total		15	100

TABLE 1a. Pallankoyil. Verb final = 75%

No	type	occurrence	Percentage
1	SVO	1	20%
2	OVS	1	20%
3	VO	3	60%
Total		5	100

TABLE 1b. Pallankoyil. Verb non-final = 25%

Frequency of constituent order in Pulanguricci inscription-P1 (0450 CE)

In Pulanguricci, three Tamil donative inscriptions were discovered and are considered as the earliest Tamil inscription of this genre, belonging to 450 CE circa (Subbarayalu 2001.1-6). Among the three inscriptions only one (P1) is well preserved and we are giving below the count of constituent order for this inscription.

No	type	occurrence	Percentage
1	SV	2	33.33%
3	OV	4	66.66%
Total		6	100

TABLE 2. Pulangurucchi. Verb final = 40%

No	type	occurrence	percentage
1	SVO	1	11.11%
2	VO	5	55.55%
3	VS	2	22.22%
4	OVS	1	11.11%
Total		9	100

TABLE 2 b. Pulangurucchi. Verb non-final = 60%

According to this frequency count, the Verb-final type (40%) is lesser than the Verb-Non final type (60%). Pulanguricci inscription, like the Pallankoyil copper plate, is a donative inscription but the frequency of constituent order is not the same in both cases.

Frequency of constituent order in Hero stone inscriptions (400-650 CE)

Hero stone inscriptions are different from the donative inscriptions and constitute a different type or ‘genre’. In our corpus, all the inscriptions describe the erection of a memorial stone in honour of a dead hero in a dispute in general during cattle raid, cattle retrieval or in a battle.

No	type	Occurrence	Percentage
1	SV	22	47.82%
2	SOV	12	26.08%
3	OSV	08	17.39%
4	OV	04	08.69%
Total		46	100

TABLE 3a. Hero stone. Verb final = 57.5%

No	type	occurrence	Percentage
1	VS	12	35.29%
2	SVO	01	02.94%
3	OSV	01	02.94%
4	OVS	01	02.94%
5	SPpIN	19	55.88%
Total		34	100

TABLE 3b. Hero stone. Verb non-final = 42.5%

The frequency count for Hero stone inscriptions is almost like that of Pulanguricci inscription. It is important to note that the frequency count varies from one type of text to another. The results presented in Tables 1, 2 and 3 are summarised in table 4 below which gives a global view of the frequency of constituent order. According to Dryer’s frequency criteria, neither verb final nor verb non-final constituent order could be considered as basic in inscriptional Tamil.

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%	

TABLE 4. Summary of constituent order

At the present state of our knowledge, none of the different constituent orders in inscriptional Tamil can be considered as basic, as Dryer had explained very clearly.³

³ « If no order is most frequent over most texts, however, or if the order varies from genre to genre or text to text, we should probably not describe any particular order as the basic order (in the sense of most frequent order)... » (Dryer 1997.72).

Distribution of arguments in Tamil inscriptions

Lehman (1973:51) argued in favour of reducing the basic word-order types to two: OV and VO, on the ground that the (S) subject argument is deleted in most of the languages. In Dravidian, argument deletion, both agent (subject) and patient (object), is a common feature. Dryer (1997) had proposed, instead of Greenberg's six way typology, an alternative four-way typology, based on two binary parameters, OV versus VO and SV versus VS. The results presented in table 5, on the distribution of arguments, show clearly that clauses containing two full NP arguments are far less than those containing one argument. Our data suggest that 1) we should not neglect Dryer's (1997) alternative proposal and, 2) forcing Tamil language "into the mold of any basic word order at all is at best descriptively unnecessary, and at worst an obstacle to the discovery of interesting universals" (Mithun 1992:15).

Type	1 argument	2 arguments	Percentage
SOV		17	14.52
OSV		09	07.62
SVO		03	02.56
OVS		03	02.56
SV	28		23.93
VS	14		11.96
OV	14		11.96
VO	08		11.11
S.Pln.N	19		14.52
Total	83	32	115

TABLE 5

1 argument = 72.17%

2 arguments = 27.82%

Constituent order variation in Tamil inscriptions

Even though scholars do not agree on the basic constituent order in Old Tamil, some have observed an important phenomenon of variation in constituent order (Zvelebil 1967:71, 1997:43, Herring 2001). In the following section, we will show 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.

Each component of the epigraphic text (invocation, eulogy, functional part, imprecation etc.) fits in a linear order in the textual structure of the inscription. 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. Lambrecht suggests that the formal structure of sentences is related to the communicative situations in which sentences are used. He states that “this relationship is governed by principles and rules of grammar, in a component called information structure” (Lambrecht 1994:334). In the present analysis we use 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 (readers).⁴

In (1) the patient argument (direct object) is not marked in accusative case but this nominal element carries the most important or salient piece of information. The patient argument is generally placed post verbally, occupying the clause final or focus position. The verb is, in such cases, in relative participle form and the object or the head noun is moved to the focus position. In a previous paper, we have made a distinction between syntactic and focused object based on the information structure (Murugaiyan 2008).

1. Chhs.1971-50 (618 CE) [SVO]

<i>kūṭal</i>	<i>īlamakkaḷ</i>	<i>naṭuvitta</i>	<i>kal</i>
<i>pln</i>	<i>warriors</i>	<i>erect.caus.rp</i>	<i>stone</i>

‘this is the memorial stone erected by the warriors of the village Kudal’

In (2), as in the previous example, the patient argument *tēvakulam* is not marked in accusative case and is placed in focus position. In addition, the genitive and locative cases are not marked either. The genitive relation is marked by the word order whereas the locative relation is understood contextually. Place nouns are inherently locative and it is not marked generally, but sometimes the place noun is in oblique case.

2. āvaṇam, (Pulanguricci inscriptions) (550 CE) [SVO]

<i>vēḷmarukaṇ</i>	<i>makaṇ</i>	(...) <i>eṅkumāṇ</i>	<i>nollaiyūruk</i>
<i>pn</i>	<i>son</i>	(...) <i>pn</i>	<i>pln</i>

<i>kūrṛattu (...)</i>	<i>ceivitta</i>	<i>tēvakulam...</i>
<i>division.obl</i>	<i>do.caus.rp</i>	<i>temple</i>

‘this is the temple that was built by (...) Enkuman, the son of velmarukan (...) in the district of Nollaiyur’

In 1 & 2 the objects of creation respectively *kal* and *tēvakulam*, being salient piece of information, are placed in post-verbal focal position but are not marked in accusative case.

⁴ The notion of saliency may be compared to the concept of newsworthiness used by Mithun (Mithun 1992).

In (3), 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 *rāmaṅ kārikaṅṅāṅ*, unpredictable to the audience, is at the right most part of the clause and occupies the highest position in the saliency hierarchy.

3. āvaṅam, Pulanguricci inscriptions (450 CE) [VS]

kēṭṭu *vantu* *kūriṅāṅ* *ōlai eḷutuvāṅ* *ṛamaṅ kārikaṅṅāṅ*
listen.adpl come.adpl say.past.3.ms writer pn

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

A complex sentence like (4) is challenging. The proper noun Kinangan has different syntactic relations, unique argument of the intransitive verb *paṭa* ‘to die’ and is in genitive possessive relation with *kal* ‘the memorial stone’. As in the previous example, the genitive possessive relation is indicated by the word order, as the case marker is absent. The noun *kal* ‘memorial stone’ being the salient piece of information, it is placed in the focus position, which is normally the predicate position. The nominal *kal* ‘memorial stone’ is not part of the argument structure but however is the salient piece of information.

4. Dhar.1972-21-82 (609 CE) [SV-VSN]

vāṅikaru *ūru* *koḷaṭ* *paṭṭāru* *kiṅaṅkaṅ* *kal*
pn village capture.inf kill.past.3ms pn stone

‘this is his memorial stone of Kinangan (who is) dead while vanikaru invaded the village’

The relation between the predicate position and the focus position will be made clearer in the following examples (5) and (6).

5. Chhs.1971-62 (0550 CE) [SV]

maṛu atiraicarū *cēvakaru* *katavacāṭṭa* *paṭṭāṅ*
pn servant pn kill.past.3ms

‘Katavacattan, the servant of Maru atiraisaru was killed’

6. Dhar.1972.23-93 (600 CE) [SVVN]

koṛṛāṭai *toṛu* *mīṭṭu* *paṭṭāṅ* *kal*
pn cow herds retrieve.adpl kill.ppln stone

‘This is the memorial stone of Korratai who was killed while retrieving the cow herds’

Example (5) shows a subject-predicate structure. The finite verb is placed at the clause final position, reserved usually for this function. But in (6), the clause final (focus) position is occupied by the noun *kal* ‘memorial stone’ preceded by the participial noun.⁵ The participial noun has exactly the same morphological form as the finite verb in (5). The participial noun form is frequently used in hero stone inscriptions thus permitting additional information, which constitutes the potential piece of information. The salient piece of information occupies the clause final position but not the verb. This shows that the information structure has more prominence than the syntactic relation.

Examples (7) and (8) constitute each an inscription. In such cases, the context and the location in which the inscription is situated become crucial to understand the meaning of the inscriptions. The inscription in (7) is engraved on a slab set up in the Street. The beneficiary, in dative case, is placed clause initially. In (7) the most important or salient information is the ‘slab’ which was made in memory of *pirativi viṭaṅka[r]*, but paradoxically this element is deleted. Quite often we need extra linguistic information, the worldly knowledge or previous (shared) knowledge, to account for this type of deletion of arguments. However, while one reads the inscription, in situ, standing before the monument, the monument by its presence becomes the old or known information or predictable. Known or old information is not focalised. However, from structural point of view, one may argue that the lexical item corresponding to the salient information is deleted.

7. S.I.I.26.377 (0600 CE) [0²SV]

pirativi viṭaṅka[r]ku rati araican ceyvittatu
pn.dat. pn do.caus.vbln

(This is the slab that) was made by Adiaraisan to Pritivi Vitankar.

Compared to (7), in (8) the salient piece of information *nicīṭikai* ‘the memorial’ is highlighted and is placed clause finally, in focal position.

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

aimpatel 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]’

⁵ “Technically any finite verb can function as participial noun and therefore in Classical Tamil, many such verb forms provide two interpretations, one as a finite verb and the other as a participial noun”. [...] More specifically, when a finite verb form is used like a noun, it is referred to as a “participial noun”. (Rajam 1992.644)

Herring has mentioned that “[w]ord order is conditioned by the poeticality of the text...” (Herring 2001.199) and also in her note 9 “‘new’ information postposing was a poetic feature in the older language”. We are not sure whether the constituent order variation is constrained by verb finality and consequently ‘information postposing’. Let us consider example (9) from the epic Kampa Rāmayaṇam (10th CE). In (9), the verb, the salient piece of information, is fronted to the clause initial position. This verse describes the episode in which Hanuman went to the forest in search of Sita who was captivated by Ravana. The most important and expected information is that Sita was found alive by Hanuman. So the author of this epic has highlighted this verbal element by the left dislocation technique. This well known passage is an excellent example of left dislocation of the verb (verb fronting) which conveys the salient piece of information.

9. *kaṇṭaneṅ* *kaṛpiṇukku* *aṇiyai* *kaṅkaḷāl* (.....) *eṇṇu* *aṇumaṇ* *paṇṇuvāṇ*
see.past.1s *chastity.dat* *jwel.ac* *eyes.inst* (...) *that anuman* *tell.non past.3.m.s*
 ‘Saw I, the jewel of chastity (Sita)’ will say Hanuman (to Rama)....

Conclusion

In this pilot survey, we presented a sample of constituent orders occurring in Tamil inscriptions. Constituent order in our corpus is particularly sensitive to discourse-pragmatic factors. In our data, various word orders are exhibited, but none of them stands out as being significantly more frequent than any other order. In the quantitative part of this study we showed that the frequency of clauses containing both agent (subject) and patient (object) arguments is not very significant. While considering the frequencies of the various word orders available in our data, the language of Tamil inscriptions does not concur with Greenberg’s traditional six-way typology (SOV, SVO, OVS, OSV, VOS, VSO).

The constituent order in inscriptional Tamil is neither free nor strict SOV but is sensitive to pragmatic factors (saliency or newsworthiness). Word order variation in the early Tamil epigraphic texts is pragmatically motivated. The less salient (given or predictable) information appears sentence initially; while the salient piece of (new, unpredictable) information is positioned sentence finally. In fact, alternative word orders do not merely result from ‘stylistic’ changes but are motivated by explicit and specific constraints on the placement of salient piece of information.

Abbreviations:

3. third person; adpl. Adverbial participle; caus. Causative; inf. Infinitive; inst. Instrumental; m. masculine; obl; oblique; pln. Place name; pn. Proper noun; ppln. Participial noun; rp. Relative participle; s. singular; vbln. Verbal noun.

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