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# Methods in Historical linguistics: Evidences from Tamil epigraphic texts

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***Methods in Historical linguistics Evidences from Tamil epigraphic texts***  
**Organised by the Department of Linguistics & the Department of History**  
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### **Abstract**

Historical linguistics, among other things, aims at understanding the principles and factors that cause changes in languages. 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. The linguistic analysis of Tamil inscriptions and classical and ancient literary texts will shed light on the historical linguistics of Tamil and will try to fill a gap in the historical linguistics of the Dravidian family of languages. An in-depth linguistic analysis of Tamil epigraphic texts will show how the Tamil language used in Tamil inscriptions constitutes an important diachronic evidence of both sociolinguistic and linguistic evolution. I will concentrate here on the following three aspects: 1) Historical sociolinguistics: *Maṇipravāḷa* style and the development of Tamil as Inscriptional Language, 2) Historical linguistics, Syntax and Information structure, and 3) Construction of a fine-grained linguistic database and demonstrate how ‘corpus analysis’ can help us mapping the process of language change and language use.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Why and how languages change over time have been the major concerns of the historical linguistics. Any language, as a living entity, is subject to change. Historical linguistics is the field of linguistic research that is interested in the study of temporal variation – diachronic changes. However, diachronic and synchronic linguistic studies are complementary to each other. In Historical linguistics, we are interested in the complex interaction between the synchronic and diachronic aspects of the language. In short, historical linguistics aims at 1) understanding the principles and factors that cause changes in language and 2) describing the history of a given language. Here we would study two different but related aspects of linguistic variation: temporal (Historical linguistics) and social (historical sociolinguistics). In general, historical linguistics deals about the changes that occurred in languages over time (temporal variation). The linguistic analysis of inscriptions and classical and ancient literary texts will shed light on the historical linguistics of Tamil and will try to fill a gap in the historical linguistics of the Dravidian family of languages.

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.

### **TAMIL INSCRIPTIONS**

There are inscriptions of many ages, carved in Tamiḷ-Brāhmī, Vaṭṭeḷuttu, Tamiḷ and Grantha scripts. The inscriptions in Tamil Nadu can be divided either chronologically or typologically into different groups. They can be broadly classified into three groups, known as (1) Tamiḷ-Brāhmī inscriptions (TBI), (2) Hero Stone Inscriptions (HSI) and (3) Temple Tamil inscriptions (TTI) (that include copper plates and other Inscriptions). The vast corpus of Tamil inscriptions shows the gradual development of the Tamil epigraphic culture. The earliest of the Tamil inscriptions written in Tamiḷ-Brāhmī script and so named as Tamiḷ-Brāhmī inscriptions (TBI), date from 300 BCE up to 500 CE. These short inscriptions carved on the rocks and in the natural caves, on pot shreds and coins have been studied in detail by Mahadevan (2003). The HSI comes immediately after the (TBI) both chronologically and typologically. The HSI, short memorial or funerary texts, are limited in number and are distributed mainly in the northern part of Tamil Nadu. Finally, the TTI are the structurally developed diverse monumental inscriptions carved on the walls of the temples and span from 5<sup>th</sup> century up to 19<sup>th</sup> CE. The TTI inscriptions contain mostly descriptions of donations (of lands, ornaments, jewellery, cows, goats, statues and images) made to temples, village assemblies, their maintenance, administration. From the expansion of Chola (8<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> CE), epigraphy flourished everywhere, and inscriptions in Tamil are literally innumerable.

### **LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS**

An in-depth linguistic analysis of Tamil epigraphic texts will show how the Tamil language used in Tamil inscriptions constitutes an important diachronic evidence of both sociolinguistic and linguistic evolution. I will concentrate on the following three aspects:

- Historical sociolinguistics: *Maṇipravāḷa* style and the development of Tamil as Inscriptional Language
- Historical linguistics, Syntax and Information structure

- Construction of a fine-grained linguistic database and illustrate how ‘corpus analysis’ can help us mapping the process of language change and language use.

### **1. Historical sociolinguistics:**

Historical sociolinguistics is the study of the relationship between language and society in the past. It aims to identify how extra linguistic factors induce changes in the grammatical structure of a language (syntax, phonology, and lexicon) over time. This topic will deal about Bilingualism, language contact, development of *Maṇipravāḷa* style and the emergence of Tamil as ‘Inscriptional Language’. We will study some of the bilingual inscriptions in Tamil and show the functions of the Indo Aryan (Prakrit and Sanskrit) and the Tamil languages in the early Tamil epigraphic texts. We will study the nature of contact between these two major Indian language families and the development of the *Maṇipravāḷa* style in the epigraphic texts. In this regard, importance will be given to the study of the sociolinguistic aspects of creation of Tamil technical terms. This part will show one aspect of the specific features of the Tamil as inscriptional language.

### **2. Historical linguistics, Syntax and Information structure:**

What type of linguistic model would offer an understanding and interpretation of a variety of ancient texts that is preserved only in “writing”? How to describe the (synchronic) linguistic structure of a language at a given point in the past? How to find out and account for the linguistic changes that have occurred during the past few centuries?

One possible solution would be to devise a conceptual framework based on semantics and pragmatics, which would be more appropriate to delve into the meaning, intended in the text. Since the 19th century, there has been a regular paradigm shift in linguistic theory and in the study of languages (from philology to structuralism, generative, functional, etc.). This paradigm shift has provided us with a handful of analytical tools, enabling us to view the discourse (written and spoken) from a new perspective; it has also shown us that texts are more than strings of sentences. Pioneering studies in this direction have made it clear that it is necessary to take into account semantic and communicative dimensions in the description of languages. (Kibrik 1997).

The place of different constituents in these propositions is controlled by information structure and other contextual considerations. 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 p.334).

Based on the above principles, this topic will study the morphological and syntactic structures of the Tamil epigraphic texts. We will concentrate on the case system, word order variation and predicate structure in the Tamil epigraphic texts.

### **3. Historical linguistics, Linguistic database and Corpus analysis**

During the last few decades, corpora analysis and database have drastically changed the linguistic analysis and the study of languages. This is even more true in the case of historical linguistics. Because the use of quantitative data alone will allow the identification of specific language changes and to study the historical evolution of languages. In this topic, we will discuss about the construction of a fine-grained linguistic database and illustrate how ‘corpus analysis’ can help us mapping the process of language change.

In this topic we will discuss about preparation of corpus, data entry, inventory of parts of speech tag set (POST), interlinear glossing of texts and other language specific issues in the construction of a linguistic database. This topic will try to illustrate how linguistic corpora can be used as readily available evidence for mapping language, language development and language variation in time and space.

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