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Appasamy Murugaiyan. Object of donation in Tamil epigraphic texts (10th -11th centuries): Exploring the interaction between syntax and information structure. S. Agesthialingom et al. *Tamiḷ moliyiyal putiya sikaraikaḷ* [Felicitation volume for Professor S.V. Shanmugam], Annamalai University, pp.339-354, 2008. hal-01665797

**HAL Id: hal-01665797**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01665797>**

Submitted on 16 Dec 2017

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Object of donation in Tamil epigraphic texts (10th - 11th centuries):  
Exploring the interaction between syntax and information structure<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:**<sup>2</sup>

This study will focus on the grammatical treatment of ‘the object of donation’ in the Tamil inscriptions. In our corpus, the object of donation, unmarked for accusative, is placed - on the right of the predicate - in the focal position. This right dislocation [VO], deviating from the basic [OV] position, triggers also the phenomenon of quantifier floating, where the quantifier is placed on the right side of the noun head. The dislocation of ‘object of donation’ is clearly the result of a discourse strategy. ‘The object of donation’ is semantically prone to fill the grammatical function of complement or ‘direct object’ of a verb meaning ‘to give’ -or something similar- inside the VP constituent of a sentence. However, pragmatically, the object of donation is a crucial referential entity in this type of texts and it will appear that the information structure principles allow a variety of constructions to put it in a more prominent structural position. We need a three level analysis - syntactic, semantic and pragmatic- to account for this dislocation.

Key words: accusative, marked object, focussed object, relativization, information structure

**I. INTRODUCTION:**

Pragmatic features play a major role on the placement of constituents in the clause. Many languages show correlation between information status and the position of constituents in sentence (Chafe 1976). In the framework of information structure, it is observed that constituents carrying old information are often placed earlier in a sentence, while those carrying new information are placed later in a sentence. This approach opens new perspectives on the explanation of word order variation and syntactic change in language history. The distribution of different word order patterns involves concepts (given / new, topic / focus, theme / rheme, foregrounding / backgrounding) which pertain to the fields of information structure and discourse organisation.

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<sup>1</sup> It is a great honour and pleasure to be able to contribute to this volume in honour of Professor S.V. Shanmugam. It is also a pleasure to acknowledge my immense gratitude for all I have learnt from him in linguistics and beyond.

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Christian Pilot-Raichoor for many discussions and comments on various drafts during the course of writing this paper. My special thanks to Corinna Anderson for her comments and suggestions on an earlier draft.

In our analysis of early Tamil epigraphic texts, we have come across two distinct structures concerning the object of a verb: (1) The regular pattern, where the direct object, whether accusative marked or not, is placed to the left of the verbal predicate, thus corresponding to the presumed canonical SOV constituent order in Dravidian and (2) The focussing pattern where the object, unmarked for accusative, is placed on the right of the predicate. 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.

In this paper we attempt to explain that the placement of different elements is controlled by the information structure (IS). Information structure concerns the way the information is packaged in discourse depending on the context of communication. The present study is based on data taken from South Indian Inscriptions - Vols. 1, 2 and 13.

In order to make the following discussion clear, we will start by laying out some basic assumptions. In Dravidian, the generally accepted word order –both diachronic and synchronic- is SOV.<sup>3</sup> A commonly made cross-linguistic generalization is that languages with extensive case-marking and rich verbal morphology tend to have greater freedom of word order<sup>4</sup> in comparison with languages with ‘fixed’ word order, like English, which encode grammatical relations directly. In the language of Tamil epigraphic texts, the grammatical form of sentences is motivated by the requirements of information structure which is an essential factor in the identification of donated objects.

## **II.1. Information structure and Epigraphic texts**

Reading and understanding epigraphic texts is based on “PRESUPPOSITIONS and ASSERTIONS” (i.e., Known / yet to be known information). The shared knowledge of the world and of the society in particular is required between the interlocutors for the interpretation of the core meaning of the text. Generally the inscription has the following components: auspicious formula, eulogy (information on the ruling king name, regnal year, genealogy ...), details about the donation and the concluding part containing name of the scribe, witness, benediction and imprecation. Each component fits in a formulaic linear order in the textual structure of the inscription. These elements,

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<sup>3</sup> “The unmarked order of constituents in a sentence is Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) in the Dravidian languages.” (Krishnamurthi, Bh. 2003.420). But Zvelebil points out rightly that the basic word order may be subject to variation: “The basic order of surface structures is regularly Subject-Object-verb (if not disturbed by stylistic or emphatic shifts)” (Zvelebil, K. 1997.43).

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that in the Tamil inscriptions the accusative, the genitive and the locative are very rarely used. But the only case widely is used the dative. This shows very clearly that the word order variation is not due to rich morphological case system.

in turn are placed in correlation with information structure and other contextual considerations.

Lambrecht (1994) 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. In this information-structure component, propositions, as conceptual representations of states of affairs, undergo pragmatic structuring according to discourse situations in which these states of affairs are to be communicated” (1994:334). The information structure, generally speaking, refers to various ways in which information, including propositional information and real-world knowledge, is linguistically encoded. We will examine below how information is encoded, or packaged, in the 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> c. Tamil inscriptions and why certain structures have been selected to convey a given piece of propositional knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

## II.2. Object Marking in Tamil

In general, it is held both by the traditional and modern Tamil grammars that the accusative marker "ai" is present obligatorily with animate nouns and is not obligatory with inanimate nouns.<sup>6</sup> The case marking of direct objects is typologically one of the major concerns in the theoretical setting of Differential Object Marking (DOM)<sup>7</sup>. A number of studies on Indian languages have shown that several parameters like humanness, definiteness, individuation and affectedness contribute to the marking or non-marking of the direct objects.<sup>8</sup> In the Tamil inscriptions we studied, the accusative case marker is very rarely used. The information structure (IS) is an essential component of sentence grammar, one of the determining factors in the linear ordering of the elements. I will try to demonstrate that pragmatics (information structure) is essential to account for the donated object in inscriptional Tamil.

## III. The basic SOV pattern

In our corpus, there are several instances of direct objects occurring with various bi-actancial verbs. There are two types of direct objects: 1) marked with accusative case and 2) unmarked for accusative. Both types of objects are syntactically similar though they differ from each other semantically and pragmatically. The direct objects are placed before the verb and thus fitting the generally recognized ‘unmarked SOV’ word order.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Discussions about the distribution of information in clauses and sentences can be traced out in the works “Functional sentence perspectives” elaborated by the Prague school linguists in the 1920’s and in more recent works like Halliday (1970, 1984), Lambrecht (1994).

<sup>6</sup> However, according to Tolkappiyam (sol-72), the objects that are weighed, measured, counted, received take the accusative case marker.

<sup>7</sup> Lazard 2001

<sup>8</sup> Masica 1981, Murugaiyan 1993, Pilot-Raichoor 1994.

<sup>9</sup> The view mentioned in previous studies that SOV is the unmarked word order, is assumed in this study. But this order does not reflect the real situation in the language of Tamil inscriptions and it is dubious to say which is the marked or the unmarked word order at this stage.

### III.1. Accusative marked direct object

As expected the accusative marker occurs with objects referring to animate beings and allows some freeness in the linear ordering, OSV in the following example:

#### 1) SII.2.28.p133.3<sup>10</sup>

.... uṭaiyārai patinmar civayo\*kikaḷ cēvittu vantāi...  
 .... god.acc ten.3.pl siva-yogi.pl worship.adp come.cond  
 ‘.... (On the festival days ) if ten Shaiva saints worship the God (each day) .....’

This inscription records a deposit of money, the interest of which was to be used for feeding Shaiva saints during the festival days. In 1, the noun ‘uṭaiyār’ the god, is already introduced in the discourse. This accusative marked noun is the direct object of the predicate ‘sēvi’ to worship.

In the following instance, the accusative case marking on the animate noun (lord) also helps to recover the subject function of the noun heading the relative clause. In this common Dravidian relative strategy, a noun phrase filling any function (subject, object, oblique, etc.) can be extracted from the basic clause and postposed to the relative participle form of the verb (kavitta) without any formal expression of its original function (see below section III).

#### 2) SII.2.34.p143.7

.....de\*varaik kavitta .... prabai oṇru.....  
 .... Lord.acc cover.rp... aureole one  
 “one aureole ... which covers the Lord....”

This inscription states that the queen had set up a sacred image and records a list of objects offered by her to this sacred image. In 2, the accusative marked noun is the direct object of the predicate ‘kavi’ to cover, whose subject argument is ‘prabai’ aureole and has two distinct roles. Syntactically this is the subject argument of the predicate ‘kavi’. Pragmatically it has focus role, it is part of a list of objects donated by the queen to the sacred image graciously set up by her.

In our corpus, we noticed a rare occurrence of the accusative case marker with an inanimate noun

#### 3) SII.2.5.p56.11

....ivvūrai ūṭaruttup po\*y puṭavūrkup pāyum vāykkāi .....  
 ....deic.village.acc cross.go.adp other.villages.dat irrigate.rp channel  
 ‘... channel which crosses through the village and irrigates other village...’

Example 3 comes from an inscription describing the donation of rice fields from different villages. The village has already been mentioned in the text and is established

<sup>10</sup> The reference of the examples follow the following pattern: SII.2.5.p56.11 = South Indian Inscriptions, followed by the number of the volume, followed by the number of inscription, followed by page number(s) and finally the number of line(s). Each part is separated by dot.

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 *ūraru* ‘pass across’. This noun 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 ‘*vāykkāi*’ chanal, 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.

In examples 1, 2 and 3, the accusative marked objects are grammatical objects but not ‘objects of donation’ to the actual predicate. These nouns, morphologically and syntactically the direct objects, are placed immediately on the left of the predicate. From discourse point of view, the accusative marked nouns are part of the presupposed clause and serve as scene setting and are pragmatically unmarked. They are the determinants or attributes to the object of donation. For instance note that in 2, the ‘aureole’ is the object of donation, which is syntactically an extracted argument, and represents the new information in the context of the discourse and pragmatically has a focus relation and is placed after the verb.

### III.2. Unmarked direct object

In this section we will examine some direct objects that are not marked in accusative case. In contradistinction to the previous section, all the direct objects discussed below are objects of donation of their governing predicate.

#### 4) SII.2.61.p246. 3-6

... nām (...)	... (...)	patiṇoru	vēli	nilam	iṛaiyiliyāka (...)	kuṭuttōm....
.... 1.pl		11	veli.unm	land	tax-free	give.past.1pl

‘we gave 11 velis of land as tax free ....’

This inscription records that the king gave 11 veli of land, exempted from tax, to the goddess that he had graciously set up in the Rajarajisvaram temple. In 4 we have an ‘unmarked’ ‘SOV’ order of constituents which is not frequent in inscriptions.<sup>11</sup> This ‘unmarked order’ shows no pragmatic function. The sentence contains a finite verb and shows agreement with the subject argument.

#### 5) SII.1.42.p68.3-19

mahāsabaiyo*m	(...)	taṭi 5ṇāi	kuḷi 200	iṇṇāyaṇārkkū	(...)	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 kuzi consisting of 5 rice fields’

<sup>11</sup> The ‘SOV -unmarked’ order is one of the possibilities used in the inscriptions. The variation in constituent order seems to be a common feature in the language of inscriptions (Gai , G.S. 1946., Sekhar, A. C. 1953., Murugaiyan A. 1998)

This inscription describes a gift of land, to the God of the Tirukkadalmallai village, made by the members of the village assembly. As in 4, we have an ‘unmarked SOV’ constituent order. But in 5 we notice 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.

6) SII.2.31.p139.8-20

uṭaiyār	śrīrājājadēvar	tiruvāymoḷintaruḷa	ittiruccuṟṟumāḷḷikai
lord	PN	sacred.order.grace.inf.	deic.sacred enclosure

eṭuppittāṅ	sēnāpati	(...)	śrī kṛīṣṇan rāmaṅ...
construct.caus.past.3.m.s	General	[...]	PN....

‘(as) the king Sri Rajarajadeva has graciously ordered, the general (...) Sri Krishnan Raman (caused to) construct this sacred surrounding palace’

This inscription states that as ordered by the king the sacred enclosure was built by the general Sri Krishnan Raman. In 6, ‘the sacred enclosure’ is at odds both on pragmatic and syntactic grounds. Syntactically, by its position, preceding the verb, it is the direct object, but it is not marked in accusative case. This object is referential and is definite as it is prefixed with the deictic marker *i-*. But pragmatically, this is not the piece of new information, as it is in anaphoric status because of the deictic morpheme. The anaphoric status of the definite direct object requires it to be [–Focus]. While examining carefully the context of the inscription, the new information is ‘the subject’, the constructor of the ‘sacred enclosure’. In this pragmatically motivated sentence, ‘the subject’ argument, the new information, is in focus relation and is placed at the right of the predicate, a finite verb in this example.

In 4, 5 and 6 the objects of donation are also the syntactic or grammatical objects but are not marked in accusative case. Each object noun is an argument of a finite verb; is referential and even definite in 6. The objects of donation, despite their blatant syntactic and semantic relations, are not marked in accusative. It may also be noticed that these examples exhibit a consistent semantic order : donator – object of donation – verb of donation, independently of their syntactic encoding (see ex. 6). These examples seem to show that the grammar choose to privilege the pragmatic motivation for structuring the sentence than the syntactic motivation.

### III.3. Focussed object

Our main concern in this paper is the place of ‘donated objects’ in the clause. In the following sentences the ‘object of donation’ is placed at the end of the clause on the right side of the verb. This pragmatically motivated structure seems to be more frequent than the ‘unmarked SOV’ order which is almost insignificant in our present corpus. The syntactic device used to achieve this goal is the relativization strategy, which is well known typologically to have affinities with the focus strategy<sup>12</sup>.

An additional instance of the predominance of the pragmatic structure is the internal ordering of the focussed elements: the more the information is unpredictable the more it is on the right side of the verb.

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<sup>12</sup> Croft 2003: 108-109.

## 7. SII.2.36.p149.2-3

..... mālarī ke\*savaṇ (....) kuṭutta paṭikkam oṇru niṟai arupattoṇpatin palam.....  
 .....PN [....] give.rp spittoon one weight 69 palam.unm  
 ‘Malari kesvan gave [....] one spittoon, which weighs sixty-nine palams’

This inscription states that Malarikesavan offered a spittoon to the image of Ganapathi in the temple of Sri Rajarajeshvara. It is inferable from the context that some object would be gifted to the statue but less likely inferable is the identity, quantity and weight of the object. The focus part of the sentence contains the identity, the quantity and the weight of the donated object. This constitutes the new information which is naturally in the focus part of the sentence. The noun phrase ‘paṭikkam’ with the numeral quantifier is the right dislocated object of donation. The pragmatics triggers also dislocation of the quantifiers, which follows the noun head.

## 8. SII.13.63.p29.8-10

cōḷa milāṭuṭaiyāṇ vaitta nuntāviḷakku oṇrukku vaitta āṭu toṇṇūrṟāru...  
 PN put.rp perpetual lamp one.dat put.rp sheep 96

“Solamilatudaiyan 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, Solamilatudaiyan 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.

## 9. SII.2.52.p217.12-20

pātādikēsāntam pattonpatu viraley āru torai usarattu nālu srihastam  
 foot.from-head.end 19 viral 6 torai height.obl 4 sacred.arm  
 uṭaiyarākak kanamāka eḷuntaruḷivitta mahāviśṇukkaḷ tirumēni oruvar  
 possesseur.as solid.aaka erect.be gracious.rp Mahavishnu.h sacred.statue one-m.s.h

“one solid image of Maha Vishnu, having four divine arms (and measuring), nineteen viral and six torai in height from the feet to the head, was set up”

This inscription states that the king had graciously set up a copper image along with many objects as attributes and gifts and all these objects were measured and engraved on stone. Example 9 follows immediately the introductory statement. The first part of this sentence which precedes the verb gives the technical description of the gifted image, which is contextually in the domain of shared knowledge, serves as a scene



setting topic for the new piece of information, the object of donation.<sup>13</sup> The focus part consists of two new pieces of information: the identity and the quantity of the statue.

#### 10. SII.1.68.p101

... sinṇavaiyar (...) vaitta nandāvilakk.oṇru.kku kuṭutta kāsu aṟupatu.  
 .... NP.... give.rp perpetual lamp. one.dat give.rp kasu 60

‘The queen Sinnavai gave sixty kases (money) for one perpetual lamp she had given.’

In this inscription a series of two gifts (lamps and money for their maintenance) made by two women to the god of Tiruamali are recorded. Example 11 is about the second gift of the series, made by the queen Sinnavai of a perpetual lamp and an amount of money (60 kases) for the maintenance of the lamp. Both events are structured in a sequential order. In each clause the referent of the gift, lamp and money, is inferable from the context. But the quantity of gifted object, being the new information, is in focus position respectively. Like in 8, the lamp is part of the two clauses with different roles in each case.

#### 11. SII. 1. 83. p114-115

...iranṭu nondāvilakku ... erippataṟku caṇṭaparākkiramavirar vaitta cāvā  
 ...2 perpetual lamp burn.vn.dat PN give.rp die.neg

mūvā pērāṭu nūṟṟeṇpatu  
 age.neg big sheep 180

‘in order to keep two perpetual lamps burning, Chandaparakkirama Vira gave one hundred and eighty deathless and ageless big sheep (i.e. the total number of sheep remains unchanged)’.

This inscription records the gift of 180 sheep, the ghee obtained from these sheep should be used to keep alight two perpetual lamps. The two perpetual lamps, present already in the discourse context and constitute the known information, are in topic relation. Note the contrast between the topic noun phrase where the numeral quantifier precedes the noun and the focus structure where the noun precedes the numeral quantifier. This example strengthens our hypotheses that the quantifier floating is one of the features of the focus part of the sentence.

#### 12. SII.2.61. p246.3-6 (cf. 4)

... (...) ikkoyill nām e|untaruḷivitta ulakmu|utum uṭaiyanācciyārkkku (...)  
 .... [...] deic.temple.loc 1.pl erect.grace.rp PN.dat  
 patiṇoru vēli nilam iṟaiyilīyāka (...) kuṭuttōm....  
 11 veli.unm land tax free.as [...] give.past.1.pl...

<sup>13</sup> In sentences concerning statues and other sacred images that were set up as gifts, there are two distinct information units. The first part contains all technical iconographic descriptions (height, weight, the metal in which the statue is made of, and whether the statue is hollow or solid etc.). The second part, the focus part, gives the new information -the identity (name) of the image and the quantity-. In an inscription (SII.2.29) there are 13 gifted objects of which the description follows the above type and this pattern seems to be followed as a norm. However, a complete statistical analysis is needed before generalising this hypothesis.

we have given eleven veli of land as tax free ...to (the image of the goddess) ulakmu|utum uṭaiyanacciyar that we have graciously set up in this temple...

This inscription records that the king had set up an image of a goddess and that he had offered to the goddess eleven veli of land as gift. In 12, we notice two clauses, in a sequential order with two different structures. In the first sentence, the image of the goddess, an object of donation, is in focus relation, which shows a pragmatically motivated structure. But the second sentence has an ‘unmarked SOV’ ordering of constituent and the gifted land, object of donation, is also in the grammatical position of the object of the verb. This type of mixed structure, though rarely noticed, comes as a proof of the different structural possibilities available to the grammar of the Tamil inscriptional language.

Examples 8, 10 and 11 show the multilevel interaction of the information structure in the patterning of the texts. At the clause level, the relativization strategy is used to focus the object of donation in each part of the sentence and the repetition of the relative participle *vaitta* ‘put’ in 8 clearly emphasizes this structural symmetry. On the sentence level in these examples, the linear order of the clauses and the dative case marking on the first clause signal the overall topic – focus relationship that links the two clauses.

A finer use of the information structure is also observable. In examples 7 to 12 different types of objects – money, land, sheep, sacred statue, vessel and other decorative objects- are noticed as gifts or offerings. All the sentences have a two place verbs and in each sentence the semantic patient/object role is saturated. In all the above sentences, except one instance (example 12), the object of donation is extracted from its basic position and dislocated on the right side of the verb. This structural position corresponds to the focus position. Rather, the new information, or more precisely, the more unpredictable information is placed at the right most part of the sentence. The right dislocation of the object of donation is in correlation with the inversion of numeral quantifiers. Instead of a binary distinction of predictability (predictable – unpredictable) a scalar notion of predictability is in corollary with the phenomenon of quantifier floating (examples 10 & 11).

## Conclusion

In this brief survey we tried to show that the placement of the objects of donation is related to their informational status. In spite of the fact that the accusative marking does exist as a specific marker of direct object (ex. 1 to 3), it seems to be never used for the introduction of the objects of donation in these inscriptional texts. The objects of donation appear into two structures: 1) An ‘unmarked (SOV)’ constituent order as illustrated by examples 4 to 6 where they are not marked in accusative case, even when definite (ex.6), but where the linear order of presentation matches the semantic sequence: donator – object of donation . 2) A pragmatically motivated word order, where the object of donation is dislocated on the right side of the verb, consistently put in a focus position, examples 7 to 12. In this case, the link between the object of donation and the focal position is maintained whatever are the grammatical relations and the overall structure of the sentence. All these evidences plead for a thorough and distinct analysis of the grammatical relations and the discourse structure of the texts. Detailed investigations are needed to expound more clearly the relation

between information structure and syntax in the early Tamil epigraphic texts, however we hope this contribution may point the way to further analysis in this area of historical linguistics.

### Abbreviations:

1 = first person, acc = accusative, advp= adverbial participle, cond = conditional, dat = dative, deic = deictic, h= honorific, inst = instrumental, m = masculine, neg = negative, obl= oblique, pl = plural, PN= proper noun; rp = relative participle, s = singular, un= unit of measure, PIN=place name, vn = verbal noun.

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