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Verbal Morphology and Polyfunctionality in Old Tamil: Evidence from Hero-stone Inscriptions (ca. 500-650 CE)

Appasamy Murugaiyan

Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes - Groupe de Recherches en Etudes Indiennes, Paris

ABSTRACT

The historical development of Tamil verbal morphology is outstandingly complex as it reflects several stages of development spanning several centuries (ca. 300 BCE-600 CE). Previous work on early Tamil, within the framework of historical linguistics, has made it clear that in the initial stage: 1) the bare stems without many morphological elements were used in different syntactic functions; 2) there was no categorial distinction between noun and verb; 3) the same inflexional material was used to encode various morphosyntactic functions; 4) the Tamil Finite Verb structure with fully developed pronominal suffixes is a later development; etc. (Bloch 1946, Caldwell 1856, Meenakshisundaran 1965, Rajam 1992, Renganathan 2013, Vinson 1878). The *ceyyum* pattern as finite verb (see *Tolkāppiyam*, *Nannūl*, etc. and the commentators on these texts) is one such earlier form that stands as evidence for the complex relation between morphology and syntax. In this paper, I try to examine the verbal morphology from hero-stone inscriptions dating from 500-650 CE. In this corpus, 27 stems occur in different morphological configurations, fulfilling different syntactic or grammatical functions. These forms consist of bare stems, personal (finite) forms and non-finite forms, which function as predicates, determinants, adverbial participles, participial nouns, etc. I try to analyse this type of flexible categorial features in terms of morphological and lexical polyfunctionality (Pilot-Raichoor 2012). The data from hero-stone inscriptions contain several layers of morphological lexical developments that stretch from the earliest till the modern periods and add more information on the historical development of Tamil and Dravidian verb morphology.

Key words: bare stem, biuniqueness, *ceyyum* pattern, early Tamil, finite verb, hero-stone inscription, historical linguistics, *-icin*, polyfunctionality, Sangam, Tamil inscriptions, verbal morphology.

Introduction

The study of the morphological structure of the Dravidian languages has a long and rich tradition that connects to the pioneering works of comparative Dravidian linguists. Their work opened new perspectives towards understanding Dravidian verb morphology. However, I need to know more about the relative diachronic variability of verbal morphological systems and to identify and differentiate the stages of historical changes that took place chronologically on their way from Classical Tamil, with its opaque (a relatively reduced) morphology, towards Modern Tamil, a morphologically transparent (rich) language.¹ In this paper, I first try to return attention to the presence of morphological and lexical polyfunctionality in the Old or Early Tamil Sangam texts; then I will try to adduce more evidence for the polyfunctional features in the hero-stone inscriptions. The data from hero-stone inscriptions are very interesting, presenting many new materials (finite form, participles, optative, participial noun, etc.) that

¹ See for instance, ‘Morphological reconstruction in Dravidian, unlike phonological reconstruction, is fraught with many pitfalls and uncertainties [...]’ Krishnamurti 2001:285.

have been grammaticalized along with the old polyfunctional system (Andronov 2001, Pilot-Raichoor 2012, V.S. Rajam 1992). Among other things, this paper considers the lexical and morphological polyfunctionality or transcategoriality as part of the grammatical configuration of Old Tamil.

This paper is organized into four sections as follows: section 1 presents the problem along with a detailed description of the major linguistic concepts employed in this study, section 2 is a presentation of morphological polyfunctionality in Old Tamil, section 3 highlights the polyfunctional features of the verb inflections of hero-stone inscriptions (ca. 500-650 C. E.), and section 4 presents concluding remarks.

1. PRESENTATION OF THE PROBLEM

Modern Tamil and other Dravidian languages, considered to be agglutinative languages, show a well-developed and highly productive inflectional morphology. The inflectional system used in Modern Dravidian languages is, to a large extent, phonologically salient, morphologically transparent, and exhibits a high degree of biuniqueness ‘in the sense that every morpheme has one form and one meaning, and every meaning corresponds to exactly one form’.² I use the term biuniqueness in its simple and generally accepted sense, i.e. the one-to-one relation between form and function.

However, in the earlier stages of the Dravidian literary languages for which I have written documentation, it has been demonstrated beyond doubt that a great many morphological materials (pronominal suffixes, present tense morpheme, locative, associative, ablative, etc.) originated as independent words and that the morphological distinction came into existence progressively in a later period (Andronov 2001, Meenakshisundaran 1965, Rajam 1992, Zvelebil 1977). In the process of morphologisation, the creation of new inflectional forms out of old lexemes or other forms is a gradual, long process and not an abrupt and simple categorial shift (Meillet 1926). The morphologization process includes several stages and each stage represents different formal and functional structures of the same material involved in the process of morphologisation.

Let us consider an example of different scholarly interpretations of the formation of the present tense marker in Tamil and Dravidian. Proto Dravidian and Old Tamil had only two tenses, past and non-past, whereas the present tense marker was a later innovation, developed independently in these languages. In the case of Tamil, ‘[t]he present tense marker (k)kinr occurs, in Tamil texts, for the first time in the *Cilappatikāram* 7.35 *ūrkinra* “which is spread-ing”, 14.125 [...]’ (Zvelebil 1971:443). The development of distinct morpheme(s) for the present tense, according to Meenakshisundaran, was ‘[t]he most important development in the Post-Cankam Age... the development of a tense sign for the present as distinct from the old non-past p or v’ (1965:140). The scholars Andronov (1961), Bloch (1946), Rajam (1985), Steever (1989), and Subramanyam (1981) proposed the following different reconstructions of the present tense marker:

-āninr-, *-(k)kinr-*, *-kintu-* > *kitu*; *nil* ‘to stand’, *kiṭa* ‘to lie down’, *iru* ‘to be’, *kil* ‘be able’.

² Lexicon of Linguistics, editors Johan Kerstens, Eddy Ruys, and Joost Zwarts, Utrecht Institute of Linguistics OTS, Utrecht University: <https://lexicon.hum.uu.nl/>.

However, Subramanyam favoured a periphrastic construction: ‘In the Middle Tamil period the periphrastic construction containing a verb base followed by the suffix *ā* plus the past tense form of one of the three verbs *niḷ* “to stand”, *kiṭa* “to lie down” and *iru* “to be” also is used to express the present tense meaning’ (1971: 241). He concludes that ‘[t]he present tense is or was originally a periphrastic construction in a good number of languages’ (1971:329).

Steever’s introductory remark is worth noting: ‘Although curiosity about the origins of the present tense-form in Tamil has stimulated some research and given rise to a number of etymologies, no linguistically satisfactory answers to the questions that emerge from the historical analysis of this form have yet been provided’ (1989:237).

This example of different scholarly interpretations of the formation of the present tense morpheme alone is more than enough to illustrate the complexity of the morphologization process in Old Tamil. This transitional stage is, in fact, a source of confusion due to different facts: the emergence of new flexional material, the disappearance of some old forms, the coexistence of both old and new flexional material, and the use of different materials expressing the same meaning or fulfilling the same syntactic function.

Morphologization, as mentioned earlier, is gradual and multi-layered. Some materials exhibit one-to-one correspondence between form and function whereas others violate this condition. The opaque inflexional system of Old Tamil tends to have a complex morphological structure, a phenomenon that requires an in-depth study with historical data. The notion of *polyfunctionality* allows us: 1) to better account for the different stages of morphologization, 2) to distinguish old inflectional elements from new ones, and 3) to shed more light on the relative chronology of Old Tamil and Proto-Dravidian morphological reconstructions.

In this paper, I use polyfunctionality in the sense of ‘a linguistic phenomenon in which one form is associated with more than one meaning or sense, and the multiple meanings or senses of a polyfunctional form belong to more than one syntactic category’ (Libert 2018:156).

Pilot-Raichoor (2012) and Murugaiyan and Pilot Raichoor (2004) borrow the notions of polyfunctionality and uncategoriality to account for the use of the same lexical and morphological material to encode different grammatical functions in Old Tamil literature. In the present paper, I try to apply the notion of polyfunctionality to examine the verbal morphology of the Tamil hero-stone inscriptions. These inscriptions provide us with a different set of data but one not completely different from the Old Tamil literature. In the linguistic literature I notice the use of different terms as synonyms or to name the same or almost the same linguistic phenomenon; *multifunctionality* and *multifunctional*, *polyfunctionality*, *plurifunctional(ity)* (or *pluri-functionality*), *polycategoriality*, *multicategoriality*, *ambicategorial*, *bicategorial(ity)* (or *bi-categorial(ity)*), *transcategorial(ity)*, and *acategorial(ity)*, *syntactic polysemy* (Libert 2018).

In the context of our present study, the polyfunctionality characterises a transitional period in Tamil before or during the complete development of the flexional system and was a means of optimization of the linguistic system, with a small stock of morphemes deployed in a wider range of grammatical functions, with a lesser degree of biuniqueness or absence of one-to-one mapping between form and function (Robert 2004, Ackerman and Bonami 2017, Libert 2018, Stump 2014).

2. POLYFUNCTIONAL PROPERTIES IN OLD TAMIL

Studies of Old Tamil verbal morphology have revealed inflectional complexities due to morphological polyfunctionality and resultant instances of transcategoriality and relative absence of biuniqueness (see, *inter alia*, Andronov 1998, Caldwell 1856, Meenakshisundaran 1965, Pilot-Raichoor 2012, Rajam 1992). The polyfunctional characteristics of Tamil and Dravidian language units had already been identified by scholars in the early periods of comparative Dravidian linguistic studies, though their interpretation of this linguistic fact differed from more recent analyses. These studies prove particularly interesting for our present topic. Here I give some examples from Old Tamil literary sources and a few from other Dravidian languages which are germane to the epigraphic data under consideration. Lexical and morphological polyfunctionality found in old Tamil, as I have mentioned above, characterises the transitional period where the typological shift from isolation to agglutination was underway (Pilot-Raichoor 2012, Zvelebil 1967). Both Pilot-Raichoor and Rajam summarize the gradual change or shift in the grammatical structure from Old Tamil to modern Tamil. Pilot-Raichoor (2012) and Rajam (1992) have arrived independently at the same kind of hypothesis regarding the chronological evolution of the Tamil language.

Pilot-Raichoor proposes 3 phases:

Phase I is the one hypothesized for pre-Tamil according to the features mentioned above pointing to an isolating type of language. Phase II is the transient phase actually attested in the earliest records and phase III is the one attested by in modern Tamil and typical of the Dravidian languages: an agglutinative type of language with a strong noun-verb distinction supported by regular morphological paradigms (Pilot-Raichoor 2012:289).

Rajam proposes four strata:

The stage of Tamil in these poems clearly reflects at least four strata, spanning several centuries (ca. 150 B.C.-500/600 A.D.?). In one stratum of the language, nominal or verbal stems without suffixes are used to perform various grammatical tasks. In the next stratum, which might be contemporaneous with the first, 'stem mutation' is used as a technique for expressing various grammatical concepts. In the third stratum, which might represent a contemporaneous or subsequent stage, numerous affixes appended to nominal and verbal stems are used to perform various grammatical functions. In the fourth stratum, which might represent the final development of the language of this period, one finds used: (a) more than one affix to denote one grammatical notion and vice versa; (b) one derived form to signify more than one grammatical concept; and (c) 'periphrasis' to perform various grammatical tasks (Rajam. 1992: 25-26).

It is generally admitted that Old Tamil has fewer morphological/flexional materials and hence the same material is seen to fulfil many grammatical functions. This naturally results in a state of confusion between form and function. This is one of the characteristic features seen from the polyfunctional point of view. In reality, polyfunctionality, like transcategoriality, is used in many languages as a means to optimize the linguistic system using a smaller number of morphological or lexical materials for many different grammatical functions (Ackerman and Bonami 2017). To speak specifically of the Old Tamil, '*kaḍu* in Caldwell's quotation is neither

a verb, nor a noun, nor an adjective; it is a polyfunctional bare stem which can be used, without any specific marking, in the three major functions' (Pilot-Raichoor 2012: 295).

With this hypothesis in mind, I will examine the case of morphological polyfunctionality in Old Tamil. In this section I will examine two verbal constructions containing two polyfunctional morphemes: *-iciṅ* and *-um* (in the *ceyyum* type of constructions).

***-um* and *-iciṅ* in Old Tamil:**

It is generally assumed that the Dravidian languages have a canonical pattern of personal verbal morphology:

stem + medials + PNG markers.

The above schema represents a typical finite verbal predicate. Among the three components present in the schema, the stem is further segmentable (root + augments) whereas the medials encode time aspect and mood and, in addition, may also contain the inflectional increment or augment. I am aware that there is no consensus among scholars regarding the internal segmentation of these flexional materials. In the present work, I am not treating these complex issues, but adhere to the simple schema: stem + tense + PNG marker.

***-um* in *ceyyum* type (*cey+y+um*)**

In comparison to other morphemes, the morpheme *-um* is used in a great number of syntactic constructions with various meanings.³ I present a selection of examples to show the polyfunctional characteristic of the morpheme *-um*, in verbal morphology. The use of the morpheme *-um* in verbal construction received due importance in traditional Tamil grammars.⁴ In its initial stages in Old Tamil, the morpheme *-um* meant, as a pronominal suffix (PNG marker), 1st, 2nd, and 3rd person and the non-past tense (Meenakshisundaran 1965: 27-28, 90). With a brief presentation, I will examine below some of the examples with the morpheme *-um*.

2.1. 1st person pl. honorific (Rajam 1992: 619)

<i>yām</i>	<i>avaṇiṅrum</i>	<i>varutum</i> ⁵	
we	from there	come.t.um	(ciṅ:143)
‘we are coming from there’			

2.2. 3rd person MS

<i>aṛivutaṅyōṅ</i>	<i>āru</i>	<i>arac.um</i>	<i>cell.um</i>	
wisdom.possess.3M.S	path	king.even	go.um	(pura.183:7)
‘even the king will go in the path of wise man’				

2.3. 3rd person F.S P (Rajam 1992:621)

<i>ivaḷ.um</i>	<i>tēmp.um</i>	
(kuru:26)		

³ See for instance Rajam 1992: 405-408 and 1038-1039.

⁴ For example, see Tolkāppiyam: 173, 227, 238, 240, 242.

⁵ The list of abbreviations is given at the end of the text.

2.7. 1st person singular (Rajam 1992:596)

maṛa.nt.iciṅ *yāṅ.ē* (aka.38.18)
forget.PAST. *iciṅ* 1.s.ē
'I forgot'

2.8. 2nd person singular

iṅaital *āṅṛiciṅ* *nīyē* (aka.267-4)
be sad.VBN be not.PAST.*iciṅ* you-ē
do not feel sad, you avoid sorrow

2.9. 3rd person neuter (Rajam 1992:597)

kāṅam tiṅṅiy malai *pōṅṛiciṅ.ē* (narr.240 :10)
jungle dense mountain resemble.PAST.*iciṅ.ē*
'the jungle is like a dense mountain'

In examples (2.7, 2.8 and 2.9), the morpheme *-iciṅ* is used as a PNG marker in a finite verbal construction. In examples (2.6) and (2.7,) the presence of the subject pronouns *yāṅ* 1st person singular and *nī* 2nd person singular leaves no place for any ambiguous interpretation. In (2.8), the meaning of 3rd person neuter is inferred from the context as a comparison is made between '*kāṅam*' jungle and '*malai*' mountain.

2.10. Imperative

kēṭṭ.iciṅ *vāḷi* *tōḷi* (narr.78.7)
listen.PAST.*iciṅ* prosper friend
'(you) listen my friend, prosper!'

In general, in Dravidian languages, the verb base alone can function as an affirmative imperative. In addition, the imperative is formed also by suffixing the 2nd person singular and plural suffix to the base. In Old Tamil, the imperative is formed by adding, to the verb base, morphemes like:

-āy, *-iciṅ*, *-mati*, *-mō*, *-mē*, *-miṅ* etc. In Modern Tamil, on the contrary, these morphemes have fallen into desuetude.

In examples 2.6-2.10 above, the same inflectional material, *-iciṅ*, is used for four different grammatical functions. These examples provide another set of evidence for the morphological polyfunctionality in Old Tamil. In later Tamil, this suffix has been replaced by specific PNG markers like:

-ēṅ, *-āṅ*, *-āḷ* and *-adu* and so on.

With the above few selected examples as evidence of morphological polyfunctionality in Old Tamil, I turn to some further evidence from the Tamil hero-stone inscriptions.

3. POLYFUNCTIONALITY IN TAMIL HERO-STONE INSCRIPTIONS

CORPUS

A brief presentation of the specific morphosyntactic features of the inscriptional Tamil is in order. Inscriptional Tamil developed historically into a distinctive entity of its own that differs significantly from other varieties of Tamil available today. The distinctive features of inscriptional Tamil are clearly attested at all levels: constituent order, predicate structure, verb morphology (the almost total absence of finite predicates), right dislocation of numeral quantifiers, limited use of case morphemes like the accusative, locative and genitive and — by contrast — a relatively widespread use of the dative case, and a few post-positions, among other features. As to the verbal forms, the finite forms are very rarely used, whereas adverbial participles and adjectival participles are most commonly used. The commonly recognised SOV word order is not relevant in the inscriptional Tamil. On the contrary, the word order is mostly controlled by principles of information structure. All these and other features contribute to the complex linguistic configuration of inscriptional Tamil. These general observations hold good also in the case of hero-stone inscriptions.

In what follows, I examine the polyfunctionality of the verb inflexional morphology of *naṭukal* (hero-stone) inscriptions. These inscriptions are published in *Ceṅkam naṭukaṅkaḷ* (Chhs), *Dharmapuri kalveṭṭukaḷ* (Dha), *āvaṇam* and *Damulica*. The fairly few hero stone inscriptions have a narrative structure with different informational nodes, consisting of one or more complete and contextually meaningful verbal and non-verbal propositions. Our corpus contains 38 inscriptions dating between 500 and 650 C E. It contains 27 simple and compound verbs with 111 occurrences. Among the 27 verbs recorded, *paṭu* ‘to die’ is used most frequently. Among these occurrences, there are 29 personal forms of *paṭu*, but only five of them occur at the focal position where it clearly functions as the main predicate as in (11) below. All the information provided here are strictly contextual and are valid only for a specific type of texts, say hero-stone inscriptions. (For more details see Murugaiyan 2012, 2019).

However semantically undifferentiated, the stem *paṭu* ‘to die’ occurs in four different grammatical constructions, 1. *paṭṭān*, 2. *paṭṭān kal*, 3. *paṭṭa kal*, and 4. *paṭṭa vāṇavaruma araicarū*.

3.1. *paṭṭān* Chhs.1971–62 (0550 CE.)

<i>maru atiaraicaru</i>	<i>cēvakaṅkatavacāṭṭa</i>	<i>paṭṭān</i>
PN	servant PN	die.PAST.3.M.S

‘Katavacāṭṭa the servant of Maruatiairaicar is dead’

3.2. *paṭṭān kal* Dhar.1972-20-81 (0588 CE.)

<i>kāvativāṭukaṅ</i>	<i>toru-iṭuvittup</i>	<i>paṭṭān</i>	<i>kal</i>
PN	cattle-liberate.ADP	die. PAST.3M.S	stone

‘This is the memorial stone of *kāvativāṭukaṅ*, (the one) who was dead (while he) liberated cattle’.

In (3.1) and (3.2), the same form *paṭṭān* (stem+tense+PNG) is used. As I have mentioned above, the schema stem+tense+PNG represents a typical finite or personal verbal form in mediaeval and Modern Dravidian. But the same form in the hero-stone inscriptions, like in Old Tamil, is seen to be used in two different constructions: as a finite verb in predicative function in (3.1);

and as a participial noun in (3.2). As Rajam wrote ‘[...] in Classical Tamil, many such verb forms [stem+Tense+PNG] provide two interpretations, one as a finite verb and the other as a participial noun’ (1992:644-645).

3.3. *paṭṭa* + PN. Damilica Vol.1 p.92-94. 6th century CE (R. Nagaswamy)

[...] *taṇṭa.tt.ōṭu* *eṟinta* *ñāṇru* *paṭṭa* *vāṇavaruma* *araicarū*
 army.OBL.ASS fight.PRP while die.PRP PN King
 ‘the king Vāṇavaruma, was the one who died while he fought with the army’

3.4. *paṭṭa* + *kal* Chhs. 1971-86 (0564 CE.)

... *pāvaṇ* *pūcaluṭ* *paṭṭa* *kal*
 PN dispute.LOC die.PRP kal
 ‘...this is the memorial stone of Pāvaṇ who died in the dispute’

In examples (3.3) and (3.4) I notice the same form *paṭṭa* (*paṭu*+Past+a), which functions as a past relative participle in (3.3) but not in (3.4). The sequence {*paṭṭa kal*} occurs three times in our corpus and, hence, cannot be considered as an error nor as sporadic.

In example (3.3), the verbal form *paṭṭa*, in the past relative participle form, functions as the determiner of the king *vāṇavaruma*. This is the regular pattern of past relative participle as attested in later Tamil. In example (3.4), if the form *paṭṭa* is taken as a Past Relative Participle, then that gives a completely different meaning: ‘this is the memorial stone that died during the dispute’. On the contrary, the intended meaning is ‘this is the memorial stone of Pūvaṇ who died in the dispute’. This interpretation, judged by the semantics of the proposition and the context, is more plausible. The construction {*paṭṭa kal*} in (14) is identical to the construction {*paṭṭāṇ kal*} in (12), where it functions as a past participial noun. Here again, this is evidence of the polyfunctionality of the form *paṭṭa*, used as both a past relative participle and a participial noun. Another possible explanation to account for this confusion is that this inscription belongs to the period where the morphological differentiation between finite form, participial noun and the relative participle form of the verbs was not yet completely realised or established.

In Tamil, when two words are juxtaposed and form immediate constituents, the first becomes the attribute of the second. This is the case of the relative participle in Tamil, which precedes the noun it qualifies. Likewise, the participial noun precedes the focused noun predicate *kal* ‘memorial stone’, and thus functions as an attribute of the *kal* memorial-stone.

I will examine below some constructions with the stem *āḷ* ‘to rule’.

3.5. *āḷ* (Chhs.1971-113 (0594 CE.)

mī vēṇṇāṭṭu *karuṅkālipāṭi* *āḷ* *korṟavācīṟkarucāṭṭaṇāru* *makaṇ* *kaṭṭaṅkaṇṇāru*
 PLN.OBL PLN ruler PN son PN
 ‘Kaṭṭaṅkaṇṇāru, the son of Korṟavāsir karuṣāṭṭaṇār the ruler/chief of Karuṅkālipāṭi in Mīveṇṇāṭu’

3.6. *āṇṭa* (Chhs.1971-33. (0595 CE.)

... *rārārrū* *āṇṭa* *kunṛak kaṇṇiyār* *kal*
 ... PLN rule.PRP. PN stone
 ‘This is the memorial stone of Kunṛakkaṇṇiyār ruling Rārārru ...’

3.7. *ālum* (Dhar.1972–21.82 (0609 CE.))

mīvenṇāṭṭuk-kippaiūr *ālum* *vāṇikaru* ...
 PLN.OBL.PLN rule.RP merchant...
 ‘the merchant, (who is) the chief / ruler of Kippai ūr...’

In this last series of examples (3.5), (3.6), and (3.7), the stem *āl* ‘to rule’, is used in three different forms: *āl*, *āṇṭa*, and *ālum*. These three forms mean, contextually, ‘ruler’, ‘rule’ and ‘ruled’ and are semantically related to each other. In (3.5), *āl* can be interpreted as an uninflected verbal modifier ‘ruling/who was ruling’, functioning like a relative participle. The use of a bare verb stem in the function of an adjectival modifier is also noted in Old Tamil and other Dravidian languages (Subrahmanyam 2006) as well as in hero-stone inscriptions (Murugaiyan 2012). The use of the bare stem *āl* as a verbal base and as an adjectival modifier is further strong evidence of the polyfunctional feature in both Old Tamil and the corpus of hero-stone inscriptions. Such a polyfunctional usage of the bare stem was in usage till the 7th century C.E. and beyond.

The forms *āṇṭa*, as in (16), and *ālum*, as in (3.7), function as past relative participle and non-past relative participle respectively. These forms represent a stage where morphological distinction between finite form, past and non-past relative forms etc., is well established. In the hero-stone, as in the later stage of the Old Tamil literary corpus, there is evidence of different stages of morphologization and the parallel use of both new and old morphological material.

4. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I attempted to study the unique characteristics of selected verbal inflections and tried to account for the lesser degree of biuniqueness or absence of one-to-one correspondence between form and function in Old Tamil. The concept of polyfunctionality proves appropriate to explain the morphological constructions in Old Tamil as well as in the corpus of the Tamil Hero-stone inscriptions. As I have shown, through the examples studied above, many of the grammatical functions were carried out by fewer flexional materials or, in other words, the same flexional material was used in several grammatical constructions. The use of a rich and transparent morphological system in the grammatical constructions in Modern Tamil and the modern Dravidian languages is the result of later developments (Caldwell 1856, Meenakshisundaran 1956, Pilot-Raichoor 2012, Renganathan 2013). This paper also shows that within the Tamil hero-stone corpus, the verbal morphology exhibits different layers of the inflectional system. The study of a larger historical corpus of Tamil and the Dravidian languages, based on the concept of morphological and lexical polyfunctionality, would certainly help us to better understand the process of historical linguistic changes that took place during the past 2000 years and more.

ABBREVIATIONS

Literary sources

cīru: cirupānāuppatai; aka: akanānūru; kuru: kuṟuntokai; narr: narraṇai; puṛa: puṛanānūru.

Grammatical terms

1: first person, 2: second person, 3: third person, ADP: adverbial participle, ASS: associative, DEICPRO: deictic proximal, F: feminine, GL: glide; INF: Infinitive, LOC: locative, M: masculine, PRP: past relative participle, OBL: oblique, PAST: past tense, PLN: place name, PN : personal name, RP: non-past relative participle, S: singular, VBN: verbal noun.

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