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The ‘whispering’ of Tamiḷi inscriptions:
Pulimāṅkōmpai-3 inscription and historical linguistics

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‘[...] *the well-known Indian fiction of interpretation tried to read the later developments in usage, whether literary or philosophical, legal or religious, into the original texts themselves*’ (Meenakshisundaran, T.P. 1965:1).

ABSTRACT

The Tamiḷ-Brāhmī or Tamiḷi inscriptions are the earliest available written records in Tamil and the Dravidian family of languages. These records constitute a unique opportunity to better understand the structure of Early Old Tamil or Pre-Sangam Tamil and Proto-Dravidian. The language of Tamiḷi inscriptions has been examined by early and contemporary scholars (Mahadevan 2003, 2014; Meenakshisundaran 1965; Mahalingam 1974; Panneerselvam 1972; Pillai 1956; Pilot-Raichoor 2012; Zvelebil 1964).

The language of both Tamiḷi inscriptions and that of Sangam literature constitute corpus languages (Kruschwitz 2015) as no native speaker of these corpora is available today. This type of ‘corpus language’ presents complex linguistic configurations not readily discernible when compared to its contemporary counterparts. Any attempt to exhaustively summarize the linguistic structure of the Tamiḷi corpus within the limits of this paper would result in inevitable lacunae and theoretical misunderstanding. The object of this study is to propose a descriptive analysis of a single Tamiḷi inscription, Pulimāṅkōmpai-3 (hereafter PK3), within the framework of historical and comparative linguistics.¹ This is an attempt to show how historical and comparative linguistics methods might help to understand the Early Old Tamil epigraphical data and to shed some new light on the reconstruction of Proto-Dravidian.

INTRODUCTION

In two editions of *Early Tamil Epigraphy* (2003, 2014; hereafter ETE), Irvatham Mahadevan delivered the totality of the corpus of the Tamiḷi (Tamil-Brāhmī) inscriptions. This monumental contribution to the study of Tamil epigraphy and culture deserves our gratitude and scholarly appreciation. Let us note, however, that ETE raises significant problems; Mahadevan’s reading, interpretation and linguistic analysis of some inscriptions, for instance, have been subjected to debate and call for revision (Ganesan 2004, Salomon 2004, Subbarayalu 2003, Velupillai 2004).

In previous works, I have shown that the language of Tamil inscriptions developed historically into a distinctive entity that differed significantly from other varieties of Tamil available today. This difference is apparent at multiple levels: case morphology, use of post-positions, constituent order, verb morphology, predicate structure, right dislocation of numeral

¹ I am thankful to R. Poongunran, K. Rajan and Y. Subbarayalu for their personal communications and their valuable suggestions on the Tamiḷi inscriptions. I am also thankful to S. Rajendhu, N. Rajasekharan Nair, and Venugopala Panicker for their help regarding the Malayalam language. However, I alone am responsible for all errors.

quantifiers, typological change from analytical to agglutinative structure, and more. All these features contribute to the complex and specific linguistic structure of inscriptional Tamil (Murugaiyan 2004, 2015, 2012, 2019). This study also emphasises the importance of epigraphic data in reconstructing proto-Dravidian. Almost all theoretical and comparative Dravidian linguistic studies and proto-Dravidian reconstruction have been based on the *literary* texts of the four major Dravidian languages (Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil and Telugu); in the Tamil research, the anthology of Sangam texts has constituted the major source. Surprisingly, the integration of epigraphic data in these projects in the four major languages is still neglected.

This paper is organised as follows: section 1 presents the problem of reading, section 2 is a detailed linguistic analysis of PK3, section 3 examines the relation between Tamil *paṭu* and Malayalam *peṭu* ~ *peḍu*, and section 4 presents concluding remarks.

PULIMĀṆKŌMPAI INSCRIPTIONS: WHICH INTERPRETATION?

The corpus of Tamiḷi inscriptions raises more questions on the structure of the Early Old Tamil and the Proto–Dravidian than one could expect. For example, is a verbal predicate mandatory for the instantiation of the predication? What is the definitive role of a finite verb? Was verbal morphology, in its fully developed state, depicting the functional and derivational components (such as tense, mood, person, causativity, etc.)? Did a clear-cut categorial distinction exist between noun and verb? Should every root form occurring with PNG (Person Number Gender) markers be considered a verb? There are many more questions beside these.

In 2006, three Tamiḷi (Tamiḷ-Brāhmī) inscriptions from *circa* 3rd-2nd century BCE, were discovered at Pulimāṅkōmpai and published by Rajan (Rajan, Yathiskumar and Selvakumar 2006). These three inscriptions are considered to be the earliest hero-stone inscriptions discovered to date in India. Mahadevan included these inscriptions in the revised and enlarged second edition of ETE (2014: 544, 642-643). One of the inscriptions, Pulimāṅkōmpai-1, is damaged. Of the remaining two inscriptions, I have selected Pulimāṅkōmpai-3 for study. In our understanding, Mahadevan’s analysis raises methodological and theoretical problems in both reading and interpretation. In what follows, I will show that the text engraved in stone is acceptable on the grounds of historical and comparative linguistics.

THE ORIGINAL TEXT

The original text engraved in stone and the translation as published are given below (Rajan *et al.* 2006: 1-5):

A). 1. *kal* 2. *pēṭutīyaṅ antavaṅ* 3. *kūṭal ūr* *ākōḷ*
 stone P.N.M PLN cow-lift

‘This is the memorial stone (erected in honour) of Pēṭu Tīyaṅ Antavan during cow-lifting at Kūṭalūr’.

THE TEXT AS REVISED BY MAHADEVAN

This is the revised text as published in ETE (Mahadevan 2014: 544):

B). 1. *kūṭal ūr ākōḷ* 2. *peṭu tīyaṅ antavaṅ* 3. *kal*

A comparison of (A) and (B) shows that constituents (1) and (3) have changed their position, whereas constituent (2) remains in its original medial position; on the other hand, *pēṭu* has been replaced by *peṭu*. Also, Mahadevan 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’ (2006: 6-8). Mahadevan’s publication of ‘Pulimāṅkōmpai-3’ (hereafter PK3) raises important problems, namely the reading of the text as well as methodological and theoretical problems of interpretation. It is understood that an acceptable or successful interpretation of the meaning of a corpus language inscription depends entirely on 1) the semantics of the lexemes, 2) the shared knowledge of the reader, and 3) the context.

1. READING INSCRIPTION PK3

Three variant readings of the inscription PK3 have been advanced. These are:

1. *pēṭu tīyaṅ* (Rajan *et al.* 2006: 2)
2. *pēra tīyaṅ* (Poongunran 2017: 51)
3. *peṭu tīyaṅ* (Mahadevan 2014: 545).

I now turn to consider the first two readings and will return to Mahadevan’s reading in section 3.

1. Rajan considers *pēṭu tīyaṅ* to be a proper noun and a single unit. In that reading, I might suggest that *pēṭu* be taken to be a place name prefixed to the proper noun as a determinant. If this is acceptable, this unit may be interpreted as Tīyaṅ from / belonging to (a place called) Pēṭu.

Let us note that *pēṭu* occurs in another hero-stone inscription in the place name *Vallipēṭu nāṭu*, suffixed to the first segment *valli* (*āvaṇam* 7, Kīraiccāṭṭu kalveṭṭu. 1996: 15-16). Furthermore, the *Tamil Lexicon* gives the following interpretation: *pēṭu* ‘Small town, village’ (p. 2890).

2. Poongunran proposes the following reading and explanation (2023: 149):

pēra tīyaṅ < *pēru* + *atiyaṅ*

‘பேறு என்பது முல்லை நிலத்தில் மாட்டுச் செல்வத்தைக் குறிக்கும்’².

[...] *peru*, it may mean the best gift in a pastoral economy, where the cattle forms [*sic*] the real wealth,’ (Rangasamy 1990:257). Hence, *pēru tīyaṅ* may mean ‘Tīyaṅ the possessor of herds of cows’.

In addition, Subbarayalu (personal communication) mentioned that the same graph (letter) is read as ‘r’ in a few occurrences, ETE, 378 for example, and also in a Tamil-Brāhmī potsherd from Kodumanal, (no. 65). Based on these occurrences, Subbarayalu also suggests the reading *pēr(a)* instead of *pēṭu*.

In the above two readings, both *pēṭu* and *pēr(u)* function as determinants of Tīyaṅ but not as verbs. Hence, these two readings do not throw a wrench into my intended linguistic analysis. However, until scholars reach a consensus, I follow Rajan’s reading.

2. LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF PK3

² ‘pēru eṇṇatu mullai nilattil māṭṭuc celvattaik kuṛikkum’

‘The word ‘pēru’ signifies the cattle wealth in the pastoral region’

As previously noted, the language of the Tamil inscriptions constitutes a corpus language with complex linguistic configurations that are not readily discernible when compared to Modern Tamil and Modern Dravidian. In other words, I need to devise a specific and appropriate linguistic tool to adequately comprehend the structure of inscriptional Tamil, rather than relying on existing notions like ‘subject’, ‘object’, etc., or grammatical categories such as finite verb, participles, etc. Many scholars have studied and commented on the language of the Tamil inscriptions. As I show below, the appreciation of the language of the Tamil corpus varies considerably among scholars. Here are some examples:

‘In these circumstances it is extremely problematic to hold that the languages of these inscriptions are truly representative of the standard of the Tamil language’ (Pillai 1956: 179).

‘[...] these records are not truly representative of the main trend of development of either the literary or the common colloquial Tamil of that period, but reflect a hybridised jargon of Buddhist and/or Jaina monks, that is, quite a different type and style of language than centamil the refined standardized language of literature’ (Zvelebil 1964: 552).

‘The sentences here [i.e. in the cave inscriptions], are substantive sentences with a topic and comment. [...] Sometimes, the predication becomes itself the topic when the name of the person occurs as a comment’ (Meenakshisundaran 1965: 48).

‘But one thing seems to be clear. The basically Tamil language used in these inscriptions was different from the Tamil language used in the Sangam literary works and contains a good proportion of Prakrit words’ (Mahalingam 1974: 157).

‘[...] it can be demonstrated that the language of the cave inscriptions [...] is Old Tamil, not materially different from the language of later Tamil inscriptions or even literary texts, in its basic phonological, morphological and syntactical features’ (Mahadevan 2014: 139).

‘The characteristic feature of the early Tamil language tradition is the separate writing of grammatical suffixes beginning with vowels without joining to the main word. This language tradition is followed in these inscriptions. Therefore, these are considered to be earlier in date. Paleographically, orthographically and linguistically these hero stones are considered as the earliest. Therefore, these three hero stones are very important to the study of early historic period of Tamil Nadu’ (Rajan 2007).

However, an empirical analysis of the language of Tamil inscriptions clearly shows features that may be called as Pre-Sangam or Early Old Tamil stage. For instance, *‘The Tamil-Brahmi data give evidence for both the isolating or “analytical” tendency of the previous stage and the development of the process of agglutination’*. Note further, too, that *‘Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions are the only records which provide evidence that later components of words or morphological constructions were originally independent words’ (Pilot- Raichoor 2012).*

I present some salient features of the Tamil inscriptions in general and of PK3 in particular below. A quick examination of this inscription reveals the linear ordering of bare lexemes and the absence of morphological elements, case markers and copula or other verbal forms. Its word order is completely the inverse of that in Modern Tamil. This type of inscription can be interpreted successfully, mainly by the semantic features of the lexical items and by the context. As Meenakshisundaran wrote, ‘The sentences here [i.e. in the cave inscriptions], are substantive sentences with a topic and comment [...] Sometimes, the predication becomes itself the topic when the name of the person occurs as a comment’ (Meenakshisundaran 1965:48). It is evident that PK3 does not fit into a ‘subject-predicate’ structure but that the information is packaged

into a ‘topic-comment’ structure. The term *topic* means ‘what the utterance is about’, and the term *comment* means ‘what the utterance has to say about the topic’ (Murugaiyan 2019).

In this inscription, the topic is ‘*kal*’, what this inscription is about. In this particular context this lexical item *kal* ‘stone’ refers to the ‘memorial stone’.

The remaining part of the inscription {‘2. *pēṭu tīyaṅ antavaṅ* 3. *kūṭal ūrākōḷ*’, *D*} Pēṭu Tīyaṅ Antavaṅ (was killed during) cow-lifting at (a place called) Kūṭal ūr}, is the comment, that is what the inscription has to say about *kal*, the ‘memorial stone’.

There is no morphological element to indicate the grammatical function of the lexemes, i.e. the genitive case is absent on the proper name (PN) and the locative case on the place name (PLN). The term ‘*ākōḷ*’³ ‘cow-lift’ is used as a bare stem and might be a noun or a verb, devoid as it is of any morphological element.

However, note that the *Tamil Lexicon* (TL) marks *ākōḷ* as a noun: ‘[...] *ākōḷ*, n. < ஆ⁸ +. (Purap.) Theme of seizing the foe's cattle, as a declaration of war [...]’ (TL 207). *Ākōḷ* is related to ‘ஆ⁸ ā, n. < ஆ⁶-. [...] 2. [T. āvu, K. M. ā.] Female of the ox, the sombar and the buffalo [...] 3. Bull [...]’ (TL 201).

Furthermore, Winslow’s *A comprehensive Tamil and English dictionary of high and low Tamil* gives the following definition: ‘[...] (*kōḷ*), v. noun. [from கைபு, v.] Taking, having, receiving, seizing, influencing [...]’ (1862: 382).

The compound lexeme *ākōḷ* is used as a ‘basic-bare stem’ and, as explained above, since no flexional material is used to indicate the grammatical functions, the grammatical relations are understood by the semantics of the lexical elements.

2.1. WORD ORDER

As mentioned earlier, the structure of inscriptional Tamil does not fit a ‘subject-predicate’ structure but presents a ‘topic-comment’ structure. The word order in Tamil epigraphic language is conditioned by the principles of information packaging and not by grammatical features. Andronov (1991), Meenakshisundaran (1965), Herring (2000) and Zvelebil (1997) have examined the word order variation in Classical Tamil. In previous work, I argued that the SOV (Subject–Object–Verb) word order is not a norm in Epigraphic Tamil and that the word order is controlled mainly by pragmatic features, where the old or known information is assigned the beginning or the initial position and the new or unknown information follows it in a proposition (Murugaiyan 2015). This pragmatic word order is also found in Sangam corpus, where any constituent may occur in any position of the sentence depending on the communicative intention of the poet as in the following example, an often-quoted passage from *Kampa Rāmāyaṇam* (*Cuntara kāṇṭam, tiruvaṭi toḷuta paṭalam*: 59, 233):⁴

1. **kaṇṭ.aṅ.ēṅ** *karṇ.in.ukk.aṅi.y.ai* *kaṅkḷ.āl* [...]

see.past.aṅ.1.S chastity.in.DAT.jewel.ACC eyes.INST

‘I saw [Sita] the jewel of chastity, with my eyes’

³ The term ‘*ākōḷ*’ is composed of two stems ā+kōḷ (cow + seize / seizing), generally translated as ‘cow-lifting’. This term is found in *tolkāppiyam* (poruḷatikāram - veṭci-3).

⁴ *Śrī kampaṛāmāyaṇam*

(“I have seen the jewel of chastity”)⁵

This example needs an explanation for those unfamiliar with the story of Rāmā and Sītā in the epic, *Kampa Rāmāyaṇam*. After Sītā was captured by Rāvaṇa, Hanumān went to the forest in search of Sītā. While waiting for news from Hanumān, Rama became very anxious. To ease Rama's anxiety, Hanuman begins his response by topicalizing the fact that he saw Sita, the most important information. Hanuman used the technique of topicalization or fronting the verbal predicate *kaṇṭēṇ* ‘saw I’, by changing the order of the constituents, which normally is at the end of the sentence.

Evidence from the Sangam corpus:

2. (VSO)

eḷḷuṇar pōlum ivar eṇ pūṅkōtai.y.ai (cilap :10. nāṭukāṇ kātai: 231)
mock-3PL EXPL they my flower garland.y.ACC
‘These people would mock at my flower garland (heroine)’

2. (VS)

nōk.ō yāṇ.ē (narr.57: 10)
suffer.1S.EXPL I.ē
‘shall I suffer?’

This type of word order was not only common but was also understood by contemporary readers. Let us recall Meenakshisundaran:

the subject *yāṇ* ‘I’ 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* [italics added for emphasis] (1965: 3).

These evidentiary examples suffice to show that the word order in PK3 as it is engraved, with the lexeme *kal* at the beginning as the topic of the sentence, is totally acceptable according to the historical linguistic features of Tamil, and it is not necessary to push the topic ‘*kal*’ to the end of the inscription, as Mahadevan does (2014).

2.2. BARE STEMS/ABSENCE OF MORPHOLOGICAL ELEMENTS

As mentioned above, using bare stems without adding any formants and morphemes represents the earliest strata in the history of the Tamil language. These bare stems without flexional material may function as nouns, verbs or adjectives depending on the context. In other words, in the pre-Sangam period, a clear-cut formal distinction between noun, verb, and adjective was yet to be generalised. There are many examples from the Sangam poems:

3. *kaḷ ār uvkai kalimakil ulavar* (akam. 346: 5)
toddy drink bliss rejoice farmers
‘farmers rejoice blissfully drinking toddy’

4. *veḷ vī.t tālai tirai.y.alai* (Kuru.163: 4)
white flower pandanus float.GL.wave

⁵ This translation is by P.S. Sundaram 2002:168.

‘the waves roll the pandanus with white flower’

2.3. NON-VERBAL SENTENCES

Another relevant question is whether the presence of a verb is essential to complete a predication or to construct a meaningful complete proposition. I raise this question in relation to Mahadevan’s comment: ‘if the word *pētu* (i.e. place name) is read as *peṭu* (i.e. paṭu), the sentence will get a verb and will be complete.’⁶

In Tamil, non-verbal sentences are very common. Many examples occur in the Sangam literature:

5. *mān taḷir mēni neṭu meṇ paṇai tōḷ kurun toṭi makaḷir* (pari. 8:38) (Rajam 1992:468)
mango shoot body long soft arm bamboo small bangle women
'mango shoot (like) complexioned women with tender, bamboo-like long and soft arms and small bangles'

6. *nīyūm tāyai iavarku* (aka. 16.13)
you.um mother.2.S they.DATIVE
'you too you are mother to them'

7. *avaṭku aval kātalaḷ* (nar. 176: 3-4)
she.DATIVE she love.3.F.S
'she is lover to her'

There are many other examples from the Sangam corpus showing that the presence of a verb is not at all mandatory. The detailed analysis of the inscription PK3 above provides ample evidence to show that the grammatical configuration of the text of PK3 as it is engraved ‘reflects an old state of affairs’. This ‘old state of affairs’ was not reported in the prescriptive traditional Tamil grammars, and was replaced, in the course of time, by the later morphologically and syntactically stabilised linguistic structure.

The above linguistic analysis of PK3 leads us to the last part of our paper namely the relation between the Tamil ‘*paṭu*’ and the enigmatic Malayalam ‘*peṭu*’.

⁶ This is our translation. The text in Tamil is as follows: “2. ‘பேடு’ (அதாவது ‘ஊர்’) என்ற சொல்லைப் ‘பெடு’ (அதாவது ‘படு’) என்று வாசித்தால் வாக்கியம் வினைச் சொல்லைப் பெற்று முழுமையடைகிறது.” (Mahadevan 2006:7)

3. THE RELATION BETWEEN TAMIL /PAṬU/ AND MALAYALAM /PEṬU/

I am well aware that studies in comparative Dravidian phonology over more than half a century, have produced remarkable results. Thanks to the advanced state of our current knowledge of comparative Dravidian phonology, the derivation of Malayalam *peṭu* from Tamil *paṭu* not only sounds improbable but raises serious theoretical and methodological questions. I have already argued that the presence of a verb is not at all necessary, particularly in this type of identificational or equative proposition and where the constituents occur in a topic-comment structure. In what follows, I first present some Proto-Dravidian phonological rules that are in contradistinction with the derivation of Malayalam *peṭu* from Tamil or the proto-Dravidian *paṭu*. Then, in support of this view, I will examine the semantic and etymological features of the Malayalam word *peṭu*.

PROTO DRAVIDIAN PHONOLOGICAL RULES AND PEṬU

Mahadevan argues that the Malayalam *peṭu* is a cognate of *paṭu*, a literary Tamil form. Below I examine the possibility of vowel raising $a > e$ in the verbal root. Dravidian scholars now widely accept that Proto-Dravidian roots are all monosyllabic. Regarding the change of $a > e$, Subrahmanyam states clearly that the PDr. **a* remains as *a* in all Dravidian languages except Toda and Parji (Subrahmanyam 1985:51). Krishnamurthi, also, states, ‘The general rule is that vowels in the root syllables remain unchanged in most of the languages’ (2003: 99). It is clear from the above Proto-Dravidian phonological rules that the change $a > e$ does not concern Malayalam, a South Dravidian language.

Further, Krishnamurthi observes that ‘the vowel raising rule ($a > e$) operates synchronically in Parji in inflection. Thus, the final *a* of a nominal stem changes to *e* before the plural suffix *-l* and the accusative-genitive suffix *-n* (both are alveolars)’ (1978: 260, 273). Moreover, ‘even in Parji, this change takes place only in nominal flexion’. Krishnamurthi’s remark that the vowel raising operates synchronically and only in nominal flexion is noteworthy. All these Proto-Dravidian phonological features are in contradistinction with the derivation of Malayalam *peṭu* from Tamil *paṭu*.

ETYMOLOGICAL RELATION IF ANY!

If the Proto-Dravidian phonological rules do not permit the derivation of *peṭu* from *paṭu*, as shown above, the whole question of the meaning and history of Malayalam *peṭu* remains to be answered, especially since Mahadevan derives Malayalam *peṭu* from Tamil *paṭu* and glosses it as follows: /*peṭu*/ (LT *paṭu*) – ‘to die’ (2014: 319). I examine the meaning and use of *paṭu* and *peṭu* in Malayalam below:⁷

paṭu in Malayalam

One of the earliest records of ‘*paṭu*’ available to us occurs in Gundert’s *A Malayalam and English dictionary* (1872), which gives the following meaning: ‘*paṭuka paṭuya* 5. 1. To fall, sink’ and cites its use in ‘fallen in battle’ and ‘to die’ under this entry (599). I also note the following ‘*peṭtu* 1. adv. part. Getting into a direction, towards [...]’ (Gundert 1872: 698).

⁷ I am thankful to Venugopala Panicker, Rajasekharan Nair and Dharmendu for their help regarding the Malayalam data and for their patience in responding to my many queries on the meaning and use of *peṭu* in Malayalam.

On the other hand, I note the following definitions in *A Dravidian etymological dictionary* (hereafter DEDR):

3852 *Ta. paṭu (paṭuv-, paṭṭ-)* [...] *Ma. paṭuka (paṭṭ-)* to fall, sink; *paṭukka* to lay stones, build (chiefly a well, tank); piss; lie down; *n.* bed; *paṭa* layer in mud walls, course of bricks; *paṭavu* laying stones, pavement; *paṭuppu, paṭappu* bed, mat; *paṭiññāru* west; *pāṭu* falling, falling into one's power; *peṭuka (peṭṭ-)* to fall, get into or under; *peṭukka* to piss (DEDR 344).

There is one further relevant entry:

3853 *Ta. paṭu (paṭuv-, paṭṭ-)* [...] *Ma. paṭu* what happens, is common; *paṭuka (paṭṭ-)* to be obtained, caught, happen, be in a state; *paṭṭāññu* truth; *paṭukka* to catch, obtain; *pāṭu* suffering pain or damage, possibility, place, situation, nature; *paṭekka* to make, create; *paṭappu* creation; people; *peṭuka (peṭṭ-)* to happen, be in, belong to; *auxiliary verb*; *peṭukka* to enclose, ensnare; *peṭṭu* getting into a direction, towards (DEDR 345).

It is very important to note that:

1) under the entries 3852 and 3853, the authors of DEDR give only two forms for Malayalam: *peṭuka (peṭṭ-)* to fall and (*peṭṭ-)* to happen, get into; with the vowel ‘e’ in the place of ‘a’ in the first syllable and this vowel change is not noticed in other Dravidian languages; and that,

2) under the entry 3852, Burrow and Emeneau give *paṭukka* and *peṭukka* with the meaning ‘piss’ and ‘to piss’, respectively.

It is important to note that DEDR entries 3852 and 3853 might appear to suggest a link between Tamil *paṭu* and Malayalam *peṭu*, as both etymons are grouped under the same entry. But there is no solid evidence to establish a direct link, if any, between the Tamil *paṭu* and Malayalam *peṭu*. It is important to note that the last, *peṭukka* ‘to piss’, has nothing in common semantically with the other entries.

The absence of phonological correspondence and the absence of a semantic relationship between the etymons *paṭu* and *peṭu* presented in entries 3852 and 3853 of DEDR, lead one, to put forward the hypothesis that it could perhaps be of two different etymons. In any case, as mentioned above, only a thorough study of historical data from Malayalam sources could elucidate the origin, nature and function of *peṭu* in Old Malayalam.⁸

***peṭu* ~ *peḍu* in contemporary Malayalam**

Gundert (697) gives the following definitions, but there is no indication of whether the occurrence is from old or modern Malayalam: ‘*peṭuka peḍuya* [...] 1. To fall, get into or under 2. to happen 3. to be in, belong to, 4. aux. Verb serving for Cpd. with Nouns [...] to get into fear, to fear; [...]’. In contemporary Malayalam, the verb *peṭuka* ~ *peḍuka* is used, with the same meaning as the *peṭuka* in this entry in Gundert. In Modern Malayalam, ‘*peṭuka* as an independent verb may carry the meanings “to get into”, “to fall into”’ (Srikumar 2019: 2). This verb is also used with the meaning ‘to become’ and it has its transitive form *peṭuttuka* with the

⁸ I am thankful to Venugopala Panicker and Rajasekaran Nair for discussions regarding *peṭu* in Old Malayalam, that helped me to put forward the hypothesis that it could perhaps be of two different etymons.

meaning ‘to make’ (Srikumar 2016: 2019). In Modern Malayalam, *peḍuka* seems to occur mostly in compounds and less frequently as a main verb.

The examples above suggest that the two forms, Tamil *paṭu* and Malayalam *peṭuka*, are cognates only in modern Malayalam and that there is no conclusive evidence to support the existence of *peḍu* in Malayalam during the Sangam period or in old Dravidian.

However, the existence of Malayalam *peṭu-* in the Sangam period, or more precisely, at the time of the PK3 inscription *c.* 3rd–2nd BCE, remains uncertain. In support of our doubts, I can only quote the remarks of Ramaswamy Ayyar:

paḍ-, a very ancient south Dr. verb-base with ramified and generalized meanings, was used in Old Mal. (as in other south Dr. speeches) both as an independent verb with the significations ‘to fall (dead on the battlefield)’, ‘to happen, occur’, ‘to be included’, and as a help-verb in the type of eḍukka-p-paḍ-, etc. The frequency with which it was employed in Mal. as a help verb (the use of paḍ- as a fully independent verb gradually fell into desuetude in New Mal.) [...] (2004: 34).

The process of vowel-raising *paṭu* > *peṭu* might have happened in Malayalam sometime after the 10th or 11th centuries CE, because ‘[v]ery old [Malayalam] inscriptions and texts use *paḍ-*: i-k-kaccattil paṭṭadinukku’ [TAS, II, p-36-10th c.] (*ibid.*). The form *peṭ-* might have developed in modern Malayalam, but there is no evidence for the existence of these forms in Old Malayalam in the Sangam period. A study of empirical data from the Malayalam historical corpus would certainly shed light on the historical development of the morphosyntactic structure and the use of *peṭu* in old Malayalam.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I presented a detailed analysis of the PK3 inscription and tried to explain how historical and comparative Dravidian methods would help us interpret the inscription engraved some 2000 years ago. I am very conscious that an error-free reading/deciphering is essential to correctly interpret the inscription. As I have mentioned above, the first two readings do not throw a wrench into our intended linguistic analysis. I ventured to examine the PK3 inscription at the phonological, morphological, syntactic, and etymological levels. The present analysis leads us to the following results:

The comparative Dravidian phonological rules do not support the *a* > *e*, vowel-raising feature in old Malayalam. Hence the derivation of Malayalam *peṭu* from Tamil *paṭu* seems doubtful. The order of constituents in Epigraphic Tamil is controlled mainly by pragmatic features, where any constituent may occur in any position of the sentence and this type of word order is not at all ungrammatical. Furthermore, in this type of identificational or equative proposition, a verb is not at all necessary to complete the predication. To sum up, the PK3 inscription as originally engraved is grammatically acceptable, and I have presented many examples from Sangam literature in support of this argument. The changes proposed in Mahadevan 2014 (pages 544, 642-643) are based on grammatical rules that were prescribed after the PK3 inscription and, above all, do not reflect the historical evolution of the Tamil and Malayalam languages nor that of the other Dravidian languages.

EPILOGUE

The poet's language is not only Tamil: the landscape, the personae, the appropriate moods, all become a language within language. Like a native speaker, he makes 'infinite use of finite means', to say with familiar words what has never been said before; he can say exactly what he wants to, without even being aware of the ground rules of his syntax (Ramanujan 1999: 210-211).

ABBREVIATIONS

1: First Person; 2: Second Person; DAT: Dative; ACC: Accusative; EXPL: Expletive; F: Feminine; GL: glide; INST: Instrumental; PAST: Past tense; PL: Plural; TAS: *Travancore Archaeological Series*.

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