



HAL
open science

Pali: The Archaic Esperanto of Theravāda Buddhism

Melinda Zulejka Fodor

► **To cite this version:**

Melinda Zulejka Fodor. Pali: The Archaic Esperanto of Theravāda Buddhism. 2023, 10.58079/11yy4 .
hal-04745442

HAL Id: hal-04745442

<https://hal.science/hal-04745442v1>

Submitted on 26 Oct 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Copyright

Pali: The Archaic Esperanto of Theravāda Buddhism

BY ILARA · PUBLISHED 20/12/2023 · UPDATED 09/07/2024



by [Melinda Fodor](#)

Once upon a time, somewhere in northern East India, within an ancient Buddhist community, the first natural “Esperanto” language, Pali, emerged. Its development was certainly not the result of artificial, deliberate, and rapid construction, but rather a long, involuntary natural process. Despite this, its role was similar to that of the Esperanto constructed by L. L. Zamenhof in 1887: to preserve and disseminate the Buddha’s teachings of non-violence across different regions and social classes, in a second universal language comprehensible to all.

Pali, an archaic classical Indo-Aryan language, lies linguistically between Sanskrit and modern Indian languages. Historically, however, it evolved from a vernacular language (Prakrit) spoken during the Vedic periods (from the 2nd millennium to the sixth century BCE), coexisting with Vedic Sanskrit reserved for the Brahmin clergy. In other words, while Sanskrit was exclusively used by high-caste men and in Vedic rituals, another language served as a vehicle for everyday

communication among everyone. It is from this common language, along with its regional variations, that Pali originated.



The roots of Pali trace back to the teachings of Gautama Siddhārtha Śākyamuni (fourth century BCE, better known as the Buddha), and it became the sacred language of *Theravāda* Buddhist liturgy. Despite its grammatical consistency, Pali functions as a kind of ancient Esperanto—a vehicular language resulting from a blend of various Middle Indo-Aryan dialects from different geographical areas, likely comprehensible to all its speakers.

As a reformer, Buddha desired his teachings to be accessible to all, allowing each person to recite them in their regional mother tongue. The transmission of his words remained strictly oral until the fourth Buddhist council in the first century BCE, when writing became the preservation method for future generations. Pali thus remained in this state of dialectal mixture, and was codified by grammarians Kaccayāna, Moggallāna, and Aggavaṃsa from the sixth century CE onwards.

Buddha was born in Kapilavastu, a city in the Śākya kingdom. He resided in several places during his lifetime: Śrāvastī (Kośala), Vārāṇasī (Kāśī), Vaiśālī (Vṛjī), Rājagṛha (Magadha), Kauśāmbī (Vatsa), and Kuśīnagara (Malla), where he attained *parinirvāṇa*. After his passing, his community underwent various changes, set down during councils in Rājagṛha, Vaiśālī, and Pāṭaliputra. These locations primarily span from the Magadha region (Northeastern India near the Bengal border) to Śūrasena (Central North India, near the Nepal border), and Pañcāla (Central North-West India), representing the early Buddhist dialectal diaspora.

The dialects of these regions are grouped together under the generic term “Prakrit”, but each is then named according to its place of origin and inhabitants. The language of Magadha is called Māgadhī, that of Śūrasena Śaurasenī, and that of Pañcāla paiśācī (according to Rājaśekhara [9th–10th cc.], Kannauj). The exception is Pali, which is not linked to any particular region or

people, even though Buddhaghosa (5th c.) identified Pali with the Māgadhī. Another interpretation is that Pali simply means “text”, referring to the Buddhist canons.

Thanks to the grammarians of Literary Prakrit, we know certain specific features of the regional dialects, which can also be identified in the Pali language. For example Māgadhī and Paiśācī *ññ* (*kaññā* ‘girl’), Māgadhī *y* (*seyyā* ‘bed’), Paiśācī *n* (*panasa* ‘breadfruit’), and Śaurasenī *dh* (*idha* ‘here’). In the nominative masculine singular, Paiśācī uses *-o* (*putto* ‘son’, standard in Pali), while Māgadhī has an *-e* ending (*putte* ‘son’, possible occurrence, but rare in Pali). Intervocalic dentals are also preserved in Paiśācī (*ati* ‘beyond’, *patha* ‘road’). The optative of Māgadhī and Pali (*bhave/bhaveam* ‘let it be’), and the passive of Paiśācī and Pali (*diyate* ‘he makes himself given by’), are very similar, if not identical in the 3rd person singular. Like the Prakrit dialects, Pali also simplifies certain intervocalic aspirations (*kh, gh, ph, bh*) into *h*.

Literary Prakrit dialects generously omit intervocalic occlusives (*k, g, c, j*) and sometimes even semi-vowels (*v, y*) of Sanskrit. However, Pali, as we know it from the texts, does not follow these rules. Indeed, the archaic Prakrit languages, whose earliest traces date back to the inscriptions on the pillars of Emperor Aśoka in the third century BCE, also preserve them. The Literary Prakrit dialects documented by grammarians (the first of whom was Vararuci in the 2nd century CE) are late and demonstrate phonetic evolution. If Sanskrit intervocalic occlusives were absent in the original Prakrit dialects or not is still the subject of debate. Some scholars propose that Prakrits evolved into higher languages used in administration through a process called sanskritization. Others argue that it was Sanskrit mispronounced by non-Sanskrit natives. Whatever the specific process involved, the presence of Sanskrit-like features indicates that Pali was used among educated groups, but that it still remained understandable to a wider audience, just like the archaic Prakrit dialects of Aśoka.

Emperor Aśoka, after unifying India by military force, repented of the suffering he had caused, and converted to *Theravāda* Buddhism. A fervent disciple, he spread Buddha’s teachings not only in the Indian peninsula, but also by sending Buddhist missionaries to other countries, including Sri Lanka. Aśoka’s legacy is further evident in the rock edicts he erected across various regions of India. These inscriptions, written in different archaic Prakrit dialects closely related to Pali, contained both state laws and the principles of Buddha’s *dharma*. This pivotal moment marked the initial diffusion of *Theravāda* Buddhism.

By the 1st century BCE, Sanskrit had become the language par excellence for all Indian sciences, religions, and scholarly communities, surpassing its initial liturgical role in the Brahmanic tradition. This change also affected Buddhist and Jain communities that previously used languages other than Sanskrit, and most of them have ended up adopting its exclusive use. In contrast, Pali has been preserved in its archaic form to this day as the canonical *lingua franca* of *Theravāda* Buddhism, thanks to its homogenization by the Pali grammarians mentioned above. The Pali canon was written in this language in different scripts, on palm leaf and paper manuscripts, copied and transmitted over the centuries. These texts are still recited

within *Theravāda* Buddhist communities. Accordingly, Pali can rightly be considered a natural form of “archaic Esperanto”. It shares the same characteristics as Esperanto, created by Louis-Lazare Zamenhof in 1887: a neutral language facilitating communication between people of different mother tongues, with no ties to a specific region. Pali played an essential role in promoting the Buddha’s teachings of “peace and love” in all regional communities, regardless of gender or social status, not only in northern India but also, later on, in certain neighboring countries to the south where Indian culture was adopted.



Melinda Fodor, Part-time Lecturer-Researcher (GREI)

Melinda Fodor is a specialist in Indian literature and Buddhist philosophy in Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit, and Tibetan. She focusses on Prakrit literature and poetics, having completed her Ph. D. dissertation on Prakrit drama in 2017 (EPHE-PSL). She catalogued the Pelliot collection of Sanskrit manuscripts at the National Library of France as part of the HisTochText project (2018-2021). A recipient of prestigious fellowships, she has also taught Prakrit at the University of Aix-en-Provence and the University of Rome Sapienza. Since 2021, Melinda Fodor has been teaching Prakrit (beginner and intermediate levels) at ILARA.

OpenEdition suggests that you cite this post as follows:

ILARA (December 20, 2023). Pali: The Archaic Esperanto of Theravāda Buddhism. *ILARA, the Institute for Linguistic Heritage and Diversity*. Retrieved October 20, 2024 from <https://doi.org/10.58079/11yy4>

