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A CASE SYSTEM WITH OPTIONAL AND INTERCHANGEABLE ENDINGS

ABSTRACT

Ancient Tamil had a system of eight cases (which still exists in very much the same form in Modern Tamil). Yet the cases endings could be freely deleted and even interchanged. This curious phenomenon is discussed in the present paper.

Proto-Dravidian is assumed to have existed as a single language until 4000 BC (Steever 1998: 11). The case system of Proto-Dravidian is characterized as follows: "The reconstruction of four cases is certain: nominative (*-∅), accusative (*-*ay* ~ **Vn*), dative (-*(k)ku*) and genitive (*-*a* ~ *-*in*). [...] The reconstruction of other such cases as the sociative, instrumental, locative and ablative is less easily demonstrated" (ibid., p. 20).

"[A]ny literate speaker of [Modern] Tamil will have fluent command of two distinct varieties of the language, a "high" variety used for writing and formal speaking [...] and a "low" variety for purposes of conversation" (Asher 1980: ix). In Modern Tamil, nouns that denote human beings have locative and ablative endings different from the corresponding endings of nouns that denote non-human beings. In the 'high' variety and in the 'low' one, nouns denoting human beings have the following cases and case-endings, respectively (see Asher 1980: 103):

Nominative:	-∅	-∅
Accusative:	-ai	-e
Dative:	-ukku	-ukku
Sociative:	-oot.u	-oot.e
Instrumental:	-aal	-aale
Genitive:	-ut.aiya	-∅ ~ -oot.a
Locative:	-it.am	-kit.t.e
Ablative:	-it.amiruntu	-kit.t.eruntu

There seems to be a quite remarkable continuity between the accusative and dative endings of proto-Dravidian, on the one hand (i.e. * -*ay* and * -*(k)ku*), and the corresponding endings of Modern Tamil, on the other (i.e. *ai* ~ *e* and -*ukku*).

The grammar *Tolkaappiyam* (= 'Old Book'), written at the beginning of the Christian era, is at the same time the oldest extant description of the Tamil

language (i.e. Ancient Tamil) and the oldest extant document of this language. The second chapter of the second book of *Tolkaappiyam* bears the title 'The Chapter on the Cases'. It teaches that, apart from the vocative, the nouns of Ancient Tamil have seven cases with the following endings: Nominative = zero, Accusative = *-ai*, Instrumental = *-otu/-aan/-aal*, Dative = *-ku*, Ablative = *-in*, Genitive = *-atu*, Locative = *-kan*. The plural is expressed either by *-ar*/*-ir* (= '+ human') or by *-kal* (= '−human'), and this marker is placed between the noun stem and the case ending. What is here portrayed as the locative ending is really a noun (with the meaning 'eye') which has assumed a postpositional function. There are in all 19 such postpositional nouns expressing different types of situatedness.

According to Lehmann (1994: 36–37), what was called 'instrumental' above, actually subsumes two distinct cases, namely sociative (*-ot.u*) and instrumental (*-aan* ~ *-aal*). What was called 'ablative' above, is called 'equative' by Lehmann (1994: 36) and 'equative-ablative' by Lehmann (1998: 80).

The third chapter of the second book of *Tolkaappiyam* bears the title 'The Chapter on the Confusion of the Cases'. Rule 104 of this chapter states that case endings may simply be left out. Rule 106 adds that, even assuming that case endings are maintained, they can be replaced by each other. From the typological point of view these two phenomena are quite remarkable.

Let us consider rule 106 first. In his grammar of Ancient Tamil Lehmann (1994: 42) states: "[dass] ein Kasussuffix durchaus auch mit der Funktion eines anderen Kasus gebraucht werden kann" (= "One case ending may quite legitimately assume the function of another such ending"). This statement is repeated elsewhere as well and documented with many examples taken from Ancient Tamil texts. In *Tolkaappiyam*, this type of arbitrary interchangeability of case endings is clearly distinguished from the situation where some sort of semantic motivation can be found for this phenomenon.

Next, let us consider rule 104. Again, Lehmann (1994) affirms the veridical nature of this rule: "[D]ie Anfügung der Kasussuffixe an Nomina [ist] fakultativ. [I]n der Mehrzahl der Fälle [sind] Nomina nicht flektiert" (p. 22). ("Attaching case endings to nouns is optional. In most cases nouns are uninflected.") "[D]ie Auslassung der Kaussufixe [kommt] im Alttamil bei freien Formen und allen Satzelementen vor, mit dem Ergebnis dass viele Sätze hauptsächlich aus unmarkierten Nominalstämmen bestehen" (p. 52). ("In Ancient Tamil the case endings may be left out [not only in compound nouns but also] in free forms and in any syntactic function, with the result that many sentences consist mainly of uninflected nominal stems.") In other words, even a complex sentence is often just a string of nominal and verbal roots (or stems), apart from the last word which is always an inflected finite verb. This phenomenon might be called 'suffix dropping'.

The optionality of case endings is also confirmed by Rajam (1992: 303–304), who at the same times makes a clear distinction between what he calls "case markers or case suffixes and postpositions": "Postpositions, unlike case markers, are items which are meaningful even when used in isolation. When used in isolation, they give the sense of a location or time. Sometimes they are written separately from the nouns they follow. Most case markers [like *-ai* and *-ku*], on the other hand, are not meaningful when used in isolation; they are suffixed to and written together with the nouns. The few exceptions are *kon.t.u* ['with', 'because of'], *ut.an* ['together with'] and *kan.* ['at', 'during'], which could just as well be considered as postpositions."

Some examples illustrating rule 104 will now be given. They are easy to grasp even without any previous knowledge of Ancient Tamil, because the notion of 'uninflected root' is self-explanatory.

(1) vaanku amai men tooḷ
bend bamboo delicate shoulder
'a delicate shoulder that bends like a bamboo'

(2) mañcai arai iin muṭṭai
peacock rock hatch egg
'an egg hatched on a rock by a peacock'

(3) karanku icai aruvi maal varai mali cunai malar
roar sound waterfall greatness mountain be-full pond flower
'flowers on a brimming pond on a big mountain, where there is a waterfall with a roaring sound'

(4) malar-∅ micai-∅ eek-in-aan-∅ maaṇ aṭi-∅
flower-GEN upside-LOC walk-PRET-3SG.M-GEN power foot-LOC
ceer-nt-aar nila-∅ micai-∅
arrive-PRET-NOM.3PL.HUMAN world-GEN upside-LOC
niṭu vaal-v-aar
long live-PRES/FUT-3PL.HUMAN
'Those who have arrived at the powerful feet of the one who walked over flowers will long live on the earth'

Examples (1) – (3), which are complex NP's, are taken from Lehmann (1994: 156, 124, 158), while example (4), which is a complete sentence, was given by Professor Asko Parpola (University of Helsinki) in a talk that he held at the University of Turku in 2001. The analysis of the six zero case endings is also the one given by Professor Parpola.

-(V)nku is an intransitivizing affix that is added to the verb root; thus, *vaanku* of example (1) and *karanku* of example (3) are uninflected intransitive stems. Example (4) illustrates another interesting feature of Ancient Tamil

(discussed in Itkonen 2001a). The subject *ceerntaar* ('those who have arrived') and the finite verb *vaalvaar* ('will live') are structurally identical, and if they are replaced by each other, the resulting sentence is fully grammatical: *vaalvaar ceerntaar* = 'Those who will live have arrived'. Thus, in this type of construction it is only the word order which tells the difference between subject and finite verb. It may be added that, consistent with what was just said, the form *eekinaan* ('the one-MASC who walked') can also have the meaning 'he walked'.

Quite obviously, the existence of suffix dropping cries out for explanation. There is, however, one question that must be answered first: How frequent is suffix dropping? Has this feature of Ancient Tamil clear parallels, or is it perhaps unique?

According at least to one opinion, suffix dropping should be quite normal. Dixon and Aikhenvald (2002b: 22) make the following statement: "Each language has its own morphological profile. In some cases all affixes are optional but in others a certain type of affix is obligatory — an inflectional system." This statement seems to say that the case of Ancient Tamil is rather normal: all affixes (e.g. case endings) may be optional; but then it adds that this is not true of inflectional systems. This is not easy to understand.

The general opinion, in any case, seems to consider the case of Ancient Tamil rather abnormal. Some time ago, I reported it on Funknet, the electronic mailbox of functional linguistics, and asked if anyone knew of similar cases. The general reaction was puzzlement; and two answers suggested that I have misunderstood my data. This made it clear to me that the issue needs to be promulgated more widely.

So there is no obvious explanation for this phenomenon. This is why less obvious explanations have to be considered. All the texts that we have from the period of early or middle Ancient Tamil (including *Tolkaappiyam* itself) are written in poetic verse. This is due to the fact that, during this whole period, the poetic activity was intense. There are extant poems from no less than 473 poets, who are known by name (cf. Lehmann 1994: 3), a number which surely is exceptional even by global standards. Do we have to do here with a *literary convention*? I have presented this question both to Thomas Lehmann and to Asko Parpola. Lehmann responded in an e-mail message: "Dies könnte die Antwort sein" (= "This could be the answer"). Parpola shrugged and said: "Nobody knows." So the question remains open.

A literary language can be considered as a type of 'special language'. However, at least Foley's (1986), Mithun's (1999), and Dixon's (2002) surveys contain no mention of special languages characterized by suffix dropping. To be sure, Mithun notes that in baby talk "the forms also lack the complex internal morphological structure of many adult words" (p. 273), and Dixon notes that "in

songs a case inflection may be omitted from some (but not all) of the words in an NP, if they occur in contiguity" (p. 91); but this is a far cry from genuine suffixdropping. Moreover, all three surveys report several instances where the expression of this or that grammatical category is optional. But again, there is no real comparison with suffix dropping. Perhaps the nearest equivalent is the phenomenon of 'noun stripping' discussed by Miner (1986).

Now, because the texts of Ancient Tamil represent a very refined type of literature that was written and recited at the palaces of Tamil kingdoms, it might be suggested that an analogy with the types of special languages just mentioned is a priori improbable. Instead, analogues should be looked for in comparable instances of court literature. So far, at least, I have been unable to unearth such analogues.

Next, I mention the possibility of 'genetic explanation', just to rule it out. It might be suggested that suffix dropping represents an earlier, analytic state of language. But we have already seen that, in the current state of knowledge, the noun system of the Dravidian proto-language is assumed to have contained at least four distinct cases (cf. Steever 1998: 20, 25); and the adnominal non-finite verb forms too had their own inflection, which is lacking in the following words of our examples: *varanku*, *iin*, *karanku*, *mali*. And since Modern Tamil continues to have a system of eight cases, we are not dealing with an actual historical development towards an analytic type of language.

The third, and the last, possibility seems to be 'typological explanation', which, to be sure, is more like a restatement of the fact of suffix dropping rather than genuine explanation. Sapir (1921: 128) pointed out that those tendencies that produce one type of language or another must be potentially present in all languages. To illustrate, Henderson (2002: 101) characterizes the verbal system of Eastern/Central Arrernte, a language of central Australia, as "basically agglutinating with tendencies towards both polysynthetic and analytic structures". Accordingly, suffix dropping could be thought to result from such a latent tendency (here: tendency towards analytic or isolating structures); and, at the same time, it would confirm the existence of such tendencies (which has so far been, and still is, of rather speculative character). This interpretation of Ancient Tamil suffix dropping has been mentioned in Itkonen (2001b: 74). According to this scenario, this mainly latent tendency was exploited by a literary tradition for some time, but when the tradition died, the tendency became latent again and has remained so until today. — It goes without saying that, to make this type of explanation more plausible, more data of the same kind are needed.

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POSTSCRIPT

Written in 2003, this article has been rejected for publication because the phenomenon that it describes has been deemed "impossible". Rather than letting it be manhandled by another pair of less than-than-qualified referees, I publish it on my homepage.