

An Epigraphical Analysis of Compound Nouns in the Early Brāhmī Inscriptions of the Anuradhapura District

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Introduction

The Early Brāhmī inscriptions in Sri Lanka belong to the 3rd century BCE to the 1st century CE and represent the earliest written system of Sri Lanka. There are more than two hundred fifty lithic records dedicated to the Buddhist Saṅgha in the Anuradhapura District. While past scholarship has mined these texts to reconstruct historical chronologies, royal genealogies and socio-religious transformations, comprehensive morphological and syntactic analyses of nominal composition remain largely marginal. This study addresses this research gap by systematically isolating, categorizing, and analyzing compound nouns within the early epigraphical record of Anuradhapura.

Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to provide a linguistic classification of the compound nouns embedded within the Early Brāhmī inscriptions of the Anuradhapura District. Specifically, the study aims to:

- Identify and categorize nominal compounds into traditional Sanskrit and Prakrit grammatical frameworks.
- Analyze the internal morpho-syntactic behavior, underlying case relations, and structural patterns of these compounds.

Methodology

This study utilizes an analytical framework. The primary corpus comprises selected early rock and cave inscriptions from prominent archaeological complexes within the Anuradhapura District. These inscriptions were analyzed based on Senarat Paranavitana's foundational corpus, *Inscriptions of Ceylon, Volume I* (1970). Linguistic analysis was conducted via a structural-morphological approach. Inscriptions were parsed into individual lexical units, separating simple stems from bound morphological compounds. Compounding strategies were evaluated based on the relationship between the prior constituent (*pūrva-pada*) and the posterior constituent (*uttara-pada*).

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Results

The linguistic analysis of the Anuradhapura epigraphical data reveals distinct structural and phonological patterns in nominal compounding:

- **Dominance of Genitive Tatpuruṣa:** The majority of compounds are *Ṣaṣṭhī-Tatpuruṣa* structures indicating lineage and ownership, including long multi-word strings like *Baḍakarika-parumaka-Tiśa-puta-parumaka-Aśaḍagutaha* and shorter kinship terms like *Rajhaputa* and *Gapati-Vega-jhitaya*.
- **Use of Bahuvrīhi Epithets:** Possessive (*Bahuvrīhi*) compounds were standardized for elite titles, as demonstrated by the frequent royal honorifics *Devanapiya-maha-rajhaha* and *Dhamarajhaśa*.
- **Institutionalized Status Markers:** Compounding directly grammaticalized religious identity by joining status markers to proper names, seen in monastic titles like *Jhotiśena-teraśa* and lay classifications like *upaśika-Varuṇadataya*.
- **Frequent Fused Proper Names:** The data shows a strong preference for compounding personal proper nouns by combining repetitive canonical stems such as *Tiśa*, *Guta*, *Mita*, and *Deva* (e.g., *Culitiśa*, *Tiśagutaśa*, *Mitadevaha*, *Budarakita*).
- **Phonological Simplification:** Inherited Indo-Aryan vocabulary shows systematic phonetic reductions within compounds, characterized by the loss of aspirates (e.g., *Guptika* to *gutiya*) and the simplification of consonant clusters (e.g., *Kṛṣṇagrāma* to *Kaṇagama*, *Cittagupta* to *Citagutaśa*).

Discussion

The structural dominance of genitive *Tatpuruṣa* and multi-word compounds in the Anuradhapura corpus reflects a highly formalized, legally bound language designed explicitly to institutionalize ownership, lineage, and property transmission to the *Sanḅha*. Furthermore, using standard compounding strategies to fuse elite and religious titles (such as *Parumaka* and *Upaśika*) directly with personal names demonstrates that nominal composition was a standardized administrative necessity rather than a mere stylistic choice during early state formation. Finally, the aggressive phonological simplification and erosion of case endings within compound boundaries confirm that this underlying vernacular was a distinct transitional dialect, actively deviating from standard Ashokan Prakrit toward the unique structural identity of early Sinhala.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that nominal compounds in Anuradhapura's Early Brāhmī inscriptions serve as vital repositories of morpho-syntactic and socio-political data. Shifting the analytical lens to precise linguistic parsing reveals how early Sri Lankan society utilized compounding to formalize legal, administrative, and religious structures during state formation.

Keywords - Early Brāhmī, Anuradhapura District, Epigraphy, Morphological Compounding, Sinhala-Prakrit

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