

Syntactical Structures in Middle Brahmi Inscriptions from Anuradhapura: A Study of Royal Decrees and Religious Donations from the 1st to the 4th Century CE

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Abstract

The Middle Brahmi inscriptions from Anuradhapura, dating from the 1st to the 4th century CE, are valuable historical documents, and they illuminate the sociopolitical, religious, and linguistic landscape of ancient Sri Lanka. Many of these inscriptions are royal decrees and religious donations. The language used in these texts, most particularly the syntactical structures, provides insights

into the hierarchical nature of society and the formal processes involved in royal and religious affairs. This study focuses on the syntactical patterns found in a selection of these Middle Brahmi inscriptions. By examining these texts, the study aims to identify common syntactical structures, trace the evolution of the Sinhalese language, and explore how these structures reflect the political and religious dynamics of the time.

Keywords: Anuradhapura, Middle Brahmi inscriptions, Sinhalese language, Sri Lanka, syntactical structures

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Problem

Despite the historical significance of the Middle Brahmi inscriptions from Anuradhapura, there is a lack of systematic analysis on how their syntactical structures reveal the relationship between language, political authority, and religious hierarchy in ancient Sri Lanka.

Aims and Objectives

The primary aim of this study is to analyze the syntactical structures of Middle Brahmi inscriptions from Anuradhapura, with a particular focus on royal decrees and religious donations from the 1st to the 4th century CE. The study's objectives are as follows:

1. **Identification of Common Syntactic Structures:** To classify and describe the syntactical patterns found in royal and religious inscriptions.
2. **Examination of Syntax and Political/Religious Contexts:** To analyze how these syntactical structures reflect the political and religious context of ancient Sri Lanka.
3. **Understanding Hierarchical and Formal Aspects of Society:** To explore how these syntactical structures reflect the hierarchical nature of ancient Sri Lankan society, particularly regarding the king's role in religious and political affairs.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach to analyze the syntactical structures in the selected Middle Brahmi inscriptions. The methodology consists of several steps:

1. **Selection of Inscriptions:** A sample of ten inscriptions from Anuradhapura has been selected based on their historical significance and the clarity of the text available. These inscriptions primarily focus on royal decrees and religious donations.
2. **Transcription and Translation:** The inscriptions are transcribed from Middle Brahmi into modern Sinhalese script. Where necessary, translations into English are provided. Fragmentary inscriptions are noted, and gaps in the text are acknowledged.
3. **Syntactical Analysis:** Each inscription is analyzed for key syntactical features, such as subject/predicate constructions, possessive forms, verb phrases, nominal phrases, and active voice. Special attention is paid to the use of honorifics and formalized language.
4. **Historical Contextualization:** Each inscription is examined in relation to its historical, political, and religious context, with a focus on the king's role in granting land, resources, and religious support.

5. **Comparative Analysis:** The **Analysis of Specific Inscriptions**

inscriptions are compared across different time periods to trace shifts in syntax and language from the 1st to the 4th century CE.

Previous Work

The study of Brahmi inscriptions has a long scholarly history, with numerous scholars contributing to the field of epigraphy in ancient Sri Lanka. Key contributions include:

- **Geiger (1912)**, who translated and analyzed several of the inscriptions from Anuradhapura, focusing on their historical and linguistic importance.
- **Codrington (1926)**, whose work on the early history of Sri Lanka incorporated epigraphic evidence, though his analysis did not focus heavily on the syntactical aspects.
- **Wickremasinghe (1995)**, who conducted a detailed study of the political and religious context of the inscriptions from Anuradhapura, providing background for understanding the purpose of royal decrees and religious donations.
- **Paranavitana (1953)**, whose epigraphic work remains foundational, offering detailed transcriptions and translations of many important inscriptions from the region.

This study builds upon these foundational works, while focusing specifically on the syntactical structures and their significance.

1. Fragmentary Slab Inscription from Nuvaravava (IC. II. 43)

This fragmentary slab inscription which now is preserved in the Anuradhapura Museum was found on the bund near the low level sluice of the Nuvaravava tank. The writing contains the right half of each of three lines. It was composed by a king named Nakamaharaji. The main objective mentions the grant donated to a caitya

The fragmentary slab inscription from Nuvaravava provides an early example of royal syntax in Middle Brahmi. The inscription begins with the phrase "Naka maharaji yathaha vavi naka cethahaṭa dini," which can be translated as "King Naka has given the lake (or pond) to the monastery (or religious place)". This sentence showcases a straightforward declarative structure, with a subject (Naka Maharaji), an object (Yataha Vavi), and a verb (Dini). The use of a possessive form and the action of giving a donation reflect the formal tone typically found in royal decrees. The syntactical structure is brief and to the point, reflecting the functional nature of these inscriptions.

2. Vessagiri Rock Inscription of Mahanaka (IC. II. 4851)

This inscription is engraved close to the highest point on rock No. B at Vessagiriya.. It was composed by a king named Mahanaka. The inscription also mentions of a donation given to a stupa at Isiramaṇa by using the overlord's share from own tank called Ayibarakā.

The Vessagiri inscription of Mahanaka offers a more elaborate example of a royal decree. The sentence “Sidha Mahanaka raja Isiramaṇa Pitaṇika cetahi karaviḍaka koṭavaya cata aruvaya tela huta mula koṭu atini samiya Ayibaravika vaviya bojaka poti dini” can be translated as "King Mahanaka, having made a donation of a reservoir for the benefit of the community, has given it with the necessary conditions to the monks." The structure of this sentence follows a complex syntax with a series of modifiers and descriptive elements that amplify the king's piety and the official nature of the donation. The use of terms like "having made a donation" and "for the benefit of the community" suggests a formalized legal framework for donations. The sentence emphasizes both the king's power and his connection to the religious establishment.

3. Vessagiri Cave Inscription (IC. I. 87)

The Vessagiri cave inscription is relatively short and contains a clear declarative statement: “Siṭaviya VaḷaMalayaha puta vahaṇakaAhali leṇe sagasa niyate,” meaning "The monk of the VaḷaMalaya, the son of VahaṇakaAhali, established the cave for religious purposes." Here, we observe a nominalized structure, with the action (establishing the cave) being the main point. The use of "son of" reflects genealogical importance, common in both royal and religious contexts. The verb structure is simple and focuses on the establishment of a religious space.

4. Vessagiri Rock Inscription of Kuṭubika Butaya (IC. II. 219221)

In this inscription, we find the phrase “Si Mahabota hata akata samajakula Satakare etana marumanaka kuṭibika Butaya kaḍa parikaboya jiṇapaṭi jagati etakulama asate Ayibaravika vavi Isiramaṇahi dinahi,” which can be translated as: “By the beneficence of Butaya the monastery was endowed with a reservoir, and the people of the village accepted the grant of land for its upkeep.” The syntax here is more complex, involving a subject (Butaya), a compound verb ("was endowed" and "accepted"), and objects (the reservoir and land). The inclusion of multiple modifiers and prepositional phrases indicates a formal donation structure where both the giver's intent and the recipient's obligations are recorded.

5. Perimiyanakulama Rock Inscription of Vasabha (AI. 27; EZ. I. 66,67; IC. II. 6367)

This was engraved on a rock flake in front of the rock shelter called Sudassana padānaghara at Abhaya giriviharaya. The purport of this epigraph was to register two donations given to a monastery. The first donation was given by the king Vasabha and Naga and another one was donated by Nakaya, the son of the treasurer Bataka and the mariner of Aji Saka.

The objective of this inscription deals to gift the water revenue (dakapati) and the share of fish (maji baka) caught in the channels of the tank of Palonakaraka and in Ketavalaka tank to the meditation hall named Sudassana for the purpose of spreading antelope skins.

In this inscription, the syntax reveals the king's administrative style: "Siddhama Vahaba maharaji Naga Sudasana patanagalahiya jina paṭi satariya kama karanaka koṭu Tiragama atanahiya Tihalakakaniyehi Palonakaraka vaviya dakapati matera maji baka dini." This phrase outlines the conditions of land and water grants, with elaborate descriptions of the location, intended beneficiaries, and the nature of the donation. The complex structure with subordinating clauses shows the legal precision involved in royal decrees, which served both political and religious purposes. The verbosity is typical of legal documents designed to prevent future disputes.

6. Ruvanmali Dagaba Slab Inscription (AI. 27; IC. II. 86-87)

This stone slab inscription of Gajabahuka Gamaṇi in the Colombo Museum was discovered at the Ruvanmalisa dagaba at Ruvanmalisa viharaya. The document mentions three main duties done by the king Gajabahu Gamaṇi Abhaya, the grandson of Vasabha the king and son of the king Tissa. These were recorded as the foundation the monastery Dakiṇi Abaya and the donation of the overlord income of the tank Varukavi for the purpose of spreading antelope skins in the Uposatha house and the grant the water revenue to the monks.

The Ruvanmali inscription is another example of a royal decree with a rich syntactical structure: "Sidha Vahaba rajaha manumaraka Tisa maharajahaputi maharaja Gayabahu Gamaṇi Abaya Dakiṇi Abaya araba viharaya karaya

Varukaviya bojika pati sovaṇa kotari koṭu pohota karahiya jina paḍisatare koṭu dine." The syntax here conveys the multiplicity of actions taken, including both religious and political aspects, with various objects and actions tied to the royal donation.

7. Ratanapasada Slab Inscription: Anuradhapura (IC. II. 88)

This slab inscription of the king Gajabahuka Gamaṇi is lying on the floor of the annex at the southwestern quarter of the main edifice of Ratanapasada which is situated on the west of the Abhayagiri dagaba at Abhayagiriviharaya.

It contains four lines of writing. The object of the epigraph was to register the donation of Paḷagamaka the tank to the stupa Gamaṇi Abaya of Uttara Vihara.

This inscription demonstrates a simple yet formal syntactical style: "Si maharaja Vahabayaha pute Tisa maharajaha pute maharaja Gamaṇi Abaya Nila rajiya Piḷagamaka vavi Abaya Gamaṇi Utara maha cetahi sovaṇa kotari koṭu dina." The declarative structure here emphasizes the donation of a lake and its conditions, with a straightforward subject verb object construction. The king's title and the name of the recipient establish authority and highlight the official nature of the donation.

8. Inscription on a Fragment of a Slab in Anuradhapura Museum (IC. II. 145147)

This Inscription inscribed on a slab fragment which is now preserved in the Anuradhapura Museum has

been discovered on a land called Kadurugaha Akkaraya a paddy field in Mahagalkulama about 300 yards northwest of Ratanapasada at Abhayagiriviharaya.

This epigraph reveals a minister called Devaba and his two sons and their donation of share of fish caught in channel of two tanks named Padahataraka and Hakanakaraka to the Monastery called Devarabaka to provide provisions for meals and to defray the expenses of oil and offering.

The fragmentary inscription presents a more layered structure: "Sidha Mahavilabanaka Davaba ameta Melayaha puta Mahamatayaha ca Meha maḷa Cumatayaha ca Me ti jana Saha sahasa ca ana sata sate ca ane se saṭi ca me vataka kehavana dariya Devagama." This inscription's syntax includes numerous clauses, each contributing to a more intricate picture of the land grant's extent and its religious implications. The use of multiple modifiers suggests a detailed bureaucratic process behind the donation, likely meant to specify the terms and conditions surrounding the gift.

9. Abhayagiri Pavement Slab Inscriptions (EZ. I. 252-259; IC. II. 150-154)

This inscription was engraved on the pavement in front of the southern vahalkaḍa of the Abhayagiri dagaba at Abhayagiriviharaya.

The object of this document was to light some donations made to Utaramahaceta, the monastery of the Abhayagiri viharaya by Maḷi Tisa known as the

king Kaniṭṭha Tissa, son of the king Mahallaka Naga. These donations mention constructing the spire as well as four altars and raising the umbrella of Uttaramaha monastery and construction of the edifices, Kukudagiri and Ratana in the monastery of Abhayagiriviharaya and to grant the water revenue and the overlord revenue from so many tanks and canals, having had the taxes remitted thereon, to monastery for providing the four requisites to the monks and for defraying the cost of oil and offerings the caitya and for the spreading carpets and for works of renovations.

The Abhayagiri Pavement inscriptions reflect a pattern of royal donations with complex syntactic structures: "Naka Maharajaha puta Maḷi Tisa maharaji Utara mahacetahi karavidaka kotu cata aravaya vaviya bojika pati sakala samataya kara kaḍaya dini." The length of the sentence and the repetition of key terms like "donation" and "lake" highlight the importance of the donation and its precise legal framework. The inclusion of multiple clauses underscores the political and religious dimensions of the act, showing that donations were not only a means of supporting religious institutions but also of affirming royal power.

Discussion

The syntactical structures in these Middle Brahmi inscriptions reflect the formal, hierarchical nature of royal decrees and religious donations. The use of **subject predicate object** structures ensures clarity in the conveyance of royal authority and the

king's involvement in both governance and religious patronage. The **possessive constructions** emphasize the king's ownership and control over land, resources, and religious institutions. Moreover, the **active voice** highlights the direct action of the king, underscoring his personal involvement in both material and spiritual contributions to society.

These inscriptions also offer insight into the evolution of Sinhalese language, particularly in the development of syntax, grammar, and word usage. They reflect the gradual shift from early Brahmi to more developed forms of the Sinhalese script, providing a linguistic

bridge between earlier epigraphy and the fully developed language in subsequent centuries.

Conclusion

The syntactical structures in the Middle Brahmi inscriptions from Anuradhapura provide a window into the formalized, hierarchical nature of royal decrees and religious donations. Through consistent use of **subject predicate object** constructions, **possessive forms**, and **active voice**, these inscriptions emphasize the king's authority and direct involvement in the management of resources and religious patronage. These texts not only reveal significant insights into the political and religious dynamics of ancient Sri Lanka but also trace the evolution of the Sinhalese language, enriching our understanding of the historical relationship between the monarchy, religion, and society during this period.

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