

SAW Seminar: History of Science, History of Text

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Text, pretext, paratext -- commentaries in manuscripts of the Tamil literary-grammatical tradition.

Abstract: Commentaries play a central role in the Indian traditions of learning, and Tamil, the second great classical language of the subcontinent after Sanskrit, is no exception in that respect. Tamil looks back on a period of about 2000 years of producing lyrical poetry, while at the same time developing a system of grammar, metrics and poetics meant, in the first place, to describe this body of poetry, to enable young poets to master their craft and to safeguard its understanding for future generations. Once established, then, the theoretical domains also began to have a dynamics of their own, which in part were to have repercussions back in the practical field. The material link between theory and practice is found in the two-fold commentary tradition. Commentaries on poetry explain the text and its literary implications, thus displaying mastery of the treatises whose rules are applied, exploited and quoted. Commentaries on grammar elucidate the rules and give examples, often by the thousands, from poetry.

The simplest type of commentary consists of a conglomeration of isolated glosses, picking out a difficult word here or there, perhaps followed by a remark on syntax. The more complex form is a paraphrase of the whole verse – poetic or theoretical, a root text always is metrical – that supplies the case endings and grammatical relations missing in the word-order oriented original and exchanges rare or complicated words for easier ones. This can be followed by a poetic or theoretical discussion with argument and counter-argument. Tendentially, the simpler gloss commentary is of an anonymous type, the discursive one has a named author.

Typology seems easy enough when proceeding from the standard editions that, in the case of Tamil, were mostly produced between the later 19th and the early 20th century. Seen from the perspective of the primary witnesses, manuscripts on palm-leaf and paper, matters appear less straightforward. There is a considerable amount of fluidity in the size and wording of even the most well-established author commentaries. Given what we know about the Indian intellectual tradition where the root text is regarded not only as primary in the evolutionary sense, but also as the frame of a theory or school, this should not come as a surprise: it is the commentary where discussion takes place, where new concepts are introduced and tested and where the development of thought is recorded.

What manuscripts let us see is the process of text reception as it took place over centuries, new readers and copyists freely deleting and adding to a certain stock. A comparatively stable root text appears surrounded by invocations, blessings, mnemonic stanzas, titles and inter-titles, notes, colophons and finally commentary in a very wide sense of the word. A commentary can be just one among a surprisingly large number of para-texts or it can be a

pretext for inscribing a new theoretical development into the folds of an established school, thus turning the normal relation between text and para-text upside down.

Documenting and analysing this whole process of transmission is the object of the ERC-financed project NETamil (“Going from Hand to Hand: Networks of Intellectual Exchange in the Tamil learned traditions”) of which I am the PI. The presentation will focus on demonstrating how joint work is realised intellectually on the one hand and physically on the other hand, pointing out the basic architecture and phrasal inventory of a Tamil commentary, which rightfully can be seen as a subtype of Indian commentary, and showing how this can be done in an almost zero-layout tradition on a palm-leaf with *scriptio continua*.