

The Missionary and Indian Traditions of the Study of the Tamil Verb

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The Dravidian languages, numbering about 27, are mainly spoken in India and some of the neighbouring countries. Their agglutinative nature has attracted the attention of traditional Indian as well as Western missionary grammarians of the colonial period. Many of the missionary grammarians of Tamil and Malayalam – two important South Dravidian languages – make a unique attempt to connect the verb stems and the tense markers. This attempt is reflected in the various classifications of the verb stems. The native traditional grammarians belonging to various centuries before and after the missionary grammarians show very little interest in the classification of the verbs on the basis of the tense markers. The Western missionary grammarians, on the other hand, believe in a system of automatic generation of the verbal paradigms based on the classification of the verbs with the help of the tense markers. The traditional Indian grammarians make an attempt to list the verb stems on the basis of semantics and never attempted to connect the stem with the tense markers. The aim of the present study is to find out the logic behind the classification of the missionary grammarians in contrast with the taxonomic attempts of the native grammarians.

The materials used for this study come from the earliest extant Tamil grammar Tolkappiyam (first three centuries A.D.), the later Tamil grammars such as Nannul (13th century A.D.), the Malayalam grammars Lilatilakam (14th century) and the later grammars such as Keralapaniniyam (1896 A.D. and 1917 A.D.) and from the works of the missionary grammarians of the colonial period, such as Rev. Robert Caldwell (1856), Ziegenbalg (1716), Fabricious (1778), Rhenius (1836), Graul (publication 1969), Arden (1942) and Beythan (1943) for Tamil and Joseph Peet (1860), Frohnmeyer (1913) and Gundert (1868) for Malayalam. The Dutch and English colonial periods have greatly contributed to the study of the Dravidian verb and its classification through the grammars of the missionaries.

The aim and philosophy of classification changed in the course of the last twenty centuries. This paper will discuss the parameters used by the missionary and traditional grammarians for classification. The problems of the tense, transitive and causative suffixes, in general, and that of their relationship with the verb stem, in particular, will be discussed in the background of the views of the missionary grammarians.

References

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