TWO PROBLEMS OF OLD TAMIL PHONOLOGY

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I. THE OLD TAMIL ĀYTAM

(with an Appendix by K. Zvelebil)

1. In 1941 Prof. C. R. Sankaran for the first time considered the possibility that the Old Tamil phoneme called āytam might represent a linguistic form of the Dedekind “cut” or “gap” and constitute the imaginary point in the flux of speech where the vowel ends and the consonant begins (see Bulletin of the Deccan College Research Institute 2, p. 343 ff.). Essentially the same view, which he has since discussed in a long series of articles, he still defends in his book on Phonemics of Old Tamil (Poona, 1951), where the āytam and the other two “non-autonomous phonemes” (cārpeḷuttu)1 of the Old Tamil grammar Tolkāppiyam are characterized as “non-linear”. Although this theory is mainly concerned with problems of a decidedly non-linguistic character, and although there are no indications to show that the author of the Tolkāppiyam knew of any such distinction as “non-linear” versus “linear” which Sankaran reads into the old sūtras,2 the latter’s studies have been indirectly useful in that they remind us of how little is known about the real nature of the āytam. Therefore, an attempt to determine more exactly its nature would seem justified in the present state of these studies. In order to make clear the argument to those not familiar with Tamil it is necessary first to explain some essential details.

The so-called āytam was a phoneme of the older language, the exact Old Tamil pronunciation of which is unknown. The Tolkāppiyam classes it apart, along with the two extra-short vowels, as the three “non-autonomous phonemes”, which can only occur when “supported” by another phoneme. (For the notion of such phonemes, which has no

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1 Although it would no doubt be better to write eruttu (see Švarný-Zvelebil, Archiv Orientální 23, p. 389), I have preferred in this article to keep to the transliteration system of the Tamil Lexicon.

doubt been borrowed from Sanskrit grammarians, cf. Skt. *parāśraya-*
“dépendant d’un autre phonème (non autonome)”, Renou, *Terminologie
grammaticale du Sanskrit*, pp. 34, 368). Whenever it occurs in literary
texts, it is now pronounced as a guttural fricative, voiced according to
Ramaswami Aiyar and Vinson, voiceless according to others. This was
certainly not the Old Tamil pronunciation. The statement of the Tol-
kāppiyam that the Old Tamil *dītam* had the same place of articulation
as the following plosives, of which there were six (*k, c, t, t, t, p*), would
seem to exclude any oral articulation. The *dītam* occurs a) in sandhi
(both external and internal); b) in a few non-compound words. The first
category is the most instructive one. The occurrence of *dītam* is limited
by the following rules: 1. its unique place is at the end of the first syllable
of a word (a seeming exception is only *muppaht* “thirty”, properly
belonging to category b), which is a compound of *mu*—“three” and *patu*
“ten”). This implies that in the case of sandhi it can only stand at the
end of monosyllables. 2. the preceding vowel is always short. 3. it is
always followed by a plosive (which induced the native grammarians to
call it *cārp-eluttu*, lit. “letter with a support, shelter”). Accordingly the
sound cannot possibly occur in sound groups other than, e.g., *-ahk-*,
*-ahc-, -aht-, -ahp-, -ehk-*, etc.

2. The sandhi phenomena fall into two groups. According to the theory
of the oldest grammar and the practice of the oldest literature the group

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5 Cf. L. V. Ramaswami Aiyar, *A Primer of Malayālam Phonology*, Bulletin of the
Sri Rama Varma Research Institute 6 (1938), p. 94, n. 3: “voiced velar fricative value
which is uniformly given to it today”, JAOS 58, p. 666: “which later assumed a voiced
comme un esprit doux, comme un g très légèrement aspiré” (e.g. *ihtu* being pronounced
*igdu*).

6 E.g., Graul, *Tamil Grammar*, p. 13 (as German *ch* in *mich*), Clayton in Arden’s
*Progressive Grammatik der Tamil-Sprache*, p. 37 (unvoiced aspirate, viz. *h* or *x*, as in
German *Nacht*; likewise “A Senthamilan”, *Tamil Culture* 4, p. 70). In Old Tamil it
was according to P. S. Subrahmanya Sastri, *History of gramm. Theories in Tamil*, p. 67,
“a kind of arrested voiceless spirant”.

5 See, e.g., P. S. Subrahmanya Sastri, *Comparative Grammar of the Tamil Language*

6 Tol. El. 1. The *dītam* is usually transliterated by *k, h, or h*. Since there is no phoneme
*h* in O.Tam. nothing prevents the use of *h* in transliteration, without diacritical marks,
which would suggest a more exact knowledge of its phonetical character than we
actually have. Voiced [h*] in the more recent Grantha script never occurs before
plosives. Against the older rule is the, apparently isolated, instance *ceyvah*e Kūg.
541, where *ah*e constitutes a separate metrical foot; “for the sake of metre”, Subrah-