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Short Remark on a Problem of Old Tamil Verbal Flexion

This article has been written to show the validity of the late Prof. J. Bloch's theory on the origin of verbal flexion in Tamil. Says Prof. Bloch in his path-breaking *Structure Grammaticale des Langues Dravidiennes*, Paris, 1946, p. 45: "Il semble donc finalement que le système flexionnel de type pronominal se soit développé secondairement. Il succède à l'usage de noms verbaux capables de sujet pronominal au nominatif".

When investigating and analysing grammatically some ancient Tamil literary texts¹, preserving that form of Tamil language-development which may be termed Early-Old Tamil, a number of forms and constructions has been found which confirm Prof. Bloch's statement fully and satisfactorily. There are several types of the use of verbal nouns or even of mere verbal bases (or stems?) in predicative function.

1. Cases like *nōkō yānē* (*Narriṇai* 26,1) "I have pain", *evan ceykō* (*ib.* 30,1) "what shall (I) do?" show that mere verbal bases (or stems) are capable of pronominal subjects and have been used as predicates.

2. As far as verbal nouns are concerned, the instances of such predicative use are far more numerous and varied, cf. *evan¹kol²tōli³annai⁴-kaṇṇiyatu⁵* (*ib.* 53,3) "What, o friend, has the mother thought?", Lit. "What¹, (is) o friend³, the thing thought⁵ (by) the mother⁴?"² The same type, i.e. the use of verbal noun, ending in *-atu*, is found in Narr. 72, 10: *Puḷarvatu kol avan natpu* "Is perhaps his love fading away?".

3. More interesting is the predicative use of some other types of verbal nouns, those ending in *-al* and *-vu*, cf.:

¹ That is, the earliest Tamil poems extant, preserved in different anthologies of the two great collections of *Eṭṭuttokai* and *Pattuppattu*.

² This use of verbal nouns as predicates is known, after all, also in New Tamil, cf. Beythān, *Praktische Grammatik der Tamilsprache*, 1943, p. 114, *eṇkē utkāruvatu?* "Wo ist das Niedersetzen? = wo soll man sich niedersetzen?; *iṇṇaikkū nāṅkaḷ(!) varuvatu*, dass ihr heute kommt = euer Kommen heute..." etc. with *nāṇ kaṇṭatillai*, which is a quite frequent form of New Tamil negative, cf. Old Tamil *nām ceytat(u)onr(u)illai* in Narr. 27.

ninakk(u)yān maraittal yāvatu "how (can) I hide (or could have been hidden) from thee?" (Narr. 72,4).

...*kālai yem mayir ōti māṇalan tolaivē* (ib. 57,10) "at (that) time the great beauty of our mane of hair, dark (and) moist, perishes"
(*tolaivu* „extinction, destruction” < v. *tolai-*, the verbal noun = Predicate, *-ē* = *acainilai ekāram*).

For the right understanding of the evolution of verbal flexion from the use of verbal nouns, the peculiar use of verbal nouns ending in *-al* is very instructive indeed; verbal noun is modified by the pronominal suffixes, determining the number and person. The temporal concept is, in such cases, mostly absent. Cf.

āḷvinaikku akanṛōr... vinai valitt(u)amaital āṛṛalar (Narrinai 69,12)

"He that has left for the sake of manly deeds... endures (and) stays, having established himself in deeds", *āṛṛalar* has to be analysed *āṛṛal* + *-ar* (*āṛṛal* is verbal noun of *√ āṛru* — "to stay, to endure"; to this verbal noun the pronominal suffix of the 3rd p. sg. *-ar* is appended); *amaital* is another verbal noun (*√ amai* — "to remain, to abide, to stay"); thus, the whole has to be interpreted literally, "remaining — staying (enduring) — he"; then "he stays and remains, he stays and endures".

This form of predicate expressed by verbal noun plus a pronominal suffix had been very probably preceding the use of finite verbal forms; it belongs to the type, called properly "nom pronominalisé", by J. Bloch, who gives its characteristics in *op. cit.*, p. 36: "De toute façon le procédé de dérivation est commun à la famille entière et a une double importance: il donne une base morphologique au genre nominal, et il fournit une transition entre le nom et le verbe" (stress is mine). This it truly does; there is, after all, no difference between a form like that which we have quoted (*āṛṛalar*) and another, derived by the same pronominal suffix *-ar* from a noun: *nerunālum iṇaṇar* (Narrinai, 84,3) "and yesterday he was here" (*iṇaṇ* "this place" + *-ar* "he").

Another very instructive instance of the same type of verbal nouns:

nin uruvu kaṇ eṛippa nōkkal āṛṛalanē... yānē (Narr. 82) "I am he who comforts by looks (so that) thine beautiful eyes glitter".

Here, *āṛṛalanē* has to be analysed: *āṛṛal* + *-an* + emphatic *-ē*; and, again, the double use of verbal nouns (*nōkkal*, *āṛṛal*) is observed in this instance³.

It has to be borne in mind, however, that such forms are not regarded by us as the true original and most ancient specimens of Old Tamil verbal flexion; *amaital*, *āṛṛal* etc. are, morphologically and functionally, highly

³ For the problem of the origin of Tamil verbal flexion, cf. the author's article in „Archiv Orientalní”, XXIII, 3, p. 489.

developed and specialized verbal forms: but such use of these forms with pronominal suffixes forms certainly a transitional type between the crude use of mere verbal bases (plus pronominal or nominal subject) as predicates and fully "conjugated" predicative verbs of pronominal type. These forms have been used probably as a "type-analogy", i.e. in analogy with some truly original forms and functions⁴.

⁴ It is interesting and characteristic, that in *Narrinai* 69, there is actually no finite verbal form of pronominal type to be found. It remains the task of frequency-statistics to show the relative and absolute occurrence of the verbal nouns used predicatively, and their relation to the developed verbal flexion of pronominal type in different Early Old Tamil texts. It seems, however, that this peculiar type of the predicative use of verbal nouns is found mostly in stanzas which also from different aspects and points of view (e.g. lexical) show that they belong to the earliest strata of Old Tamil poetry. A lot remains certainly to be done. Nevertheless, it can be said that, as in most cases, the late Prof. J. Bloch has been right in his theory of the use of verbal nouns as predicates of nominal or pronominal subjects. A careful and patient morphological and syntactic analysis of all Early Old Tamil texts is a much needed desideratum.



The first part of the paper is devoted to a general discussion of the problem. It is shown that the problem is of great importance in the theory of the structure of the atom. The second part is devoted to a detailed discussion of the problem. It is shown that the problem is of great importance in the theory of the structure of the atom.

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