

Editorial
Once more on the language of the Buddha

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In the previous editorial of this journal, Richard Gombrich focused on the language of the Buddha. Since this subject is raised once again in the present issue, it would be worthwhile considering a few key points. We can start with an important contribution by Lance Cousins (JOCBS 5: 89-135, 2013): in a wide-ranging article, Cousins distinguished (p.121) classical Pali (the redacted language of the 4th or 5th century AD) from what he called ‘Old Pali’, equivalent to the common epigraphic Prakrit used in the 1st century BC. Focusing entirely on the written word, Cousins argued that some old texts were probably written in the language of the Mauryan empire, which he calls ‘Old Ardhamāgadhī’:

Such written works (or at any rate some of them) must have been written down in OldArdhamāgadhī... The use of OldArdhamāgadhī is not merely a matter of hypothesis. In the *Kathāvatthu* we have an example of exactly this. The *Kathāvatthu* is traditionally believed to have been written in the Mauryan period and I believe its contents and other evidence support this for the core of the work. Frequently it presents debates between opposing views in a form that still preserves many so-called ‘Eastern’ features. (p.122)

Cousins claims that when a written form of the Pali canon was assembled in the 1st century BC, texts in Old-Ardhamāgadhī would have been transformed into ‘Old Pali’ (p.122):

When written versions of the oral literature were systematically produced, probably in the first century B.C., and existing written works of established authority were joined to them to produce what we may call a Canon, the language which must have been used was a Buddhist version of the standard language known directly to us in its epigraphic form. I am calling both simply Old Pali.

It is surely the case that the extant Pali canon emerged not just from oral *bhāṇaka* traditions, but also to some extent from early manuscript traditions. But this does not necessarily mean that, in the process of canonical formation, in the 1st century BC, the language of any early manuscripts was levelled with that of the oral traditions. Indeed, this does not appear to have happened with the *Kathāvatthu*. Would a team of editors have harmonised its language with the rest of their tradition, and yet left so many ‘Māgadhisms’ in it? Non-standard Pali forms appear right at the very beginning of the text: *āmantā*, *hevaṃ*, *vattabe*, *hañce* etc. Surely these indicate that the *Kathāvatthu* was not harmonised with the rest of the Pali tradition, but must have been preserved in something very close to its original form.

If this suggests that the original language of the *Kathāvatthu* was (Old-)Pali with some Māgadhī/Old-Ardhamāgadhī features, how could this language have been formed? Perhaps we should suppose that the composers of the *Kathāvatthu* used a standard dialect, which would have been (Old) Pali, but were influenced by the local dialect of Magadha. The situation would have been rather like British citizens who migrate to America, and then retain their British accent with the odd Americanism. If we posit a relatively small group of British migrants in America, with a regular influx of British migrants, and lots of movement back and forth between the two countries (imagine also that the two countries are close to each other), a slightly Americanised British accent would probably have resulted.

This scenario explains the language of the *Kathāvatthu*: with the earliest Buddhist tradition based in Kosala, and using a Western *lingua franca*, the smaller Buddhist communities in Magadha would have used the same language, with some local features. If the difference between northern Indian dialects was

marginal in the early 4th century BC, and if for most of that time the ‘headquarters’ of the movement were in Kosala/Sāvattthī, a Western Buddhist dialect would have had sufficient time to become standard. Apart from the *Kathāvatthu*, Aśoka’s Girnar inscriptions indicate that such a dialect already existed, and the widespread use of the same dialect in post-Mauryan India shows that it must already have been established long before Aśoka.

The use of Pali as the pre-Aśokan Buddhist language before Aśoka was explored by Karpik in JOCBS 16 (10-86). In the current issue, Bryan Levman claims that a *koine* or *lingua franca* underlies Pali, but inasmuch as he claims that the language of the Buddha was the direct predecessor of Pali, it must have been more like Pali than Māgadhī. But exactly how much like Pali? This remains unclear, but Levman seems to be saying something like that the Buddha spoke ‘Even Older Pali’ than Cousins’ ‘Old Pali’.

Without wishing to reduce the study of Pali to a Monty Python sketch, we can mention some important areas of progress and future debate. Clearly, the general consensus has moved away from the old assumption that the Buddha spoke something like Māgadhī. And if so, the study of Pali has come back full circle, to a position closer to Rhys Davids’ view that the Buddha spoke Kosalī, not Māgadhī. Apart from this vague consensus, Karpik and Levman disagree on the nature of dialect variation in the Pali canon. According to Karpik, features of other dialects were naturally absorbed in the early history of Pali, given its wide geographic spread and long historical development. But Levman claims that some dialect forms were not absorbed in the historical development of Pali, but can be explained as remnants of an earlier state of affairs, i.e. of a pre-Pali dialect which underlies the language of the Pali canon.

These studies will, we hope, raise more questions, and so fuel further further investigations of the language(s) of early Buddhism. It remains to be seen just how far we can go in imagining Pali as the language of the Buddha. Can the Māgadhī hypothesis be revived? Is the hypothesis of a language underlying the Pali canon plausible, be it ‘Old Pali’ (Cousins) or ‘Even Older Pali’ (Levman)? Can we even say anything sensible about the oral language(s) of early Buddhism if, as Cousins suggests, oral dialects were simply replaced by whatever written dialect was in fashion? The last word on the language of the Buddha may never be reached. But it is to be hoped that the recent papers published by this journal lead to an ongoing debate, one which advances our understanding of long neglected aspects of early Buddhism.