

A Study on the Development of the Sinhala Language Through Contact with Tamil, Sanscrit, Pali and European Languages

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Abstract

The history of the Sinhala language extends far into the past, with written records dating back to the 4th century BC, as evidenced by inscriptions and other ancient documents. Following the arrival of Prince Vijaya, Sri Lanka became inhabited, though there is little concrete information to suggest that writing was in use at that time. It is assumed that Kuveni and the indigenous people communicated using a form of language, although there is no direct evidence to support this. In the 3rd century BC-236 years after the Buddha's Parinirvana-Venerable Mahinda arrived from Magadha and introduced Buddhism to Sri Lanka. Since then, elements of Indian cultural traditions have gradually merged with the island's language and culture. The translation of Pali texts into Sinhala contributed to the increased complexity of the language and its literature. Inscriptions in caves inhabited by Buddhist monks reveal the use of early Sinhala, also known as Prakrit (Prakrutha) Sinhala, particularly in recording monastic precepts. The central research question of this study is whether contact with closely related languages is an inevitable factor in the evolution of a language. The aim is to explore how external linguistic influences have contributed to the development of Sinhala. It is well established that Sinhala has absorbed words categorized as Tatsama and Tatbhava. The influence of Indian Emperor Ashoka's inscriptions is evident in the similarities found in the Sinhala alphabet. The spread of Buddhism and the adoption of the Brahmi script further expanded the Sinhala writing system, under the influence of Pali and Sanskrit. Numerous words from Pali and Sanskrit can be identified in Sinhala today, showing how these languages have nourished its vocabulary. This study examines Sinhala vocabulary in both written and spoken forms, while also reviewing related research. There is substantial evidence to conclude that Sinhala has evolved through extensive contact with other languages. During the colonial era, European languages further influenced Sinhala. Prior to that, the Tamil language had also played a significant role, particularly due to geographic and cultural proximity. Additionally, the influence of Pali and Sanskrit—closely related languages from the same linguistic family—has been considerable. This study places particular emphasis on the Polonnaruwa period and the colonial era. It ultimately concludes that the Sinhala language has been enriched through a diverse and fascinating array of borrowed linguistic elements.

Keywords: Lexical Borrowing, Language Evolution, Sinhala Language, Pali, Sanskrit and Tamil Influence, Script Development, Historical Linguistics, Vocabulary Enrichment