Pali Grammatical Scholarship as a Dialogic Mechanism

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In order to utilise grammars as powerful tools to interpret the past, it is necessary to examine the grammatical literature in a new way. Due to the large quantity of grammatical literature in South Asia, it is not surprising that there have been just a few attempts to use this body of work as a source of history. These approaches have largely focused on the contents of grammars, their terminology and their grammatical examples. However, due to the conservative nature of grammatical traditions, much of this information has been preserved and passed down for generations. Therefore, it is difficult to determine whether a grammatical example in a particular work, for instance, is representative of the time the work was written. This is not to say that nothing of historical interest can be gained by looking at the contents of grammars but that a different approach may be needed to extract accurate historical information from them.

One such method would be to view grammatical literature as part of a dialogic mechanism. Juri Lotman has theorised in detail about how cultural formations can be viewed as dialogic. For Lotman, a text is an act of communication which presupposes an addresser and an addressee. Through examining the relationship between the addresser and addressee in the act of communication, it is possible to extrapolate the mechanisms of this interaction on to a wider culture. In this regard, it is not the contents of a text itself that provides the most potent historical information, but the tension between a text's sources and how they are reconfigured and presented within it.

Lotman's key idea is that the tension between reception and transmission will reveal wider information about the structures through which this information is articulated. In this regard, all acts of communication can become potent historical sources when analysed in terms of a dialogic mechanism.

By treating the creation of the Moggallāna grammatical system of Pali as part of such a dialogic process — the result of the reception of new grammatical information from other cultures, the reformulation and adaptation of this information, and the transmission of it to new addressees — it is possible to bypass the illusory rigidity of tradition and to situate the grammatical tradition within its immediate historical and ideological context.

This paper presents a small scale historical analysis of the grammatical literature produced during the reign of Parākramabāhu.