



Pāli as the Language of Buddhist Scripture: Analytical Study

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Abstract

This research aims to analytically examine the Pāli language as the language of the Buddhist sacred texts. This research is carried out by library method with content analysis as its primary approach. The data are gathered from various literary sources such as journals, books and relevant articles related to the research topic. As result, the chronology of the Pāli as the sacred language of Buddhist text can be understood. In early period, the term Pāli did not indicate as a language, but it referred to the texts or Buddhist scripture. Pāli is defined as the texts or scripture (pāṭhe iti pi pāḷi) which means “that which protects.” It is called Pāli because it protects the teaching (pāḷi attham pāleṭi pāli). Therefore, the term Pāli is considered synonymous with terms Buddhavacana, Tipiṭaka, Tanti, and Pariyatti. The language had been used by the Buddha when delivering the teachings was identified as Māgadhī. Pāli literature such as commentaries and chronicles highlight that Pāli as Māgadhī, Māgadhānirutti or Māgadhikabhāsā which was the language spoken by the Buddha during his lifetime. In conclusion, at the beginning Pāli means the scripture, but later it came to be recognized as the language of the scripture

Keywords: Language, Pāli, Scripture, Buddhism

INTRODUCTION

Language is one of the important elements in communication. In the society, people communicate each other with a language. Language is the most effective communication tool in conveying messages, thoughts, feelings and goals to other people (Mailani et al., 2022). Both spoken language and written language have the same goal, namely to convey information, thoughts, concepts, ideas and feelings. The use of language as a medium of communication has been used since ancient times. Language is also used as a medium to convey the religious teachings to the people. Even language is also used as a medium to preserve teachings through writing. In the sixth century BC, Buddha used language to spread his teachings. This language is now known as Pāli. In general, Pāli is also known as the language of the sacred scriptures of the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, because the Tipiṭaka, commentaries and other literature are written in that language. Pāli now is considered to be a sacred language since it is a language that holds religious significance and is used in the practice, ritual, scripture, and liturgies of Buddhism. In Theravāda Buddhist countries like Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia, Pāli language is used in religious rituals, chants, and ceremonies. Monks often recite Pali texts during these rituals. Chanting the Buddha's teaching in Pāli language is believed to have spiritual power, calmness, and happiness. This language is believed to be the language used by the Buddha and his disciples to teach the Dhamma in the society. It is considered a Prakrit language, a vernacular language used by ordinary people, as opposed to the more scholarly Sanskrit. However, the recognition of Pāli as the language spoken by the Buddha is a controversial issue. The term Pāli in early Pāli literature does not indicate it as a language (Law, 2007). Pāli literature more often mentions Māgadhī as the earliest language spoken by the Buddha. Traditionally, Pāli is considered synonymous with Māgadhī, or the language of the Magadha region. However, the language spoken in Magadha today is not the same as Pāli. Nowadays, there is no a single region or country that uses Pāli as the language of daily communication. This has led to the arising of various opinions regarding the history of the origin of the Pāli language. By studying Pāli literature, both early and later composition, the history and development of the Pāli language can be traced. The article aims to analytically examine the Pāli language as the language of Buddhist scriptures.

METHODS

The methodology used in this research is the library research. The literature review method or literature study can be understood as a series of activities related to the methods of collecting library data, reading, taking notes and processing research materials (Mestika, 2014). Here, researcher collects data that is relevant to the research topic, examine it, and

process the data as research material. According to Amir Hamzah, library research is classified as qualitative research, but in the context of library research, data is taken from exploration of library materials which are studied holistically, then analyzed based on a particular framework of thought or theory/philosophical paradigm that underlies it, then uses a certain approach in accordance with the research objectives achieved (Hamzah, 2019: 25). According to Sugiyono, literature studies are also related to theoretical studies and other references related to the values, culture and norms that develop in the social situation studied (Sugiyono, 2021). Based on this theory, this research was carried out by collecting data both from primary sources in the form of literatures written in Pāli and from secondary sources in the form of books, journals, articles and previous researches related to the research topic. Data analysis in library research is content analysis, namely research that takes the form of an in-depth discussion of the content of written or printed information, then drawing conclusions based on the data that has been collected and analyzed (Afifuddin and Saebani, 2008)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Chronological Approach to Pāli as the Language of Buddhist Scripture

The term Pāli in early times did not indicate the meaning of language. The word Pāli refers to texts, especially Buddhist scriptures (Hazra, 2014). The word Pālibhāsā or Pāli is a later term whose existence is very difficult to trace in the sixth century or much earlier. Even this term cannot be traced in the Tipiṭaka written in the first century. Bimala Chun Law said that even in the sixth or seventh century AD, the term Pāli did not indicate any meaning as a language (Law, 2007). The term Pāli means line, row, or text. It is difficult to find evidence that the Buddha during his lifetime used Pāli terms as a language in teaching the Dhamma. However, in the era of writing commentaries that occurred in Sri Lanka in the fifth century AD, the term Pāli was used by Bhikkhu Buddhaghosa to refer to the Tipiṭaka scriptures which differentiated them from commentaries. The term Pāli in the Tipiṭaka and early Pāli literature is not used as a language, but as a scripture or text containing important teachings. The books of the Tipiṭaka use the Pāli term at the end of the original name. The use of Pāli terms in the books in the Tipiṭaka is not unimportant, because this is what differentiates the Tipiṭaka from other literature such as commentaries (*aṭṭhakathā*), sub-commentaries (*ṭīkā*), or compendium (*pakarāṇa*).

The term Pāli is often used to refer to the Tipiṭaka scriptures to differentiate them from the commentaries. In the *Culavaṃsa* and *Mahāvaṃsa* it is said that, "*Pāḷimattaṃ idhānītaṃ, natthi aṭṭhakathā idha*," which means "Only Pāli was brought here, here there are no commentaries" (Mhv. 227). The term Pāli here very clear means Tipiṭaka. We also find many examples where the Pāli term means text, specifically the Tipiṭaka scripture. In the

Visuddhimagga it is also said, "*Idaṃ sabbākārena neva pāliyaṃ, na aṭṭhakathāyaṃ āgataṃ*" which means "This method is not taken from the Pali or the commentaries," (Nanamoli, 2020). In the commentaries we also find the statement, "*Taṃ neva pāliyaṃ, na aṭṭhakathāyaṃ sandissati,*" which means "It cannot be found in the Pāli or the commentaries." Therefore, Pāli is considered synonymous with *Buddhavacana*, *Tipiṭaka*, *Tanti*, and *Pariyatti* (Law, 2007).

Pāli is defined as a sacred text or scripture (*pāṭhe iti pi pāḷi*). It also means 'the one who protects.' Because it protects the teachings it is called Pāli (*pāḷiṭi atthaṃ pāletīti pāḷi*) (Hazra, 2014). The word Pāli comes from the word 'pā' which means to protect. That's why Pāli is interpreted as protecting the teachings (*saddatthaṃ pāletīti pāḷi*). The use of the term Pāli initially referred to holy books, but in course of time the term Pāli changed its meaning and was considered as a language. This evolution of meaning occurs sooner or later in a natural process (Law, 2007). This happened because of a long-standing misunderstanding (Tin et al., 2021). In the 17th century, the term Pāli was used as the language of Theravada Buddhist scriptures (Norman, 1994: 165). In the book *Sāsanavaṃsa* written in Burma in 1861, the use of Pāli terms can already be seen as a language (Norman, 1994). This evolution of meaning has been further strengthened by the recent emergence of literary books in which Pāli is very much synonymous with language. In other words, the language in which Pāli (the Tipiṭaka scriptures) was written was eventually called Pāli.

The Origin of Pāli

The Pāli language is believed to have emerged from the Middle Indo-Aryan dialect. Traditionally, Pāli is *Māgadhī*, *Māgadhānirutti* and *Māgadhikabhāsā*. The Buddha and his disciples often lived and spent their time in the Magadha area. In this area, the Buddha and his disciples taught the Dhamma to the people. It cannot be denied that Buddha taught his teachings in the language used by the general public in Magadha. Therefore, Pāli is considered identical to *Māgadhī*. Bhikkhu Buddhaghosa in his commentary says that the language used by the Buddha at that time was Magadhan or *Māgadhī* (*Sammāsambuddhopi tepiṭakaṃ Buddhavacanāṃ tantiṃ āropento māgadhābhāsāya eva āropesi*) (*Samohavinodanī*, 388). This language is referred to as *Mūlabhāsā* or the root of all languages (*Māgadhikāya sabbasattānaṃ mūlabhāsāya*) (Nanamoli, 2020). It is said that this language is a language that is easily understood by all groups of people without needing to learn it. The commentaries written in Sinhala were translated by Bhikkhu Buddhaghosa into *Māgadhā* which is considered as the native language of the Buddha (*Parivattesi sabbāpi, sīhalaṭṭhakathā tadā; Sabbesaṃ mūlabhāsāya, māgadhāya niruttiyā*) (Mhv. 244). When commenting on the word *Sakānirutti*, the Bhikkhu Buddhaghosa said that *Sakānirutti* was a form of the *Māgadhaka* dialect used by the Buddha (*Ettha sakā niruttināma sammāsambuddhena vuttappakāro māgadhiko vohāro*) (Vin.IV.23 et al., 2019).

Traditionally, Theravāda believe Pāli to be the Māgadhī language that the Buddha also used when expounding his teachings. After the Buddha achieved perfect enlightenment, the Buddha wandered from place to place to preach his teachings to all levels of society. It is difficult to prove whether the Buddha used only one language in preaching the Dhamma to different places. It is possible that the Buddha used different languages in different places, because the Buddha mastered many languages. He was an educated person and was born into a royal family and high caste (*ksatriya*). He had the opportunity to learn various languages since he was a child. During his childhood, he studied with a teacher named Sabbamitta who was an expert in language and grammar, fluent in the Veda and the six Vedaṅgas which consisted of phonetics, poetry, grammar, exegesis, astrology, and religious ceremonies (Kusaladhamma, 2015). In fact, he also mastered the Three Vedic Books (*tiṇṇaṃ vedānaṃ pāragū*), vocabulary (*sanighaṇḍu*), the art of poetry (*keṭubhānaṃ*), linguistic knowledge (*sākkharappabhedānaṃ*), and history (*itihāsapañcamānaṃ*). Of course, it is possible that the Buddha also spoke different languages when he met people who came from various places who had different languages. However, there is no textual evidence to support this opinion. From the scriptures, there is only some evidence that the Buddha knew many languages and asked his students not to insist on the use of local languages or object to common appellation (*Janapadaniruttiṃ nābhiniveseyya, samaññaṃ nātidhāveyyā'ti*). As recorded in the *Araṇavibhaṅga Sutta*, the Buddha mentioned various languages for referring to 'bowl', namely *pāti, patta, vittha, sarāva, dhāropa, poṇa* and *pisīla* (Bodhi, 2010).

The existence of caste system in the society at that time influenced the use of language among the people. Society is divided into four castes, namely: *brāhmaṇa, kṣatriya, vaiśya*, and *sūdra*. Sanskrit was the language used by nobles and high caste people. Ordinary people did not have the opportunity to learn or speak that language, because Sanskrit was believed to be a sacred language that came from the gods. The Brahmins use this language. Meanwhile, ordinary people communicate in Prakrit language, one of which is Māgadhī language. The Buddha chose to teach his teachings in Māgadhī language because the Buddha wanted his teachings to be understood by everyone regardless of caste. Māgadhī is a common language that can be understood by everyone. Not only the Buddha, other ascetic teachers also used Māgadhī language. Jaina also used the Māgadhī language, but the Māgadhī used by the Jainas is slightly different from that of the Buddhists. Ardha Māgadhī emerged for the language used by Jaina. Meanwhile, the Māgadhī used by the Buddha became known as *Suddha Māgadhī* (Jayawickrama, 2004).

If we look at Asoka's edicts or inscriptions carved on stone slabs scattered across several regions in India, written in the third century BC, it can be understood that the edicts were written in various languages, although the differences are not that big. Some were written in Sanskrit, and most were written in Prakrit languages similar to today's Pāli. By looking at this, it is difficult to ascertain whether the Pāli language as it is known today has

undergone changes and developments or is still stagnant. This is because the Pāli language in the Tipiṭaka today was written long after the Buddha's passing away, precisely in the first century in Sri Lanka.

Regarding the origin of the Pāli language, there are many opinions and arguments among scholars. Pāli is a name given by the people of Sri Lanka and some other Asia to refer to the dialect of Buddhist scriptures, which developed in the kingdom of Magadha, or modern Bihar in the 6th century BC (D'Alwis, 1860). A.K. Warder argues that Pāli was a Prakrit language spoken in western India, in the Avanti region where the Theravāda sect was based. Oldenberg has a different opinion. He said that Pāli came from Kaliṅga. His statement was also supported by Edward Muller. By comparing Pāli with Asoka's inscriptions in Girnar or Gujarat, Westergaard and E. Kuhn concluded that Pāli was a dialect of Ujjayini. T.W. Rhys Davids argued that Pāli was the spoken language of Kosala (Davids, 1911). Max Walleser says that the word 'Pāli' comes from the word 'Pāṭali' or 'Pāḍali' which is assumed to be the language of Pāṭaliputra (Law, 2007). However, based on the Indian method, the word 'Pāṭali' cannot be transformed into the word 'Pāli.' In Prakrit it is recently known as 'Pāḍali' (Tin et al., 2021).

There are many opinions arise among scholars and historians regarding the origin of the Pāli language. Each scholar has reasons to support his opinion. However, traditionally, as obtained from Pāli literary sources, such as commentaries and Pāli compendiums, Theravādins believe Pāli to be the language of Māgadhī, Māgadhānirutti or Māgadhikabhāsā which was also the language spoken by the Buddha when he was alive. The *Anudīpanī* book mentions several synonyms of the Māgadhī language, including *Mūlabhāsā*, *Ariyabhāsā*, *Māgadhābhāsā*, *Pālibhāsā*, and *Sabhāvanirutti* (*māgadhābhāsāhi mūlabhāsāti ca ariyabhāsāti ca māgadhābhās āti ca pālibhāsāti ca dhammaniruttīti ca sabhāvaniruttīti ca vuccati*). The authors of commentaries (*aṭṭhakathā*), sub-commentaries (*ṭīkā*), and chronicles (*vaṃsa*), identify Pāli as Māgadhī (Chowdhury, 2010). Through the *Bhāṇaka* system, Buddha's teachings and their language were preserved from generation to generation until the Tipiṭaka was first written down on a palm leaf in Sri Lanka in the first century. Therefore, Theravādins believe that the Tipiṭaka or Pāli language is the same language that the Buddha spoke when he was alive.

Pāli or Māgadhī at that time was a spoken language that was only used as a medium of communication. Although Pāli has unique arts and characteristics as a language, it is not as complex as later written languages. The Buddha explained his teachings in a simple language so that his listeners could easily understand them. However, the Buddha did not use it monotonously, because during his discussions, the Buddha also preached the Dhamma with verse. And when someone asked a question in form of verse, the Buddha also answered it in form of verse.

The Significance of Studying Pāli Grammar

The Pāli language does not have a special script like modern languages, therefore the Pāli Tipiṭaka writing is available in a variety of scripts. The Tipiṭaka was first written down in Sri Lanka in Sinhala script. That Tipiṭaka later became the basis of all the Tipiṭaka books in other Theravāda Buddhist countries. Currently Tipiṭaka Pāli is available in various scripts such as Sinhala, Devanagari, Burmese, Khmer Thai, Latin etc.

Having knowledge on the Pāli grammar is very important because Pāli is the language of Buddhist scriptures. With one's understanding of Pāli grammar, one will be able to understand Buddhist terms well. In addition, when encountering Pāli sentences, one can understand them directly without depending on translation. In the *Moggallāna Pañcikaṭṭhikā*, it is emphasized about the importance of having knowledge of the Pāli language that even if one learns the scriptures, but does not learn the grammar, he doubts every word, like a blind elephant in the forest (*Yo niruttiṃ na sikkheyya, sikkhanto piṭakattayaṃ; Padepade vikaṅkheyya, vane andhagajo yathati*).

In the world of Pāli study, there are three types of traditions, namely: *Kaccāyana*, *Moggallāyana*, and *Saddanīti*. Pāli grammar books belonging to the *Kaccāyana* tradition include: *Kaccāyana*, *Mukhamattadīpanī*, *Nyāsappadīpa*, *Niruttisāramañjusā*, *Kaccāyanasuttaniddesa*, *Kaccāyanavaṇṇanā*, *Rūpasiddhi*, *Rūpasiddhiṭṭhikā*, *Bālāvatāra*, *Bālāvatārapurāṇaṭṭhikā*, *Bālāvatāra - Abhinavaṭṭhikā*, *Cūlanirutti*, *Kaccāyanasāra*, *Kaccāyanasāraṭṭhikā*, *Kaccāyanabheda*, *Kaccāyanabhedaṭṭhikā*, *Kaccāyanabhedaṭṭhikā*, *Kārikā*, *Kārikāṭṭhikā*, *Vibhatyattha*, *Vibhatyatthaṭṭhikā*, *Vācakopadesa*, *Vācakopadesaṭṭhikā*, *Vāccavācaka*, *Vāccavācakaṭṭhikā*, *Ganthatṭhipakaraṇā*, *Ganthābharāṇa*, *Saddavuttiṭṭhikā*, *Saddavutti-Abhinavaṭṭhikā*, *Saddabindu*, *Saddabindupurāṇaṭṭhikā*, *Saddabindu-Abhinavaṭṭhikā*, *Sambandhacintā*, *Sambandhacintāṭṭhikā*, *Saddatthabhedacintā*, *Saddatthabhedacintāṭṭhikā*, *Saddasāratthajālīnī*, and *Saddasāratthajālīnīṭṭhikā*. The *Saddanīti* tradition also has a Pāli grammar book called *Saddanīti* (Burmese tradition). Meanwhile, books included in the *Moggallāyana* tradition include: *Moggallāyana*, *Moggallāyanapañcikaṭṭhikā*, *Niruttidīpanī-abhinavapañcikaṭṭhikā*, *ṬṬhikā*, *Padasādhana*, *Padasādhanaṭṭhikā*, *Payogasiddhi*, *Susaddasiddhi*, *Niruttisaṅgaha*, *Bālappabodhana*, dan *Bālappabodhanaṭṭhikā*.

CONCLUSION

From the explanation above, it can be concluded that Pāli is the language of Theravāda Buddhist scriptures or literature. Although initially, the term Pāli was often used with the meaning of the Tipitaka scripture, in course of time the term Pāli experienced a changing in meaning to be understood as the language of the scripture itself. According to Theravāda tradition, this language is believed to have originated in the Magadha region which was used by Buddha and his disciples to teach his teachings to the people. Thus, Pāli is also called *Māgadhī*, *Māgadhānirutti* or *Māgadhikabhāsā*. The collection of Buddhist teachings and

their language were well preserved from generation to generation until the Tipiṭaka was written down for the first time in Sri Lanka. Although Pāli is not currently used anywhere as a daily communication language, it is still preserved as the language of scriptures and other Buddhist literature.

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