F. B. J. KUIPER

A TAMIL GHOST-WORD: PAHTU ‘TEN’

In memoriam
Fr X. S. Thani Nayagam
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I

All older grammars of modern Tamil, such as those by Graul (1855, p. 31), Pope, (1859, p. 102), Mervart (1929, p. 110), Arden-Clayton (1942, p. 113) and Beythan (1943, p. 140) give pattu as the only form of the Tamil word for ‘ten’. Even Vinson, although including the older language in his description, does not mention any variant form. The form “bagdu, employée dans les vieux poètes” (1903, p. 101), which he found in ‘irubagdu’ [= irupahtu] ‘twenty’, is of course a different case (see below).

In recent years, however, a form pahtu, mostly quoted alongside of pattu, has made its entrance in linguistic literature. Thus, to quote a single instance, Andronov (1966, p. 78), gives the following words and variants for ‘ten’: pattu, paax6ù, oru6aaddu, oru6ax6du, oru6aan. It should be noted that his book, like Vinson’s, combines a description of the modern language with that of the classical language so that lists like the preceding must be looked upon as inventories of all forms used in course of the time elapsed since the Sangam literature. Thus he quotes for the demonstrative pronoun atu the three forms a6u, a6i, and ax6u (pp. 86, 88–90), the first of which belongs to Old Tamil, and the second to the modern language. As far as I can see, one of the first modern scholars to mention pahtu was C. R. Sankaran (1951, p. 24), who in a discussion of the āyam wrote: ‘We have also pattu side by side with pahtu and attai side by side with ahtai’ (in which quotation his spelling of the āyam has been adapted to the practice followed here). It may be surmised that he has taken pahtu from the Tamil Lexicon (1930, p. 2375), where this form is recorded. From this lexicon, in any case, it has found its way into the Dravidian Etymological Dictionary (1961, nr. 3236), and from the latter standard work it will no doubt be quoted for many years to come in comparative studies of Dravidian. It may be useful, therefore, to examine on which grounds this variant of pattu is supposed to have existed.

II

The first reason for such an enquiry is that for purely theoretical reasons the

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existence of a variant pahtu is contrary to expectation. One of the cases in which the āytam is found to occur is in disyllabic words where a normal short u (mukkaram) has been elided. Even in this case, however, its use was restricted to a few specific instances where, owing to the syntactical function of the word concerned, the cluster āytam + plosive, as a substitute for a long plosive, apparently served as a juncture feature. Thus, while the antevocalic form of the attributive word putu 'new' became putt' without any change of the final long plosive, att', which only occurs in non-attributive use, changed via *att' into aht' (Kuiper 1958, p. 201). A confirmation of this analysis, which presupposes the existence of *att' as a pre-stage of aht', has since been found in Kamban’s Rāmāyaṇam, where a form ett’ is actually found to occur (Govindankutty 1972). It should be observed that there is this basic difference between putu and pattu ‘ten’, that in the latter word the final -u was by definition ultra short and that its elision before vowels did not, accordingly, offer any problem (see below, Section 4).

In this connection it is essential to note that the author of the Tolkæppiyam was not concerned with the rationale of the occurrence of the āytam in aht’, which was irrelevant to his synchronic method of description. Hence it is that he accounts for the two allomorphs attu (C-) and aht’ (V-) by means of a theoretical construction *ahtu, which is said to lose its āytam before a following consonant (Tol. El_uttatikaram 425). There can be no doubt that the fictitious word *ahtu was only an elegant device invented for descriptive purposes — although now, instead of the elision of final -u, it was the disappearance of the āytam in attu that required a special sūtra. Indeed, since the final vowel of *ahtu was by definition an ultra-short u (kuriyalukaram), no special rule was needed to account for the elision in aht’ — which is the only form in which the allomorph with āytam actually occurs in Old Tamil texts.

III

Although the numerals onpatu ‘nine’ and those from 20 to 80, such as irupatu ‘twenty’, muppattu ‘thirty’, are unquestionably compounds, the way they were treated in Old Tamil sandhi was exceptional. As early as Tolkæppiyam, indeed, their final member showed the same sandhi treatment as a separate disyllabic word. Instances are muppattē espa (Tol. El. 1), onpatē espa (Tol. El. 82) and from the later literature ehipattē erinum (Kamparāmāyaṇam 6.4063.2, quoted from Govindankutty 1972). It should be noted that this sandhi occurs exclusively in the numerals ending in patu, when they drop their final vowel in antevocalic position. Never, as far as I can see, does it occur in, e.g., muppattu, the form used before other numerals. As instances may be quoted muppatt’ inivakai (Tol. Porulatikaram 644.4), muppatt’ ir āyram ‘32000’ (Patiṟṭupattu 9). The Tolkæppiyam