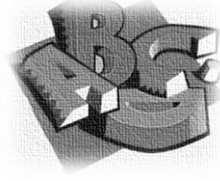


## In What Language Should One Learn the Buddha's Word?

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The original Buddha's word as we have it in the Pāli Canon and also in the archaeological findings is closely related to the Māgadhī language, the common and vernacular language in the Ganges valley of ancient India belonging to the Middle Indo-Aryan Prakrit, which became the literary language of Theravāda Buddhism or Proto-Buddhism.

Today there are several translations of the Pāli Canon in English itself and in many other languages as well. However, if one compares these translations, one may easily find discrepancies. Read, for example different translations of the Dhammapada, a very popular book of the Pāli Canon, and you will easily notice that the translations, even in English, differ in the renderings of the same Pāli words. Hence, one may have a vague understanding, or even a complete misunderstanding of the real meaning of the Buddha's word. Is it then better to learn the Buddha's word in its original language as well?

Now, in the Buddha's time a similar dilemma came up as to which language one should learn the Buddha's word. The answer was given by the Buddha himself. Even so, some English scholars made a wrong translation of it also, and thus misunderstandings grew up.

Knowledge of the Pāli grammar is essential to determine the meaning, hence we are going to examine the Buddha's answer from its grammatical aspect as well. Before that, let's read the background story in order to understand the context.

*Vinaya Piṭaka > Cūḷavagga > Khuddaka Vatthu (Vin ii. 138)*

"Now at that time the monks Yamelu and Tekula, ... brahmins by birth, ... spoke thus to the Lord :

"At present, Venerable Sir, monks of various names, various clans, and various races have gone forth from various families. They (*Te*) corrupt the Buddha's word (*Buddha-vacanaṃ*) in its own language (*sakāya niruttīyā*). May we, Venerable Sir, render the Buddha's word in metrical form (*chandaso*)."

The Buddha ... rebuked them, ... and addressed the monks, saying : "Monks, the Buddha's word (*Buddha-vacanaṃ*) should not be rendered in metrical form

*"Tena kho pana samayena Yamelu Tekulā nāma bhikkhū ...brāhmaṇajātikā ... Bhagavantam etadavocum –*

*"Etarahi, bhante, bhikkhū nānānāmā, nānāgottā, nānājaccā, nānākulā pabbajitā. Te sakāya niruttīyā Buddhavacanaṃ dūsentī. Handa mayaṃ, bhante, Buddha-vacanaṃ chandaso āropemā"ti.*

*Vigarahi Buddho, Bhagavā... "Na, bhikkhave, Buddhavacanaṃ chandaso ārope-ttabbam. Yo āropeyya, āpatti dukkaṭassa.*

(*chandaso*). Whoever should (so) render it, there is an offence of wrong-doing. I allow you, bhikkhus, to learn the Buddha's word (*Buddha-vacanam*) in its own language (*sakāya niruttiyā*)."

*Anujānāmi, bhikkhave, sakāya niruttiyā Buddhavacanam pariyāpuṇitun*"ti.

Here, the word *nirutti* is translated by some scholars as 'dialect', which is also acceptable. But what is at issue is the last sentence which Prof. Rhys Davids & Hermann Oldenberg translate as follows:

"I allow you, O Bhikkhus (monks), to learn the words of the Buddha, **each in his own dialect**"

Here, the emphasis has been shifted to the '**monks' own dialect or language**' (*nirutti*), instead to the 'Buddha's own language'.

However, by examining the background story from its grammatical aspect, we will notice that grammatically the phrase "monks of various names, ... (*bhikkhū nānā-nāmā*)" is in the plural form. Again, the phrase "They ... corrupt it (*Te ... dūsentī*)" is also in plural. But the phrases *sakāya niruttiyā* and *Buddha-vacanam* are in the singular form. Thus we have:

Plural	Singular	Singular	Plural
<i>Te</i>	<i>sakāya niruttiyā</i>	<i>Buddha-vacanam</i>	<i>dūsentī</i> .
They	in <b>its</b> own <b>language</b>	the Buddha's word	corrupt.

That is:

Plural	Singular	Singular
They corrupt	the Buddha's word	in <b>its</b> own <b>language</b> .

If *sakāya niruttiyā* would refer to the plural phrase "They ... corrupt (*Te ... dūsentī*)", it should have been in the plural form too as *sakehi niruttīhi* (in *their* own *languages*), which had to be rendered thus:

Plural	Plural	Singular	Plural
<i>Te</i>	<i>sakehi niruttīhi</i>	<i>Buddha-vacanam</i>	<i>dūsentī</i> .
They	in <b>their</b> own <b>languages</b>	the Buddha's word	corrupt.

That is:

Plural	Singular	Plural
They corrupt	the Buddha's word	in <b>their</b> own <b>languages</b> .

Since, of course, this plural form is not in the text, the singular form of *sakāya niruttiyā* can only refer to the singular form of *Buddhavacanam*, which has to be translated as:

Plural	Singular	Singular
They corrupt	the Buddha's word	in <b>its</b> own <b>language</b> .

Prof. Rhys Davids & Hermann Oldenberg understood the problem with the plural-singular form and in order to compensate with it, they translated the singular *sakāya niruttiyā* as '**each [monk] in his own dialect**'. Here, of course, they had to interpolate the word "each", which in the Pāli corresponds to *ekeka* or *pacceka*, but which is completely absent from the Pāli text. This contrived interpolation shifted the emphasis to the "each monks' own dialect" instead to the Buddha's.

I.B. Horner, the latest translator of the Vinaya piṭaka, corrected this error by translating the last sentence as:

"I allow you, monks, to learn the speech of the Awakened One according to his own dialect."

Therefore, when the Buddha says:

	Singular	Singular	Singular
" <i>Anujānāmi, bhikkhave,</i>	<i>sakāya niruttiyā</i>	<i>Buddhavacanam</i>	<i>pariyāpuṇitum.</i> "

he means:

		Singular	Singular
"I allow you, monks,	to learn	the Buddha's word ( <i>Buddhavacanam</i> )	in <b>its own language/dialect.</b> " ( <i>sakāya niruttiyā</i> )

Nevertheless, it is often mistranslated also as:

		Singular	Plural
"I allow you, monks,	to learn	the Buddha's word ( <i>Buddhavacanam</i> )	in <b>your own languages/dialects.</b> " ( <i>sakehi niruttihi</i> )

—which wrongly means: in the languages [plural] of monks of various names, clans, and races [plural].

The Vinaya Commentary is clear that it means in the Buddha's own language/dialect, which is the Māgadhesa usage of speech, stating:

<p>"Here 'its own language' (<i>sakā nirutti</i>) means the Māgadhesa usage of speech in the manner uttered by the <i>Sammā Sambuddha</i>."</p>	<p>"<i>Sakā nirutti nāma Sammā Sambuddhena vutta-ppakāro Māgadhiko vohāro.</i>" (VA. 1214)</p>
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Moreover, the same Commentary explains that the metrical form (*chandaso*) the Buddha refused to accept for his word is the Sanskrit language, which those two monks, brahmins by birth, suggested. It says about them:

"**May we render it in metrical form** (*chandaso*), means: 'May we render it into the mode of recitation consistent with the Sanskrit language, like a Veda.

"***Chandaso āropemā***'ti vedaṃ viya sakkata-bhāsāya vācanā-maggaṃ āropema.

## The Meaning of *Chandaso*

The word *chandaso* occurs in the Pāṭi Canon several times and refers to the metrical form of Vedic meter or hymn, as for example:

“*Sāvittī chandaso mukhaṃ.*” ( MN 92, Sn 568 & Vin. i. 246)

“*Sāvitrī is the foremost of Vedic meter (chandaso).*”

In Sanskrit it is called **Chandas** and refers to one of the six Vedaṅgas, or limbs of Vedic studies.<sup>1</sup> It is the study of poetic metres and verse in Sanskrit.<sup>2</sup> This field of study was central to the composition of the Vedas, the scriptural canons of Hinduism, so central that some later Hindu and Buddhist texts refer to the Vedas as **Chandas**.<sup>3</sup>

The Sāvitrī Mantra, also known as the Gāyatrī Mantra, is a highly revered mantra from the Rig Veda (Maṇḍala 3.62.10),<sup>4</sup> dedicated to Savitr, an off-spring of the Vedic primeval mother goddess Aditi.

### CONCLUSION

It seems that this very injunction of the Buddha to learn his word in the language or dialect he spoke was crucial for his Theravādin disciples to preserve his teaching to its pristine form, not allowing it to disappear up to the present day. In many other Suttas and in Vinaya too he prompted his disciples to memorize his words, telling them,

“to learn much of them, retain them in mind, recite them verbally, investigate them with the mind and penetrate them well by view.” (e.g. A ii. 22)

Hence, he also says:

“Monks, there are these two things that lead to the continuation, non-decline, and non-disappearance of the good Dhamma. What two? Well articulated words and phrases and well-interpreted meaning. When the words and phrases are well articulated, the meaning is well interpreted.”

But he also warns his disciples that the opposite leads to the discontinuation, decline, and disappearance of the good Dhamma. (A i. 59)

Thus, without veering towards either of these two extremes—allowing his word to be learnt through Sanskrit or allowing it to be learnt through languages/dialects of various clans and races—the Buddha veered towards the middle: the language or dialect he spoke.

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<sup>1</sup> James Lochtefeld (2002), "Chandas" in The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Hinduism, Vol. 1: A-M, Rosen Publishing, ISBN 0-8239-2287-1, page 140

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. & Moriz Winternitz (1988). A History of Indian Literature: Buddhist literature and Jaina literature. Motilal Banarsidass. p. 577. ISBN 978-81-208-0265-0.

<sup>4</sup> "Rig Veda: Rig-Veda, Book 3: HYMN LXII. Indra and Others". www.sacred-texts.com. Retrieved 29 September 2020.

Translations of his words in other languages can be helpful, but for a serious reader it is of great importance to know the Buddha's language in order to check their correct meaning. Otherwise, it is quite easy to be misled.

That is why three months after the Buddha's Parinibbāna, a Council of 500 senior disciples closely associated with him was held, at which all his teaching, discourses and rules of discipline, as they were remembered, came to be recited, approved as authentic, and classified into five Collections, called Nikāyas, which constitute the Tipiṭaka (Triple Canon).

As W. Rahula states, these Collections were entrusted to various Theras or Elders and to their pupillary succession for oral transmission for the benefit of future generations. In order to perpetuate an unbroken and authentic oral transmission, regular and systematic recitation is necessary. It must be particularly noted that this recitation was not the act of a single individual alone, but of a group. The purpose of this mode of collective recitation was to keep the texts intact, free from change, modification or interpolation. If one member of the group forgot a word, another would remember it; or if one modified, added or omitted a word or a phrase, another would correct him.

In this way, it was hoped, nothing could be changed, modified, added or omitted. Texts handed down through an unbroken oral tradition of this kind were considered more reliable and authentic than any record of the teachings set down by a single individual alone many years after the death of their promulgator.

The teachings of the Buddha were committed to writing for the first time at a Council in the first century B.C.—held in Ceylon four centuries after his death. Up to that time, the whole of the Tipitaka had been handed down from generation to generation in this unbroken oral tradition.

The original texts are in Pali, a language soft, melodious and smooth-flowing. Their frequent repetitions, the use of categories, not only help memorization, which is necessary for the continuity of oral tradition, but also give them poetic beauty and charm. They use poetic rhythms and have all the grace of poetry. The recitation of these texts in the original Pali in the calm atmosphere of a tropical grove or in a monastery still produces beautiful, harmonious and serene effects. The sonorous Pali words, their grandeur, and the well-known cadence of repetitions, produce the effect, even for someone who does not know their meaning, of a solemn chant in an unknown tongue. (W. Rahula, What the Buddha Taught).