Pali, the Language: The Medium and the Message

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BRYAN G. LEVMAN, *Pali, the Language: The Medium and the Message.* Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2020. xvii, 292 pp. £61.99 (pb). ISBN : 1-5275-4195-9.

Does Pali matter? Generations of students and Buddhist practitioners have weighed that question against the language's steep learning curve, with debates now populating online forums. The availability of multiple translations of its canon makes knowledge of the original less necessary until disagreements in translation create uncertainty that might be resolved by going to the source. The Suddhavāri monastery in Brazil pragmatically encourages Portuguese-speaking practitioners to prioritize the study of English.[1]

Bryan Levman's *Pali, the Language,* makes the strongest and most sweeping argument for its fundamental importance: Reading in translation means "missing a vital component" of the Buddha's teachings (263). Pali, a "very close" cousin to the Buddha's language, "fostered, confirmed and mirrored" (xiv) the central teachings of Buddhism, which here mostly means the teachings of the Sutta Pitaka, as interpreted by Bhikkhu Bodhi and others. This profound appreciation for Pali harks back to the fifth-century South Asian commentator Buddhaghosa, whose own Pali exceptionalism led him to claim that an abandoned child would learn that language spontaneously. Drawing from the twentieth-century Canadian theorist Marshall McLuhan, for whom "the medium is the message," Levman repeatedly argues that Pali as a medium was "just as important" as the Buddha's message. This is a moment in a long history of reflection about linguistic relativity, going back to Plato and the Buddha himself. For Levman, a "mutual dependency" (265) and a "symbiotic, reciprocal relationship" (152) bind the medium and message. The "structure and sound"

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[1] Mosteiro Budista Suddhavāri, "Perguntas Frequentes," https://suddhavari.org/perguntas-frequentes/ (accessed April 3, 2023).

of Pali themselves convey meaning, for the *dhamma* is "innate" to its "very nature" (264). The book praises Pali a dozen times as the "perfect" medium for communicating the *dhamma.*

An introduction summarizes the argument, which a conclusion neatly recapitulates. In between, eleven chapters consider specific teachings (*anattā*, the Buddha, the Middle Way, the mind, nirvana, karma, dependent origination, meditation), a specific text (the *Bāhiya Sutta*), and a topic directly related to language (the vernacular, "Prolegomenon to a Buddhist Language"). A typical chapter offers a learned but accessible exposition of its subject, rich with Pali quotations and English translations from the *sutta*s; at key moments, comments link the discussion to the book's overarching argument. Each chapter features sections of boxed text which develop a tangent—usually a word or grammatical concept—in greater depth; these are consistently interesting, and often valuable in illustrating and clarifying a point made in the main text. A comprehensive subject-matter index, alongside indices of texts and words discussed, facilitates navigation for readers keen on particular topics.

Levman's evidence is both copious and varied, a diversity which makes the thesis all the more persuasive. Some examples are characteristics inherent to the Pali language; others describe ways Pali happens to have been used in these *sutta*s. A general audience of readers or listeners would likely be aware of some features, while others might only be appreciated by a linguistic scholar. Surveying all this material, we can see three distinct strands making up the argument: orality, grammar, and repetition.

That the *sutta*s are oral, in a dialogue form, "mirrors the simplicity" (152) of the Buddha's message and suggests the impermanence and undesirability of existence (131, 265). That the *suttas* are mostly prose allows for efficient communication (26). Their colloquial timbre gives an

"everyday relevance" that underlines the "urgency of suffering" (264). Their euphony creates an "affective, emotional" reinforcement (52), and their musicality and rhythm "brings the Buddha's words back to life" (225), for the nature of music parallels this "grand vision of the essential ephemerality and interdependence of existence" (263).

Pali grammatical features play a special role. That this is an inflected language allows for an "immediacy" (xii) and an "extreme conciseness and directness which is the perfect medium for clearly expressing the Buddha's simple view of reality" (264). The use of passive voice and of impersonal subjects—avoiding "he" and "she"—indicate the "essential randomness and aimlessness of existence" (xiii) and the denial of a distinct self or agent (175-82). Negative language points to Buddhism's emptiness, as the polysemous nature of Pali words points to its relativism (264-5).

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the Pali canon's language is its repeating of ideas, words, and passages. Such repetition reminds us that processes are "inexorable, inevitable, constant" (235) and "gradual" (227). In particular, interlocking chain structures evoke dependent origination and the interdependence of the universe (131, 175, 197-98, 205). Structural repetition, as in musical forms, creates unity (212), and offers affective and mnemonic reinforcement (44-51, 136, 152-55, 228, 265). Similarly pedagogical (20-21), the verbal repetition of near-synonymic adjectives serves to "emphasize a point from slightly different viewpoints," thus corresponding to Buddhist relativism (265). Hearing those synonym chains motivates the listener and even induces the pleasure of the first *jhāna* (198, 247).

How persuasive are these assertions? Much will depend on an individual reader's subjective experience of the arguments. The two boldest claims found little purchase with me, but were fascinating to consider.

First were the repeated assertions that Pali is *equally as important* as the *dhamma* itself, "or perhaps even more so" (209). To test such a claim, my forensic inclination would want to separate the medium from the message, and see if someone without access to the message, presumably someone who did not speak Pali, could merely by listening to that language's sonics and structures learn the *dhamma*, or something better. This is an extraordinary claim, but I am not able to find a more cautious way of understanding the boldest iterations of this thesis, which separates medium from message, and some of his examples seem to support such a strong reading of his argument: Pali's orality itself teaches impermanence, and its interlocking statements teach interdependence. Would not an orally given statement that A leads to B, and B leads to C, and C leads to D, teach the same things in any language?

Second were assertions of Pali's *perfection* as a medium. It is easy to value Pali because its canon is considered by some to be as close as we can get to a full statement of the original teachings. To claim its absolute perfection, to my conditioning, begs for comparison with other languages and their abilities to transmit *dhamma*. We see so many examples of Pali's power, but would other languages not have these or equally effective means? To return to dependent origination, other languages can match Pali's elegant structure: "bedingt durch A ist B; bedingt durch B ist C..." or "以A 為緣而有B; 以B為緣而有C." Alternatively, the same structure could be expressed in an ugly way ("A can come from B, and it's B that causes C, which in turn leads to D..."), which sounds rather vernacular and thus could be said to share Pali's consonance with everyday reality.

Sometimes the examples work at cross purposes. When the Pali structure is simple, it reflects the simplicity of the *dhamma*; when complex, the complexity of suffering (67), of *kamma* (141), of dependent origination (198), or of life itself (240-1). When concise, Pali is pedagogically effective; when repetitive, it illustrates the nature of reality. Pali's

inflections reflect its directness; its homophonic ambiguities reflect the conventionality of language. To me, these are persuasive individually, but added together they make it seem like Pali can do no wrong, making it difficult to soberly evaluate its perfection.

A comparative linguist could perhaps steer us towards many obscure languages with specific features that work well with *dhamma*. Jorge Luis Borges' fictitious Tlön language has no nouns ("'The moon rose above the river' is *hlör ufang axaxaxas mlö*, or literally: 'upward behind the onstreaming it mooned'"), which connects to the fluidity and instability of the world seen in a Buddhist perspective.[2] There are some helpful moments of comparison with Vedic Sanskrit and, especially, with English. Such comparison is necessarily subjective. Levman prefers the twelve words in the Pali "*rūpaṃ attato samanupassati rūpavantaṃ vā attānaṃ attani vā rūpaṃ rūpasmiṃ vā attānaṃ*" over a doubly wordy English translation ("regards form as self, or he regards the self as possessing form, or he regards form as in the self, or he regards self as in form") (52-3), but I could see a less elegant English translator achieving similar conciseness: "regards form as (or within) self, or self as having (or being in) form."

Sometimes Levman's skill as a translator leads to a beauty in his English renderings that work against his argument for Pali exceptionalism. To my ear (as a native English speaker, though also a Pali enthusiast), the Pali original's "*kammassako'mhi kammadāyādo kammayoni kammabandhu kammapaṭisaraṇo...*" (139) pales in the presence of his rendering "what goes around comes around" (139). That English is also vernacular and impersonal, two characteristics he praises in Pali. Similarly, Levman proposes "No, not, nada, never, nowhere, no how" (213) as the English equivalent of the idiomatic negating structure of "*nāhaṃ kvacani, kassaci*

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[2] Jorge Luis Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," trans. James E. Irby, in *Labyrinths*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1968), 8.

kiñcanatasmiṁ, na ca mama kvacani kismiñci kiñcanaṁ na'tthīti," but why is the English inferior to the Pali? I could also imagine an equally gifted scholar of Sanskrit might make an equally comprehensive case for its exceptional ability as a medium.

These bold statements work better as, and perhaps were meant to be, expressions of enthusiasm intended for language connoisseurs rather than empirical statements for a book reviewer to poke and probe. Although I hesitate to grant Pali equal importance with *dhamma*, or a superiority to other languages in ability to express *dhamma*, I can appreciate its important functions and features. The explanations themselves did persuade me of—or deepened and broadened my previous belief in—a more modest argument: that Pali, and the Pali canon, enjoy features that rhetorically support the conveyance of the *dhamma*. These Levman explains, with detail and clarity rarely found in other studies, as a real masterclass for the Pali student. Readers will profitably follow some threads here into some of the author's other works on the historical development of Pali and the possible indigeneity of the Buddha and his culture of origin.[3]

The last few years have enjoyed a renaissance of books on Pali and early Buddhism. This volume stands out even in this august company for its strides towards its ambitious goal, and its potential for edifying a large audience. This book will also attract readers less interested in its destination than in its journey. In the process of composing this monograph, Levman has created an excellent exposition of the key Buddhist teachings, well-referenced, reflective, accessible. Serious Buddhist practitioners

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[3] Bryan Levman, "Cultural Remnants of the Indigenous Peoples in the Buddhist Scriptures," *Buddhist Studies Review* 30 (2013): 145-180; Bryan Geoffrey Levman, "Linguistic Ambiguities, the Transmissional Process, and the Earliest Recoverable Language of Buddhism," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Toronto, 2014.

sometimes ask me whether they should learn Pali. The idea of reading the original canon in the original language appeals, whether for psychological and aesthetic reasons, or for a deeper or more precise understanding of dhamma. For native English speakers, learning an inflected language with a complex morphology is a daunting undertaking. I recommend this book to them as a test to see if they want to study the language proper, or as a shortcut to much of the payoff of sustained Pali study, rewards gained without the sweat and tears of paradigm memorization. The volume's organization also lends itself to exploring a specific topic or text. A reader new to Pali, or to classical languages more generally, might not follow all the linguistic explanations, but will have more understanding here than with other books that dig into the language. This book would effectively serve as a more technical sequel to Sarah Shaw's recent *The Art of Listening.*[4] The reader working through a traditional textbook, or Bhikkhu Bodhi's more pragmatic introduction to reading Pali, might find in this volume the motivation and inspiration necessary for perseverance.[5] All the morphology that makes Pali study so challenging to non-linguists, might after all, as Levman has taught us, be the very thing that allows a terseness which is itself at the heart of *dhamma.*

Notes on the Contributor

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[4] Sarah Shaw, *The Art of Listening: A Guide to the Early Teachings of Buddhism* (Boulder: Shambala, 2021).

[5] Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Reading the Buddha's Discourses in Pali* (Somerville: Wisdom, 2020).