

LINGUISTIC EXPERIMENTS

LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY IN AŚOKAN INSCRIPTIONS AND IN EARLY BUDDHIST TEXTS

O.v.Hinüber, Freiburg i. Brsg.

In his inscriptions Aśoka addresses his subjects directly or via his officials, the *mahāmātras*. Consequently, at least these officials were supposed to understand the administrative language, which was used at the court of the Mauryas in Pāṭaliputra, in the pillar and most rock edicts. For, it is difficult to conceive that this language was immediately understood by people living at Erraguḍi in the Dravidian linguistic area. Exceptions are made, however, in the far Northwest, where Greek or Aramaic were the current linguistic medium. A special case is Gandhāra. The prevailing script was Kharoṣṭhī which seems to have barred the use of Brāhmī. This tradition combined with a language markedly different from the standard north Indian Prakrit could explain the graphic and linguistic recasting of the administrative language.

The rock edicts at Girnar alone stand out in two respects. For, in spite of the fact that the language of Girnar does not enjoy the same special status as Gandhārī did, and Brāhmī is used, the language of the court is not left unchanged. Different from the outright translations into Greek or Aramaic and from the change in script and language in Gandhāra, in Girnar only eastern forms are removed and transferred into their western equivalents such as *lājā* > *rājā*. Moreover, the officials choose a very peculiar and astonishing way to handle the linguistic form of the documents they received from Pāṭaliputra, when they started to introduce forms such as *ārabhīptā* or *tiṣaṃto*. However these forms are to be interpreted, they show a spirit and will of innovation and experiment absent from all other versions. The result was, at least in its graphic form, a language with a definitely artificial look.

When looking at the development of the languages in different Buddhist schools, similar observations can be made. As if inspired by the “linguists” of Girnar, the inclination towards interference with the natural development and towards a conscious shaping of the language seems to have gained momentum. If texts used in the Theravāda, Mahāsāṃghikalokottaravāda or Sāṃmitiya traditions are compared the same tendencies observed at Girnar can be traced, when the linguistic form of the texts used in these individual Buddhist schools is developed on the basis of an old, perhaps rather uniform “Buddhist Middle Indic”, which can only be inferred by reconstruction. Therefore, it seems, the spirit of Girnar lived on and influenced the process of the formation Buddhist languages, which most likely can be understood as an exercise in identity.