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**A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON SEMANTIC ROLES OF
KARMA AND *KARUMA*
IN CONTEMPORARY SINHALA LANGUAGE**

Dilini Ariyawansa

Editor in Chief

Dr. Iromi Ariyaratne

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A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON SEMANTIC ROLES OF *KARMA* AND *KARUMA* IN CONTEMPORARY SINHALA LANGUAGE

Dilini Ariyawansa¹

Abstract

One central concept of Buddhism is referred to as *kamma*. In Sinhala vocabulary, three words convey this idea, *karma*, a loan-word from Sanskrit, *kam*, a derived form from the Sanskrit word, and *karuma*, a phonological alteration in spoken Sinhala. Since the derived form is mainly found in classical Sinhala, this study comparatively examines the semantic roles of the word '*karma*' in contemporary written Sinhala and the word '*karuma*' in spoken Sinhala. This examination is done by comparing the sentences in written Sinhala to the utterances in spoken Sinhala in everyday discourse. From this comparison, it is evident that the semantic role of the word '*karma*' indicates the belief in Buddhist teachings as a noun and as an adjective whereas the word '*karuma*' represents only one aspect of the Buddhist concept. In spoken Sinhala, the word '*karuma*' conveys meanings such as an unwholesome deed, unlucky, ill-fated and unsuccessful and it cannot be labeled as a word relating only to Buddhist vocabulary. This demonstrates that the semantic role of the word '*karuma*' has been adjusted by the Sinhala speaking community. Therefore, the word '*karuma*' can be considered as evidence for the enrichment of contemporary spoken Sinhala vocabulary by reshaping phonetic constructions and semantic roles of the words in Buddhist vocabulary according to the needs of the community of Sinhala speakers.

Keywords

Anaptyxis, *Karuma*, *Karma*, Sinhala speaking community

Introduction

Pali word '*kamma*' conveys one of the central concepts of Buddhism. According to Buddhist teachings, one becomes an outcast or a noble by his *kamm*s, not by birth.¹ Further, *kamma* is one of the supreme factors that purifies someone's life.² The *Nibbedhikasutta* in *Aṅguttaranikāya* which explains the *kamma*, its causes, diversity, results, cessation and the path of practice for the cessation, defines *kamma* as follows:

“Action, monks, I say is intention; intending, one does action by
body, by speech, by mind”³

¹ Lecturer (MA, BA [Hons], Royal Pandit), Department of Sinhala, Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka. Email: dilinia@arts.pdn.ac.lk

As stated in the *Cūlakammavibhaṅgasutta*, being are owners and heirs of their *Kammas*, and they have *kammas* as their progenitor, kin and homing place. Further, *kammas* can differentiate them according to inferiority and superiority.⁴ However, in *Mahākammavibhaṅgasutta*, it has been mentioned that there are four types of *kammas*, incapable and appears incapable, incapable and appears capable, capable and appears capable, capable and appears incapable. For example, who kills living beings and holds the right view may have a good rebirth. He will experience the results of his misdeed later.⁵ Currently, some Western scholars compare Buddhist teachings on *kamma* and rebirth to Christian ideas of evil whereas some accept the concept of *kamma* while rejecting the belief of rebirth.⁶ Although it is a core teaching of Buddhism, at present, the discourse on *kamma* is not confined to Buddhist communities.

The lexical meanings of the Pali word '*kamma*', which has been derived from Sanskrit word *karma*, are 'doing', 'deed' and 'work'.⁷ In its development from Sanskrit, the Pali language underwent several phonological changes. One of those alterations is the assimilation of medial bi-consonantal clusters.⁸ For instance, the words *rakta*, *tarka* and *varṇa* in Sanskrit language become *ratta*, *takka* and *vaṇṇa* in Pali. In the aforementioned words, *kt*, *rk* and *rṇ* clusters have become *tt*, *kk* and *ṇṇ* through assimilation. Accordingly, the word *karma* (*rm* cluster) in Sanskrit becomes *kamma* (*mm* cluster) when derived to Pali language.

Some words related to Buddhist teachings and Buddhist literature are found in everyday discourse of the contemporary Sinhala language. For instance, the Sinhala speaking community uses the term *ane aniccaṃ* to express heartfelt condolences. The word *aniccaṃ* in this term has been derived from Sanskrit word *anitya* and the Pali word *anicca*, which means impermanence. Further, the name Vessantara refers to a generous king whereas the name Kevaṭṭa indicates a conspirator. However, there are more Sanskrit words in the Sinhala vocabulary compared to the amount of Pali words. Instead of using Pali *kamma* as a loan-word, Sanskrit word *karma* has been borrowed and inserted into the Sinhala language.

There are three different forms related to the Sanskrit word *karma*. This paper explores two of them with particular emphasis on the semantic roles of those forms in contemporary Sinhala language.

Phonological Developments of the Word *Karma* in Sinhala Language

According to the phonological rules of early Sinhala language, consonantal clusters develop into single consonants. Therefore, the Sanskrit word *karma* has been added to the Sinhala language as *kam* by converting *rm* compound to a single consonant, *m*. In addition to this derived form, the word *karma* can also be found in Sinhala vocabulary as a loan-word from Sanskrit. Further, in some instances, the Sinhala speaking community adds a vowel between consonantal compounds and converts them into single consonants. In historical linguistics, this process is called 'anaptyxis'. Some examples from the everyday discourse are as follows:

1. *varṣā* (Sanskrit) > *varusā*
2. *grīṣma* (Sanskrit) > *girisma*
3. *śloka* (Sanskrit) > *solōka*
4. plan (English) > *pælæna*
5. buns (English) > *banis*

The aforementioned Sanskrit and English words contain *rṣ*, *gr*, *śl*, *pl* and *ns* clusters. To make the words more easily pronounceable, consonantal clusters are converted into single consonants through anaptyxis with the vowels; *u*, *i*, *o*, *æ* and *i*. Similarly, the Sanskrit word *karma* becomes *karuma* in spoken Sinhala with vowel *u* added between the *rm* cluster. Accordingly, there are three parallel forms in the Sinhala language with a common etymology, *kam*, *karma* and *karuma*.

Although there are three separate forms in Sinhala vocabulary to indicate the idea conveyed by Sanskrit word *karma*, these forms have individual utilities and are attached to different contexts. The word *kam* was commonly found in classical Sinhala poetry because Sanskrit or Pali words were rarely used in ancient poetic works. Since this paper is based on contemporary Sinhala language, it does not examine the role of this derived form, *kam*. Due to the diglossic feature of the Sinhala language, separate words can be identified in written vocabulary and spoken vocabulary. The Sanskrit loan-word *karma*, which has been used in classical Sinhala prose, can be seen mainly in contemporary written language. On the other hand, the form *karuma* can be commonly found in spoken Sinhala vocabulary. Although the words *karma* and *karuma* share the same etymology, it is evident that they have different semantic roles in written and spoken forms of contemporary Sinhala language.

The Semantic Role of the Word *Karma* in Written Sinhala Language

In written Sinhala, the Sanskrit loan-word *karma* is mainly found in the texts related to Buddhism. For instance, the word *karma* functions as a noun in Sinhala sentences by inflecting in noun cases as follows:

1. *sambudu dahamē karmaya yanu cētanāva vē*⁹
(*karma* is defined as intention in Buddhism.)
2. *karmayē vipāka*¹⁰
(Results of *karma*)
3. *lōkayē siyalla karmayaṭa anuvama siduvannē da?*¹¹
(Does everything in the world happen according to *karma*?)
4. *atīta karmavalin vipākayak æthi karannē kesē da?*¹²
(How do the past *karmas* generate results?)
5. *suḷu suḷu akusala karmavalata vipāka dīmaṭa avasthāvaka nolæbīma*¹³
(Minor unwholesome *karmas* do not get an opportunity to produce results.)

When examining the above examples, it is evident that the word *karma* expresses the meaning related to Buddhist teachings in the *Nibbedhikasutta*. This word inflects in several noun cases according to the syntactic slot. Therefore, the

semantic role of the noun *karma* in the aforesaid sentences is conveying the original Buddhist idea.

In addition, the Sanskrit word *karma* performs the duty of an adjective in compounds such as *karma saṅkalpaya* (the concept of *karma*), *karma vipāka* (the results of *karmas*) and *karma phala* (the results of *karmas*) in the contexts related to Buddhism. In these examples, the noun stem has been used as an adjective. These compounds convey ideas relevant to Buddhist beliefs. Although the word *karma* in Sinhala vocabulary also conveys several meanings including work, occupation and deed, in instances such as *śalya-karma* (operations), *śānti-karma* (rituals) and *karma vibhakti* (accusative case), it still performs the function of expressing the original Buddhist idea in relevant contexts. In other words, the Sanskrit word *karma* can be used in Sinhala language to indicate an intention according to Buddhist perspective. Therefore, the semantic role of conveying the original Buddhist idea has not been changed in the noun *karma* and the adjective *karma* in written Sinhala language.

The Semantic Role of the Word *Karuma* in Spoken Sinhala Language

A considerable portion of Sinhala vocabulary is common to written and spoken variants. Conversely, some words are confined to spoken Sinhala whereas some are limited to written variant. In some instances, written forms and spoken forms have slight differences due to phonological developments in the spoken variant. Since the aim of these developments is to achieve the convenience of pronunciation, they occur in accordance with the phonetic features of the native language. As previously stated, the word *karma* becomes *karuma* in spoken Sinhala to avoid the *rm* consonant cluster. Although the word *karma* can also be seen in spoken Sinhala, *karuma* is the most accustomed form in Sinhala speech community. The employment of the word *karuma* as a noun and as an adjective is similar to that of the word *karma*. However, it can be examined that the word *karuma* has a different semantic role in spoken Sinhala compared to the role of the word *karma* in written variant.

The Sinhala speaking community uses the word *karuma* in utterances as a noun by inflecting in cases as follows:

1. *Mēka mage pūruve karumayak.* (This is an unwholesome deed I have done in the past.)
2. *Mē karumayen maṃ kavada goḍa ennada?* (When will I get rid of this suffering?)
3. *Mama karuma gevanavā.* (I am paying for what I have done in the past.)
4. *Mēvā pera karumavala vipāka.* (These are the results of previous unwholesome deeds.)
5. *Anunge karumavalata karagahanna epā.* (Do not intervene in unwholesome deeds done by others.)

When comparing these kind of utterances with the sentences in written Sinhala language, it is evident that the word *karuma* is confined to negative contexts. For instance, when someone believes that he is enjoying the results of good deeds

done in a previous birth, he does not say that they are the results of *karuma* although he can write it as the results of *karma*. Although own *kammas* differentiate beings according to both inferiority and superiority¹⁴, Sinhala speech community emphasizes one aspect, "misdeeds produce bad results". Despite there being four types of *kammas* as incapable and appears incapable, incapable and appears capable, capable and appears capable, and capable and appears incapable¹⁵, people believe that they can pay for what they have done in the past and stop *kammas* from producing results.

According to Buddhist teachings, one who performed meritorious deeds rejoices in this birth and in the next birth.¹⁶ However, the use of the word *karuma* in spoken Sinhala only reflects the opposite idea of the above teaching, one who performed misdeeds grieves in this birth and the next birth.¹⁷ On the other hand, in written Sinhala, the noun *karma* can be compounded with both positive and negative adjectives. For example, compounds such as *kusala karma* (wholesome deeds) and *akusala karma* (unwholesome deeds) can be seen in written Sinhala. However, the noun *karuma* in spoken Sinhala is never used with a positive adjective and the semantic role of this noun is confined to conveying a negative meaning.

Examining semantic changes in the English language, a researcher has pointed out that the criteria for rating a meaning as new are harder to establish and apply than those for rating a word as new.¹⁸ When comparing the idea conveyed by the word *karuma* to the meaning of the word *karma*, it is evident that the word *karuma* does not indicate a new meaning. Although both acceptable and unacceptable intentions can be expressed by the word *karma*, the form *karuma* only conveys ideas related to unacceptable intentions. According to linguistics, this can be considered narrowing, a type of semantic change that restricts the meaning of a word. For example, the meaning of 'deer' was 'animal' in Old English. However, in contemporary language, 'deer' is a specific kind of animal.¹⁹

In addition to performing as a noun, the word *karuma* plays the role of an adjective. The Sinhala speaking community uses utterances such as *karuma vasamgatayak* (an ill-fated pandemic), *karuma jivitayak* (a miserable life) and *karuma rassavak* (a stressful job) in everyday discourse. When examining the meaning of this type of compounds, it can be noted that there are two types of combinations.

<i>karuma</i> + negative meaning = negative meaning		<i>karuma</i> + neutral meaning = negative meaning	
Utterance	Context	Utterance	Context
<i>karuma tuvālayak</i>	suffer from an incurable wound	<i>karuma væssak</i>	suffer from a rain
<i>karuma yuddayak</i>	suffer from a war	<i>karuma pāvillak</i>	suffer from a drought

<i>karuma anaturak</i>	face an ill-fated accident	<i>karuma vibāgayak</i>	face a difficult exam
<i>karuma gaṃvaturak</i>	suffer from a flood	<i>karuma kālayak</i>	spend a stressful time
<i>karuma pātālayak</i>	suffer from underworld activities	<i>karuma pālanayak</i>	the governing party is unsuccessful

Further, the Sinhala speaking community uses the word *maha* (*maha karuma tuvālayak*, *maha karuma væssak*, etc.) to emphasize the negative aspect of the situation. When examining these examples, it becomes clear that the adjective *karuma* is also confined to indicating a negative sense. Therefore, the semantic role of the noun *karuma* in spoken Sinhala language can be identified as expressing negative concepts including an unwholesome deed, an unacceptable behavior and suffering, whereas the adjective *karuma* indicates adverse ideas such as unlucky, unsuccessful and stressful. Accordingly, it is evident that the word *karuma* in spoken Sinhala does not reflect the exact idea in Buddhist teachings.

Conclusion

This paper has compared the word *karma* in written Sinhala with the word *karuma* in spoken Sinhala with special emphasis on their semantic roles. It could be evident that the noun *karma* in written Sinhala conveys the original meaning in Buddhist teachings whereas the noun *karuma* in spoken Sinhala is limited to expressly negative ideas. Further, the word *karma* functions as an adjective in written Sinhala to convey the original meaning in Buddhist beliefs. However, the semantic role of the adjective *karuma* conveys negative ideas such as ‘unsuccessful’, ‘ill-fated’ and ‘unlucky’.

<i>karma</i> in written Sinhala		<i>karuma</i> in spoken Sinhala	
as a noun	as an adjective	as a noun	as an adjective
an intention	of an intention	An unwholesome deed, an unacceptable wok, a cruel act, etc....	Unsuccessful, ill-fated, unlucky, incurable, miserable, etc....

In conclusion, the word *karma* in written Sinhala and the word *karuma* in spoken Sinhala have separate semantic roles. The first form conveys the original idea in

Buddhism whereas the second form indicates only one aspect of that idea. Therefore, the word *karuma* can be considered an example for the enrichment of spoken Sinhala vocabulary through phonetic and semantic alterations of words in Buddhist vocabulary. Further studies are required to look at more Sinhala words that change their semantic roles to fit everyday discourse in a creative way, irrespective of the etymological relationship with Buddhist vocabulary.

Endnotes

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- ¹ "Na jaccā vasalo hoti na jaccā hoti brāhmaṇo
Kammunā vasalo hoti kammunā hoti brāhmaṇo." Su : p. 41
 - ² "Kammaṃ vijjā ca dhammo ca silaṃ jīvitamuttamaṃ
Etena maccā sujjhanti na gottena dhanena vā." Sa. I : p. 98
 - ³ "Cetanāhaṃ bhikkhave kammaṃ vadāmi Cetayitvā kammaṃ karoti kāyena
vācāya manasā"
A. III : p. 415
 - ⁴ "Kamassakā mānavā sattā kammadāyādā kammaṃyōni kammabandhū kammappaṭisaraṇā.
Kammaṃ satte vibhajati yadidaṃ hīnappanītātāyā'ti." M. III : p. 202
 - ⁵ M III : p. 207
 - ⁶ Lin and Yen 2015
 - ⁷ Davids 1979
 - ⁸ Suzuki 2002
 - ⁹ pitaka.lk 2021
 - ¹⁰ Budusaraṇa 2011
 - ¹¹ Budusaraṇa 2018
 - ¹² pitaka.lk 2021
 - ¹³ Budu Dahama 2014
 - ¹⁴ "Kammaṃ satte vibhajati yadidaṃ hīnappanītātāyā'ti." M. III : p. 202
 - ¹⁵ M III : p. 207
 - ¹⁶ "Idha modati pecca modati katapuñño ubhayattha modati." D : p. 12
 - ¹⁷ "Idha socati pecca socati pāpakāri ubhayattha modati." Ibid.
 - ¹⁸ Thorndike 1947
 - ¹⁹ Traugott 2017

Abbreviations

A.	<i>Aṅguttaranikāya</i>
D.	<i>Dhammapada</i>
M.	<i>Majjhimanikāya</i>
p.	Page
Sa.	<i>Saṅyuttanikāya</i>
Su.	<i>Suttanipāta</i>

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