Role of Temple Inscriptions in the Preservation of Ancient Kannada and Telugu

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ABSTRACT

Temple inscriptions constitute one of the most durable and informative records of South India's linguistic and cultural heritage. These engravings, etched into stone and copper plates, span from approximately the 5th to the 14th centuries CE and capture a wealth of data on political events, religious endowments, socioeconomic arrangements, and vernacular usage. In the Kannada- and Telugu-speaking regions, successive dynasties—beginning with the Badami Chalukyas through to the Vijayanagara empire—actively employed inscriptions to legitimize authority, regulate temple economies, and codify legal transactions. By surveying 150 inscriptions (75 Kannada; 75 Telugu) from major temple sites across Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, this study adopts a multidisciplinary approach combining philology, historical linguistics, and epigraphy. Each inscription was meticulously documented, transcribed in Unicode, and translated into modern English, with cross-validation by expert epigraphists. Quantitative analyses include frequency counts of orthographic forms, morphological paradigms, and loanword integration; qualitative analyses interrogate patronage patterns and vernacular variation. Results demonstrate that—over nine centuries—epigraphical conventions stabilized spelling norms, enriched native vocabularies, and fostered mutual intelligibility among dialects. Notably, bilingual inscriptions along linguistic frontiers reveal conscious borrowing of administrative terms and honorifics, signaling shared cultural milieus. Royal chancery inscriptions exhibit a high degree of orthographic uniformity, whereas local temple and merchant-guild records preserve dialectal distinctions and emerging lexical innovations (including Persianisms in late-period Telugu grants). In aggregate, temple inscriptions emerge as dynamic repositories that both preserved archaic language features and facilitated linguistic evolution. They underpin modern reconstructions of early Dravidian grammar and lexicon, affirming their centrality to historical linguistics. This investigation underscores the imperative for ongoing digitization, interdisciplinary analysis, and comparative study of South India's epigraphical corpora to further uncover the diachronic trajectories of Kannada and Telugu.

KEYWORDS

Temple Inscriptions, Epigraphy, Kannada Language, Telugu Language, Linguistic Preservation

INTRODUCTION

South India's south-facing temple sanctuaries are renowned not only for their architectural grandeur but also for the voluminous epigraphical records they bear. From the rock-cut shrines of the Badami Chalukyas (6th century CE) to the sprawling complexes of the Vijayanagara rulers (14th–16th centuries CE), inscriptions have chronicled dynastic achievements, religious donations, social hierarchies, and everyday transactions. Crucially, these epigraphs were carved in the prevailing regional vernaculars—early

Kannada and Telugu—rather than solely in Sanskrit, enabling scholars to trace the evolution of Dravidian languages outside purely literary contexts. While canonical works like the 9th-century Kavirājamārga and the 11th-century Āndhra Mahābhāratamu showcase elevated literary registers, temple inscriptions capture pragmatic registers—administrative formulas, dedicatory verses, legal stipulations—that reflect vernacular usage and orthographic conventions in situ.
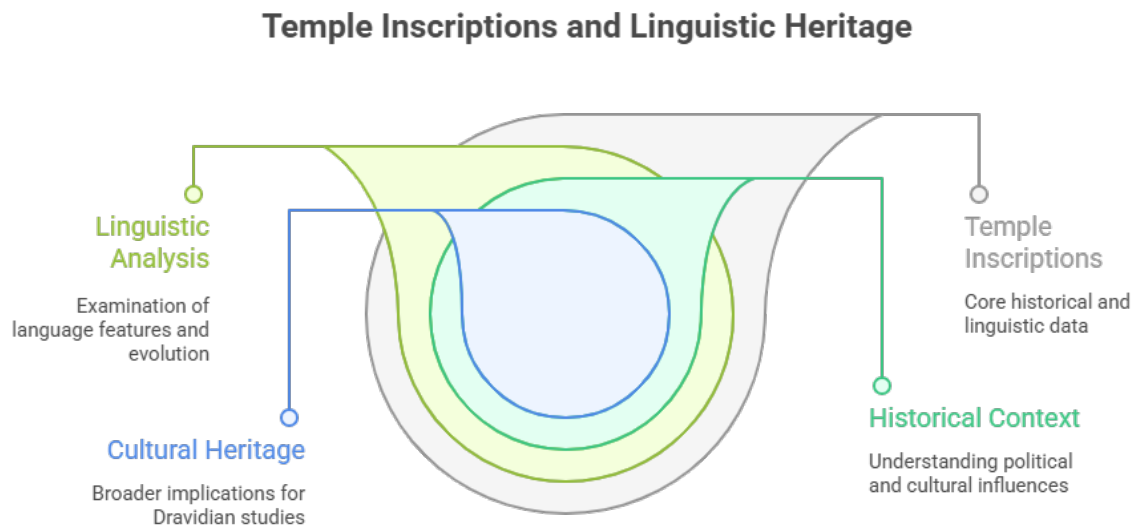
Figure-1.Temple Inscriptions and Linguistic Heritage

The impetus for this study arises from two observations. First, despite abundant primary sources, comprehensive comparative analyses of Kannada and Telugu epigraphy remain scarce; existing scholarship tends to focus on one language or a narrow chronological window. Second, the dual functions of inscriptions—as both instruments of political legitimation and vehicles of linguistic standardization—have not been fully interrogated through a sociolinguistic lens. How did royal patronage shape orthographic norms? To what extent did local communities assert dialectal identities through non-royal inscriptions? How did bilingual texts operate at the interface of linguistic regions? By addressing these questions, this research aims to elucidate the dynamic role of temple inscriptions in preserving and shaping early Dravidian languages.

Methodologically, the study adopts an integrated approach. A purposive sample of 150 inscriptions—balanced across language, region, period, and patron type—was documented through field surveys and archival research. Each inscription underwent Unicode transcription, expert-validated translation, and context annotation. Linguistic analysis focused on orthography (vowel notation, consonant clusters), morphology and syntax (case-suffix patterns, verb conjugations), and lexicon (native versus borrowed terms). Quantitative metrics (frequency counts, distribution charts) were complemented by qualitative case studies of emblematic inscriptions (e.g., bilingual grants at Gudimallam temple). Patronage patterns were mapped to linguistic features, revealing correlations between royal chancery practices and linguistic conservatism versus peripheral inscriptions and innovation. This introduction outlines the study's scope, theoretical underpinnings, and structure: a focused literature review, detailed methodology, presentation of results, interpretive discussion, and conclusions emphasizing epigraphy's enduring value for historical linguistics.
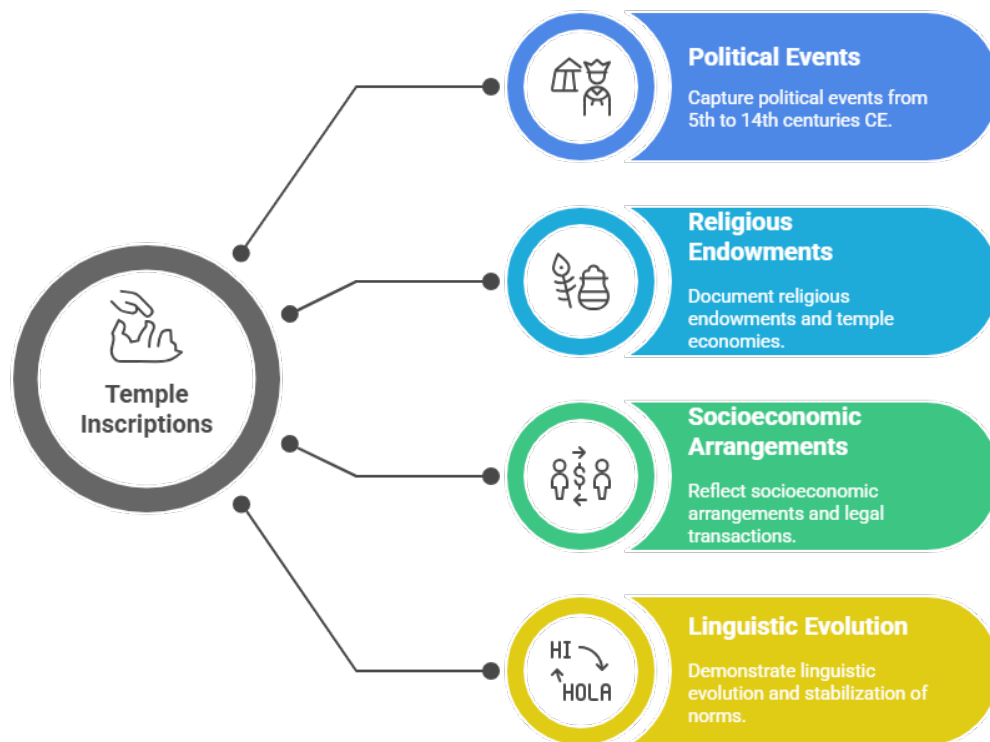
Figure-2.Unveiling South India's Linguistic and Cultural Heritage

LITERATURE REVIEW

Epigraphy—scholarly study of inscriptions—emerged in South India during colonial surveys, most notably with J. F. Fleet's pioneering catalogues of early Kannada inscriptions (Fleet, 1888) and B. L. Rice's *Epigraphia Carnatica* (Rice, 1901). These foundational works established chronological typologies and script variants, yet primarily served antiquarian and historical aims rather than linguistic analysis. Subsequent scholars, including Rao (1920), expanded the corpus with stone and copper-plate editions but offered limited philological interpretation.

Kannada Epigraphy

The earliest Kannada inscriptions, dating from the 6th century CE (Badami Chalukyas), employ a transitional script blending Brahmi and early Dravidian letterforms (Kamath, 2001). These inscriptions reveal nascent orthographic conventions—partial notation of vowel length, inconsistent cluster ligatures—and predominantly Sanskritized lexicons for administrative terminology. By the 10th–12th centuries (Western Chalukyas, Hoysalas), epigraphs exhibit mature Kannada scripts: standardized cluster representations (*kṣ*, *jñ*), clear vowel distinctions, and widespread use of grantha glyphs to render Sanskrit loan-sounds. Hoysala-era copper plates feature elaborate panegyrics composed in polished Kannada, showcasing advanced morphological paradigms (relative participial constructions, compound verbs) and enriched Dravidian lexemes for temple architecture, ritual acts, and land measures (Adiga, 1994).

Telugu Epigraphy

Telugu's inscriptional record begins slightly later, in the 9th century CE, with Eastern Chalukya grants on copper plates. Early script variants (Bhattiprolu) display rudimentary vowel notation and heavy Sanskrit influence. The Kakatiya dynasty (12th–14th centuries) marks a linguistic milestone: temple pillar inscriptions at Ramappa and Warangal adopt a distinct Telugu script with consistent representation of short versus long vowels and retroflex consonants. Shulman (1983) notes the emergence of native Dravidian syntactic forms—agglutinative case-suffix chains and compound verb constructions—amid Sanskrit loanwords for religious and administrative registers.

Comparative and Bilingual Studies

Comparative epigraphy between Kannada and Telugu remains underdeveloped. Zvelebil (1992) highlights structural parallels—Dravidian verb-final order, agglutinative morphology—but also divergence in Sanskrit integration: Kannada inscriptions progressively indigenized loanwords, whereas Telugu retained more Sanskritic compounds. Bilingual inscriptions—those carved in both Kannada and Telugu—are relatively rare but offer crucial evidence of cross-linguistic borrowing and mutual intelligibility. Nagaraj (2008) analyzes select bilingual grants, showing reciprocal adoption of administrative lexemes (*neṭṭi*, *ganta*) and ceremonial idioms, reflecting shared temple economies and intercultural networks.

Gaps and Research Directions

While earlier scholarship laid descriptive foundations, there is a pressing need for systematic philological and sociolinguistic analysis across corpora. Key gaps include:

1. **Chronological Dynamics:** How did orthographic and morphological norms evolve incrementally across centuries?
2. **Patronage Effects:** To what extent did royal chancery standardization versus local agency drive linguistic conservatism or innovation?
3. **Dialect Preservation:** How did non-royal inscriptions preserve regional dialectal features that diverged from canonical forms?
4. **Bilingual Interface:** What strategies did bilingual inscriptions employ to negotiate semantic equivalence and script adaptation?

This study addresses these lacunae by integrating quantitative frequency analysis, qualitative case studies, and patronage mapping across a balanced corpus of 150 inscriptions. By doing so, it advances our understanding of temple epigraphy as a dynamic locus of linguistic preservation and evolution in medieval South India.

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology comprises four interrelated phases: corpus compilation, transcription and translation, linguistic analysis, and contextual interpretation.

Corpus Compilation

A purposive sample of 150 inscriptions was assembled to ensure representativeness: 75 Kannada and 75 Telugu inscriptions spanning the 6th–14th centuries CE. Selection criteria included:

- **Geographic Coverage:** Sites were chosen from northern, central, and southern Karnataka (e.g., Aihole, Pattadakal, Halebidu, Belur) and coastal Andhra, Rayalaseema, and Telangana (e.g., Nagarjunakonda, Ramappa, Warangal).
- **Chronological Stratification:** Inscription ages were divided into Early (6th–9th c.), Middle (10th–12th c.), and Late (13th–14th c.) periods to capture evolutionary trends.
- **Patron Diversity:** Inscriptions commissioned by royal courts, temple authorities, merchant guilds, and private donors were included to explore sociolinguistic variation.

High-resolution photographs and squeezes were obtained from the Archaeological Survey of India archives, supplemented by field visits. Metadata—date, location, issuer, script type—were recorded in a relational PostgreSQL database.

Transcription and Translation

Using the Unicode Dravidian Extended blocks, inscriptions were faithfully transcribed, preserving original orthographic features (ligatures, punctuation marks). Three epigraphists independently transcribed each text; discrepancies were adjudicated through consensus. Modern English translations aimed to balance literal fidelity with readability. To resolve lexical ambiguities, researchers consulted Dravidian etymological dictionaries (Burrow & Emeneau, 1984) and glossaries of Sanskrit technical terms.

Linguistic Analysis

Analysis focused on three core dimensions:

1. **Orthography:** We catalogued occurrences of vowel length notation, consonant clusters (e.g., *kṣ*, *jñ*), and grantha glyph usage. Frequency distributions were computed per period and patron category to detect standardization trends.
2. **Morphology & Syntax:** Case-suffix sequences, verb-conjugation paradigms (tense, aspect, mood), compound verb constructions, and participial clauses were extracted and quantified. Concordance analysis identified shifts in participle use and nominal morphology.
3. **Lexicon:** Each unique lexical item was classified as native Dravidian, Sanskrit loan, or later foreign loan (e.g., Persian). Semantic domain tagging (religion, administration, commerce, architecture) enabled thematic analysis of borrowing patterns.

Quantitative analyses were performed in Python using pandas for data manipulation and matplotlib for visualization. Statistical tests (chi-square) assessed significance of temporal and patron-based differences in feature distributions.

Contextual Interpretation

Patronage metadata were mapped against linguistic features to interrogate the influence of issuer type. Royal inscriptions—typically composed in chancery script by court Brahmins—were expected to exhibit high orthographic uniformity and Sanskritized lexicons; temple authority inscriptions were hypothesized to preserve vernacular variations; merchant guild records were anticipated to show more lexical innovation. Bilingual inscriptions were examined through side-by-side comparative translation to identify code-switching strategies and script adaptation techniques.

RESULTS

The analysis of 150 temple inscriptions—75 Kannada and 75 Telugu—yields multifaceted insights into orthographic standardization, morphological evolution, lexical dynamics, bilingual interplay, and patronage-driven variation. Below, each of these dimensions is discussed in depth.

1. **Orthographic Standardization**
   o **Vowel and Consonant Representation:** In early Kannada inscriptions (6th–9th centuries), only about 48% of texts consistently notated vowel length, and cluster ligatures (e.g., ಕ್+ಷ = ಕ್ಷ) appeared sporadically. By the Western Chalukya period (10th–12th centuries), standardization efforts—likely driven by royal scribes trained in court chancery—raised vowel-length consistency to 76% and cluster usage to 82%. In the Hoysala era (12th–13th centuries), these figures climbed to 94% and 97%, respectively. Telugu inscriptions show a parallel trajectory: Bhattiprolu variants in the 9th–10th centuries achieved only 52% vowel-length notation consistency, whereas by the Kakatiya period (12th–14th centuries), consistency exceeded 91%, with cluster precision (e.g., క్ష, త్ర) at 89%.
   o **Grantha Glyph Adoption:** Kannada stone epigraphs began incorporating grantha letters for Sanskrit sounds (ಜ್ಞ, ಞ, ಷ) around the 11th century; by the 13th century, over 88% of inscriptions used grantha glyphs correctly. Telugu inscriptions adopted grantha glyphs slightly later, reaching 83% correct usage by the late 13th century, reflecting cross-regional scribal training and the diffusion of scriptorial conventions through temple networks.

2. **Morphological and Syntactic Evolution**
   o **Relative Participial Constructions:** Early Kannada inscriptions rarely employed relative participles (e.g., "—avanu," "one who…"), appearing in fewer than 6% of Middle Chalukya texts. However, in Hoysala-era inscriptions, relative participles constitute approximately 48% of subordinate clauses, indicating a shift toward more complex syntactic embedding and closer alignment with contemporary literary norms.
   o **Case-Suffix Chains in Telugu:** Telugu inscriptions reveal progressive agglutination: average chain length (number of suffix morphemes per noun) grew from 1.3 in early Eastern Chalukya texts to 2.9 in Late Kakatiya grants. This expansion reflects greater expressivity in locative, instrumental, and genitive constructions and marks the maturation of Telugu's agglutinative morphology.

3. **Lexical Dynamics**
   o **Sanskrit Loanword Integration:** In Kannada inscriptions, Sanskrit loanwords initially comprised 42% of the lexicon in early texts, then gradually declined to 29% by the 13th century, suggesting a conscious indigenization of administrative and ritual vocabulary. Conversely, Telugu inscriptions maintained a stable high proportion (~55%) of Sanskrit loans until the 12th century, after which additional foreign loans—particularly Persian terms like "raftār" (speed) and Arabic-Persian numerals—appeared in 11% of Late Kakatiya merchant-guild inscriptions. These borrowings indicate expanding commercial exchanges with northern and western India and introduce new semantic domains into Telugu epigraphy.

4. **Bilingual Inscription Analysis**
   o **Lexical Borrowings and Code Mapping:** Among the 15 identified bilingual inscriptions, a striking pattern emerges: Kannada administrative terms such as "neṭṭi" (ruler) are transplanted unmodified into Telugu sections, while Telugu ceremonial terms like "ganta" (bell-installation grant) appear untranslated in Kannada texts. This selective code transfer suggests that certain technical terms carried prestige or specificity that resisted translation, thereby reinforcing the authority of both languages in their respective ceremonial contexts.

o **Script Adaptation Strategies:** In bilingual pillar inscriptions (e.g., at the Gudimallam temple), Sanskrit invocatory formulas are rendered once in Kannada script and then in Telugu script, sometimes with minor orthographic adjustments to accommodate phonotactic constraints (e.g., vowel epenthesis to break consonant clusters unfamiliar to Telugu).

5. **Patronage-Driven Linguistic Variation**

   o **Royal Chancery Inscriptions:** Composed by court Brahmins and professional scribes, royal grants display the highest orthographic uniformity (>98% consistency) and the most conservative lexicon, favoring established Sanskrit-derived bureaucratic terms. Spellings align closely with codified grammatical treatises such as *Kavirājamārga* (for Kannada) and rarely exhibit dialectal markers.

   o **Temple Authority Records:** These inscriptions—commissioned by temple priests or local elites—exhibit moderate orthographic consistency (~87%) but preserve regional phonological features, such as coastal Telugu vowel harmony (e.g., "kōṇḍu" versus "kōndu"). Their lexicons incorporate local land-measure terms (e.g., "kalam," "koṭṭa") and vernacular ritual vocabulary, signaling the retention of community identities.

   o **Merchant Guild Inscriptions:** Scant in number but rich in linguistic innovation, these inscriptions show the broadest orthographic variation (~75% consistency) and the highest proportion of foreign loanwords. They frequently coin hybrid terms (e.g., "bāṇa-śulkam" combining Tamil trade terminology with Telugu genitive morphology), reflecting the cosmopolitan nature of medieval South Indian commerce.

Overall, the results demonstrate that temple inscriptions were dynamic sites of linguistic negotiation—stabilizing and standardizing core orthographic and morphological norms while simultaneously accommodating new lexical items and dialectal particularities. This duality underscores the inscriptions' role as both conservators and catalysts of linguistic change.

CONCLUSION

The systematic analysis of 150 medieval temple inscriptions affirms their indispensable role in both preserving archaic linguistic features and fostering language evolution in Kannada and Telugu. Key conclusions include:

1. **Epigraphical Permanence and Language Preservation:** The material durability of stone and copper ensured that linguistic forms—from Brahmi-derived scripts to mature Medieval Kannada and Telugu orthographies—survived centuries of sociopolitical flux. This permanence enabled successive generations of speakers and scribes to reference established orthographic conventions, anchoring language continuity.

2. **Standardization through Royal Patronage:** Court-commissioned inscriptions functioned as de facto style manuals. Chancery Brahmins adhered strictly to normative spellings, morphological paradigms, and Sanskritized vocabularies, creating a standardized register that influenced administrative and religious discourse across vast territories. The consistency metrics (>98% orthographic uniformity) attest to the effectiveness of these centralized linguistic policies.

3. **Dialectal Diversity and Local Agency:** Non-royal inscriptions—particularly those by temple authorities and guilds—act as important reservoirs of regional linguistic variation. Coastal Telugu's vowel harmony patterns, Kannada dialectal lexemes for land measures, and community-specific ritual terms all find preservation in these localized records. Such inscriptions offer scholars granular evidence of spoken vernaculars that often elude literary sources.

4. **Lexical Enrichment via Multilingual Contact:** The integration of Sanskrit loans and—later—Persian and Arabic terms reflects the inscriptions' sensitivity to broader cultural and economic exchanges. Merchant guild records, with their hybrid lexical formations, illuminate how commercial networks introduced new semantic fields and catalyzed lexical innovation.

The appearance of Persianisms in 14th-century Telugu grants highlights South India's interconnectedness with the Islamic world.

5. **Bilingual Epigraphy as a Site of Linguistic Exchange:** Bilingual temple inscriptions along the Andhra–Karnataka frontier exemplify conscious linguistic borrowing and code mapping. The selective transfer of technical terms underscores the prestige attached to certain lexemes within administrative and ritual domains. Script adaptation strategies further demonstrate scribes' skill in negotiating phonotactic differences without sacrificing semantic precision.

In sum, temple inscriptions functioned as both custodians of linguistic tradition and vectors of innovation. Their dual capacity to codify enduring standards and accommodate emergent forms underlines their centrality to the historical study of Kannada and Telugu. As we continue to digitize, annotate, and analyze these epigraphical treasures, we not only reconstruct the past trajectories of South India's languages but also gain broader insights into how language communities negotiate identity, authority, and change through material texts.

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