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Sustainable data management @ Tamilex

The Tamilex project, funded by a long-term grant from the Akademie der Wissenschaften in Hamburg, aims to create the first historical dictionary of Classical Tamil. It comprises an online corpus of annotated texts, linked to manuscript images, which provides the material evidence for lexical entries. Each of these layers requires careful consideration in order to ensure that the data is preserved and managed sustainably for generations to come, and that it remains accessible for future scholars to use and re-use in their research projects.

Traditionally, Classical Tamil texts were transmitted by copying onto palm leaves. Data management, then, consisted of making new copies before the old ones were destroyed by the heat, humidity, and insects of south India. But each time a text was copied, it would be slightly different, whether due to scribal errors or intentional revisions or corrections. Now, we aim to critically edit these texts so that their evolution becomes apparent, while preserving the rich textual variation that has been accumulated over almost two millennia. Earlier editors may have ignored these variations, selecting or correcting one preferred version of the text as definitive, and thus inadvertently making the same mistakes as the manuscript scribes of the past. When dictionaries have been compiled on the basis of these editions, this has led to appearance of lexical phantoms —words that do not exist except as faulty conjectures on the part of an editor. These conjectures have now become part of the history of the text and its language as well. Today, our challenge is to collect and analyze all of this complex data in a way that is transparent, reusable, and traceable back to its material sources.

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Keywords

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