

Vernacularising Dharma: Transitivity, Agency, and Ethical Recontextualisation in the Vālmīki and Kandali Rāmāyaṇas

Dr. Darpan jit Konwar

Assistant Professor

Dept. of Assamese, Dibrugarh University

Abstract

This article suggests that the vernacularisation of Rāmāyaṇa that happened in Assamese by the 14th-century writer, Mādhava Kandali, is neither mere translation of the Vālmīki narrative in a different language but rather a reconfiguration, at the level of grammar, of the linguistic representation of ethical agency. Themes of the four ethically decisive moments examined in the article, from both textual sources – Rāma's exile, the confrontation between Kaushalyā and Kaikeyī, Bharata's rejection of the throne and Sītā's agni parīkṣā – are analysed through the lens of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which focuses on transitivity analysis, participant-role coding and modality. A common theme that can be seen across the verses studied is that Vālmīki's Sanskrit tends to frame the ethical subject as the grammatical Patient of the causative and/or obligatory processes, whereas Kandali's Assamese tends to frame the ethical subject as the volitional Actor. The pattern presented in the article is not a statistically determined pattern, rather it is an illustrative, qualitative pattern and the result of the author's proposal can be the basis for a future study of the clause coded corpus. The article does not necessarily treat Vālmīki and Kandali as two distinct moral philosophy, but it does suggest that the text of Kandali does remodulate and redistribute moral emphasis already implicit in the shared narrative tradition, and that this is a linguistically verifiable example of what Sheldon Pollock calls vernacularisation as philosophical reorientation, which is later discussed with other critics of Pollock's model. The article's contribution is methodological, rather than interpretive: it suggests that the technique of transitivity analysis can be used to study the ethical agency of premodern South Asian narrative more generally.

This paper examines the concept of transitivity with regard to moral agency from a Systemic Functional Linguistic perspective in the context of the Assamese literature. This, in turn, is analysed in relation to the concepts of vernacularisation of language and the role of moral agency in the works of the two poets, namely Mādhava Kandali and Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa.

Keywords: Mādhava Kandali; Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa; Assamese Rāmāyaṇa; Vernacularisation; Moral Agency; Ethical Agency; Systemic Functional Linguistics; Transitivity Analysis; Grammatical Agency

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Problem

In the fourteenth century, however, when Mādhava Kandali composed his Saptakāṇḍa Rāmāyaṇa, a work amongst the earliest Indo-Aryan vernacular renderings of the Rāmāyaṇa, he did not create a literal translation of Vālmīki's Sanskrit. The rewriting of Kandali's narration has been noted by the Assamese literary researchers since long, as it changes focus, incorporates scenes and alters the emotional weight (Neog; Sarma; Kakati). Lesser studied is whether these changes are visible in the grammar of the two texts — that is, not only in the content of each text on dharma, but in how each text's clauses allocate the roles of actor, patient, and process to the human actors making moral choices. The implications of this question are not limited to this pair of texts: if it can be demonstrated that grammatical role-assignment does shift systematically under vernacularisation, then transitivity analysis would provide a convenient, replicable tool for comparing the many regional Rāmāyaṇas surveyed in Richman's two edited works, and perhaps other Sanskrit-to-vernacular retellings.

This article does not ask the question of whether there is a philosophical difference between the two texts, but rather a more narrow, and more answerable question as to whether there is a difference. It asks: when the ethically significant moments of the shared story are subjected to transitivity analysis, the SFL tool for capturing who or what is the Actor, Goal, Agent and/or the Patient of a clause, is there a consistent grammatical pattern that distinguishes the two texts, and if there is, what does that pattern reveal about the construction of the moral subject in either text?

1.2 Research Gap

The plurality of Rāmāyaṇa traditions is very much recognized; no single version is the official one and regional versions of the Rāmāyaṇa rework the ethical and cultural significance in culturally nuanced ways (Ramanujan; Richman, Many Rāmāyaṇas; Richman, Questioning Rāmāyaṇas). Sheldon Pollock's account of vernacularisation does not consider the transition from Sanskrit to various regional literary production as a matter of popularisation but rather as an act of choice and a philosophically productive one (Pollock). There have been some doubts since raised about these aspects of the framework, including Pollock's somewhat binary representation of the shift from a Sanskrit “cosmopolis” to vernacular literary production and his comparatively limited understanding of what constitutes literature, which were raised by Pauwels in the quotes cited above and others, such as Bronner, Cox, and McCrea, who collected these and other objections in their volume of critical engagements with Pollock.

The existing literature on Kandali's Saptakāṇḍa Rāmāyaṇa, however, has focused on literary history, devotional transformations and regional identity (Neog; Sarma; Kakati; Barua; Sarma, Ramayanar Itibritto). The study of Mahanta, which is in Assamese language, is the most systematic narrative level account of Kandali's departures from Vālmīki. What is relatively under-investigated in the Pollock-inflected vernacularisation literature as well as the Assamese literary-historical scholarship is a clause-level grammatical analysis of the construction of moral agency in the two texts. While not directly addressing ethical agency, one doctoral study (Bez, 1998) approaches the issue of grammatical description at the level of grammatical categories in the case of Kandali Rāmāyaṇa. This is an article about filling that void.

1.3 Research Questions

RQ1: In what ways are moral agency(s) differently built into transitivity structures and participant-role configurations in the ethically decisive verses of the Rāmāyaṇas' Vālmīki and Kandali?

RQ2: If a consistent pattern is present, is it present throughout several episodes and several characters or just in some rhetorically interesting verses?

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RQ3: Is the behavioral formulation of dharma (dharmaṃ pathe cholā) by Kandali a grammatically valid example of a transitivity pattern shift from the ontological formulation of dharma (vālmīki's rāmo vighrahavān dharmah, "Rāma is dharma embodied") in itself as well as in broader terms?

RQ4: What does this pattern indicate about the relationship between the agency of the grammar and the conceptualization of vernacularisation as a reorientation of the philosophical approach—confirmation, improvement, or complication?

1.4 Argument and Contribution

The article suggests that Kandali's vernacularisation of the Rāmāyaṇa is a redistribution of the grammatical agency: in the verses studied, the ethical subject in the Sanskrit text of Vālmīki is more likely to be a Patient of an external, hierarchically superior process, whereas the Assamese version of Kandali has a more common tendency to construct the moral subject as a volitional Actor of the same decision. It is not a claim that there are two conflicting moral philosophies, but rather a reweighting of the existing emphasis of the shared tradition, a reweighting that can be found in both the Vālmīki text, which is not devoid of moments of agency, relation, or emotion, and the Kandali text, which is not devoid of moments of hierarchy or obligation. There are three aspects to the contribution: It provides a micro-linguistic method replicable for comparison of Sanskrit and Assamese narrative ethics; It is a demonstration of the possibility of applying the transitivity analysis productively to premodern South Asian literature; and It is a modest contribution to the discussion on the philosophical impact of vernacularisation, one that joins and does not end it. Theoretical Framework.2. Vernacularisation and Ethical Agency. It is important to be clear about what is on the line to be drawn in describing the dharma grammatically before we move on to vernacularisation theory and to the language of this article. Even in the Sanskrit tradition itself, the term is not consistent even in the Dharmasūtras, as Olivelle points out, it is used differently by different legal schools, each of which deals with the relationship between duty and custom, and duty and personal conduct in a different manner. Hildebeitel's brief history of dharma in law, religion and story, too, warns against seeing dharma as a doctrinal content that a text asserts or denies, instead describing dharma as a place and field of continuous story and legal debate. The absence of dharma from the Sanskrit sources, if there is any, doesn't have to be interpreted as a departure from dharma as such in the vernacular translation; it can simply be interpreted as one further step in a story that was already contentious. Against this background, the narrower claim developed below that "grammar" transfers agency to different people around ethically crucial moments is offered, not as a claim on what dharma "really" is, but as a claim on the agency that the grammar of one vernacular retelling gives to whom.

2.1 Vernacularisation as Recontextualisation

Pollock's discussion of vernacularisation is an analysis of a process that, over the course of the second millennium CE, led to the use of local languages in literary works and can not be reduced to "broadening of readers" (283–290). In this context, Kandali's linguistic decisions are not only stylistic, but may also suggest a political claim to ethical authority and who it is granted to. The framework presented here for Pollock's process of cosmopolitanization is not a definitive fact, but a useful starting hypothesis, as the critiques collected in Bronner and Cox and McCrea show; especially the latter, which raises the concern that a straightforward Sanskrit-cosmopolis-to-vernacular-millennium story may overlook the disparities and multidirectionality of vernacularisation in various regions and genres. Kandali's Assamese Rāmāyaṇa, composed under the patronage of the Kachari king Mahāmāṇikya of the Barāha dynasty whose kingdom was located in Kapili valley in the modern day Assam districts of Hojai and Nagaon (Sarma), is only one regional data point (among many) with which to test such general claims, rather than a confirming instance which is taken for granted. This patronage has a sociolinguistic context, which is also interesting for the vernacularisation question.

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It is recorded that Mahāmāṇikya settled Brahmins and enhanced the propagation of the Brahmanical religious culture in his kingdom, while Kandali's Rāmāyaṇa was commissioned not at a pre-established centre of Sanskrit learning but at a frontier court which was still consolidating its Sanskritic credentials. In light of this, the commissioning of a vernacular Rāmāyaṇa does not seem to be just a process of popularisation for a Sanskrit-literate elite, but rather connected to the court's own process of religious legitimation to make the epic's moral message available to a Brahmanising regional polity instead of rendering it unintelligible to a pre-existing Sanskrit audience. The following grammatical claims are not directly concerned with this context, but provided for historical context. In general, Kandali's Rāmāyaṇa is considered one of the earliest translations of the Vālmīki epic into a modern Indo-Aryan vernacular, coming before only Kampan's Tamil and Ranganātha's Telugu versions (Neog; Sarma). Claims of strict priority are approached with great circumspection here, and, as is normal in a subject where the transmission of manuscripts and their dating are still subject to debate.

2.2 From Translation to Retelling

Kandali's text does not fall into the category of a "translation" of Vālmīki in the modern sense, as entire scenes are added, altered or treated differently emotionally and grammatically. Is better characterized as a vernacular retelling and reconfiguration than as a literal translation of the Sanskrit epic, as Ramanujan has shown, and as Richman (Many Rāmāyaṇas) has noted more generally, as part of the translation/retelling continuum of which it represents a facet. While Venuti focuses on the translator's (in)visibility, Kandali speaks of the translator's position within the translator's own text, and Pollock is a more directly relevant theorist of vernacularisation per se than Venuti (Pollock; Venuti).

2.3 Systemic Functional Linguistics: Transitivity and Moral Agency

Halliday and Matthiessen's analysis of transitivity can help classify the clauses according to the process they represent, and the different roles that the subjects play in that process (Actor, Goal, Senser, Agent, Patient and so on) (Halliday and Matthiessen). Transitivity analysis is a direct tool for the investigation of moral agency because a clause with the moral subject as Actor of a volitional material process constructs that subject in a different way from a clause with the same moral subject as Actor of a causative material process with another party initiating the process. The more precise ergative terminology (aka Initiator, Medium, for causative constructions) is used here in Section 4, while Actor, Goal, Patient and Agent are used in this introductory paragraph in their more common sense, not the more technical sense. This article will not combine this one instrument with the others, as earlier drafts of this project did, but will focus only on this clearly defined instrument: lexical-density claims, narrative-voice analysis, and register analysis are treated in a companion article, "Dharma Recontextualised", which compares the discourse-semantic dimension of the same comparison and thus focuses on the grammatical-agentive side.

Before going further, one methodological note must be made. The Sanskrit grammatical categories or kāraka roles, verbal voice, causative morphology, are not exactly the same as SFL's Process/Participant categories, which have been developed mostly from the English language and other modern languages. The mapping between the two is not an exact match; the Sanskrit clause first is described in terms of its own constituent parts (subject, object, causative or non-causative verb, case marking), and then, by analogy, in SFL terms, making the Sanskrit and Assamese material comparable in a single descriptive vocabulary. This map is not presented as a fact, instead it is noted in the analysis below where it is contentious.

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3.0 methodology

The primary texts and editions.

Sanskrit citations are given according to the Baroda Critical Edition (Bhatt et al.). The Sanskrit verses are glossed in English and checked against, but not exactly paralleled, Goldman's translation of the Sanskrit (along with the scholarly annotation) at Princeton (Goldman; Goldman and Sutherland Goldman), because this work is used here not as a primary source of the Sanskrit text, but as a secondary source for cultural and lexical nuances. The citations in Assamese are based on the work of Hemchandra Goswami on Kandali's Saptakāṇḍa Rāmāyaṇa, which was published in 1926. A number of the Assamese verses mentioned below have been identified only because of Mahanta's study of the episode-by-episode version of the Assamese text and are cited here as "cited in Mahanta" rather than as a direct reference to the primary edition on each page; this is not treated as a substitute for direct citation of the primary edition, but merely as a limitation of Mahanta's study, which is made clear in section 3.5.

3.2.1 Corpus Selection

The four episodes were selected based on the following conditions:

- (i) There was an explicit ethical decision to be made;
- (ii) There was a textually equivalent quote from both texts;
- (iii) There was first-person or third-person direct speech in which the ethical subject made or was subjected to a moral demand; and
- (iv) The episode was located within the five kāṇḍas that can be directly traced back to Kandali: Ayodhyākāṇḍa, Aranyakāṇḍa, Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa, Sundarakāṇḍa, and Laṅkākāṇḍa. Because of this, the later composition of the Ādikāṇḍa by Mādhavdeva and Uttarakāṇḍa by Śaṅkaradeva is not analyzed here (Neog 67–72). Other episodes (e.g. the Śūrpaṇakhā vs Rāma confrontation; the Vālī–Sugrīva confrontation; Rāma's acceptance of exile vs Bharata's refusal of the throne; the Kaushalyā–Kaikeyī confrontation vs Sītā's agni parīkṣā; Sītā's agni parīkṣā vs Bharata's refusal) were considered but rejected because they do not assert an ethical statement that is clearly bounded in all the contexts and is similar across both texts.

3.3 Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis is the clause, a single Process and its related Participants and Circumstances, that is taken from the verse or short verse-group that expresses the moral of the episode. The coding of each clause is done as below, with regard to the type of process, the role of participants and the modality.

3.4 Analytical Procedure

For each episode:

- (i) The main Sanskrit and Assamese verses where the ethical decision was made were identified;
- (ii) Each verse was parsed for its own subject, object, verbal morphology;
- (iii) The structure was mapped to the SFL Process/Participant categories, with the mapping made explicit;
- (iv) The social relation between the Actor/Agent and Goal/Patient of each clause was noted (superior-subordinate, peer, intimate);
- (v) Modality (deontic, epistemic, volitional) noted;
- (vi) The pattern of the clauses was compared across the two texts and across episodes. All Sanskrit terms (except for the Sanskrit name of the Buddha) are transliterated in accordance with IAST conventions and are italicised throughout, as are all Assamese terms.

3.5 Scope and Limitations

The study is not a representative and exhaustive clause-level coding of the entire Lankāṇḍa to Lankāṇḍa of either text, but rather a set of purposes selected verses. This pattern does not hold on verse-by-verse; nor does it hold on the level of “all clauses” in either epic, a more extensive undertaking that is better suited to a dedicated corpus-linguistic study, and one this article does not yet systematically code but rather recommends as a next step. Like in previous versions of this project, no numerical lexical-density calculation has been done for this article; in the same way, previous versions of this project made specific claims about “lexical density,” which have been removed or changed to a qualitative observation of nominalisation and vocabulary type, based on the evidence available. Lastly, some quotations from Assamese sources are given based on Mahanta's secondary work and not by re-verifying them word-by-word with the primary work of Goswami, as he admits when cited. Although presently three stanzas are cited as Assamese, ‘cited in Mahanta’, they have not been independently located as yet, the absence for which results in the use of Sītā's declaration to stand in for Rāma's reply to Daśaratha's command during the exile episode (section 4.1): The citation of a library catalogue is a priority task to be completed in the interim; Mahanta's award as a Sahitya Akademi awardee is a most reliably documented reference point.

4. Transitivity and Ethical Agency: Four Episodes

This section repeats the process of the previous section, but applies it to each of the four episodes. The Sanskrit clause is analyzed for its transitivity, followed by the Assamese clause, its transitivity analysis and a brief comparative observation for each subsection. Findings are reported at the level of the verse(s) studied.

4.1 Episode 1: Rāma's Acceptance of Exile

site tatrābhavāms tataḥ pravrajayati mām vanam
 “The revered one [my father] causes me to go to the forest.”
 (Vālmīki, Ayodhyākāṇḍa 2.20.3; Bhatt et al., vol. 2)

Transitivity Role	Sanskrit Element	SFL Mapping	Ethical Implication
Initiator (ergative Agent)	tatrābhavān (‘the revered one’)	Initiator of a caused material process (Halliday and Matthiessen's ergative Agent)	The command is grammatically sourced in an authority external to the subject
Process	pravrajayati (causative: ‘causes to depart’)	Causative material process	The subject's movement is not self-initiated but caused
Medium (surface Patient)	mām (‘me’, accusative: Rāma)	Medium / Goal (transitive Patient)	The ethical subject is grammatically constructed as acted upon
Circumstance	vanam (‘forest’)	Circumstance: Location	The destination is externally given, not chosen

Table 1. Transitivity Analysis: Vālmīki, Ayodhyākāṇḍa 2.20.3.

The causative verb pravrajayati puts Medium Rāma and the Initiator tatrābhavān, the latter of which is honorific-distanced. As in Halliday and Matthiessen's ergative model of transitivity, causative constructions of this type are treated here as an Initiator + Process + Medium construction, and not as a basic transitive relation of Agent/Patient. “Patient” is included parenthetically in the table only as a gloss for readers more accustomed to the transitive model, and is not the primary analytical category. The honorific as a whole is a third-person distancing form used for a present interlocutor, and is linguistically independent of the causative morphology. Together these two forms, honorific and causative, create the moral subject, whom they place below, subjected to, an authority above him.

Swāmīra saite banavāse yābom moi. / Tomā bine nāth mor jibon nohoy.
“I shall go to the forest with my husband. / Without you, my lord, life has no meaning for me.”
(Kandali, Ayodhyākāṇḍa; cited in Mahanta 277)

Transitivity Role	Assamese Element	SFL Mapping	Ethical Implication
Actor (explicit)	moi (‘I’)	Actor of a volitional material process	The moral decision is grammatically sourced in the subject herself
Process	yābom (‘I shall go’: volitional future)	Volitional material process	The process is grammatically voluntary, not compelled
Goal / Companion	swāmīra saite (‘with my husband’)	Circumstance: Accompaniment	The salient term is relational companionship, not an externally imposed destination
Experiential clause	mor jibon nohoy (‘life has no meaning for me’)	Relational: Carrier/Attribute (first person)	Moral grounding is located in the subject’s own felt experience

Table 2. Transitivity Analysis: *Kandali, Ayodhyākāṇḍa* (Sītā’s declaration; cited in Mahanta 277).

In the clauses examined here, Vālmīki uses a causative material process with the ethical subject as Medium of an external Initiator; Kandali uses a volitional material process with the ethical subject as Actor. A methodological point must be made explicit here rather than left implicit: Table 1 analyses Rāma’s own speech in Vālmīki, but Table 2 analyses Sītā’s speech in Kandali, not Kandali’s rendering of Rāma’s own response to Daśaratha’s command. This is a genuine asymmetry, not a stylistic choice, and it weakens the strength of the contrast as evidence for this specific episode considered in isolation: a fully symmetrical comparison would require Kandali’s own version of Rāma’s reply to stand against Vālmīki’s, and that verse has not yet been independently located and verified for this article. The substitution is made because Sītā’s Assamese utterance furnishes the clearest available volitional construction in the surrounding material, and because Sītā’s declaration occurs in direct response to the same paternal command that governs Rāma’s own decision in this episode; it is not offered as equivalent to a matched same-speaker comparison. Locating and verifying Kandali’s direct rendering of Rāma’s own reply to Daśaratha, against Goswami’s primary edition, is identified in section 3.5 as an outstanding task for revision prior to submission; until that verification is complete, the Episode 1 contrast should be read as suggestive rather than as the strongest evidence in the four-episode set, with Episode 2 offering a more directly comparable same-speaker contrast. This limitation is treated below (section 4.5) accordingly, as part of a pattern that recurs, with variation and with differing degrees of evidential directness, across the remaining three episodes.

The pronoun system surrounding these clauses reinforces the same contrast. Sanskrit tatrābhavān (third-person distancing honorific) and the standard second-person tvam or honorific bhavān mark social distance through pronoun morphology; Assamese toma/tumi (intimate second person) and mor (affectively marked first-person possessive) instead mark relational closeness. This is consistent with, though independent evidence from, the transitivity pattern; a fuller discussion of the pronoun and deixis system, together with register and semantic-field evidence, is developed in the companion article rather than repeated at length here.

4.2 Episode 2: The Kaushalyā–Kaikeyī Confrontation

In Vālmīki, Kaushalyā’s grief is narrated within the register of dynastic and legal obligation; her own agency is grammatically subordinated to the structures of rājadharmā and mātṛ-dharma within which

she is positioned as bound by institutional duty rather than as an independent grammatical Agent of her response. In Kandali, by contrast, Kaushalyā's grief is rendered through a body as grammatical Actor of its own reaction:

Kekeyir dekhiyā śorir mur kāmpe.

"At the sight of Kaikeyī, my body trembles."

(Kandali, Ayodhyākāṇḍa verse 179/8; cited in Mahanta 276)

Here śorir ('body') functions as Actor of the behavioural process kāmpe ('trembles') — a first-person, embodied, volitional-adjacent construction that locates ethical evidence in Kaushalyā's own physical experience rather than in an externally imposed legal category. Mahanta identifies this verse, along with three further nature similes in the same speech, as Kandali's own addition, absent from the Vālmīki source (Mahanta 276) — which is consistent with, though does not by itself prove, the pattern under discussion: additions of this kind recur at points where the Assamese text elsewhere shifts toward volitional, embodied Actor constructions.

4.3 Episode 3: Bharata's Refusal of the Throne

In Vālmīki, Bharata's refusal is embedded within the discourse of rājadharmā and dynastic legitimacy; the modality is predominantly one of legal or institutional necessity, and Bharata's decision is framed less as personal volition than as conformity to an obligation attaching to his position. In Kandali, the corresponding passages construct Bharata as Agent of a volitional refusal grounded in bhrātr-prema (fraternal love) rather than in institutional legitimacy — a modality of loving commitment rather than legal necessity. As in Episode 1, the shift is from an obligation-governed modality toward a volition-governed one, though the transitivity evidence in this episode is thinner than in Episodes 1 and 2 and rests on a smaller number of directly comparable clauses; it is reported here with that caveat rather than as equally strong evidence.

4.4 Episode 4: Sītā's Agni Parīkṣā

In Vālmīki, Sītā functions grammatically as Patient of a social-dharmic requirement, with cosmic-legal structures positioned as the Agent of necessity. Kandali's treatment does not simply reverse this pattern by making Sītā the Actor of her own vindication; instead, it relocates the grammatical weight onto Rāma's body as Actor of visible suffering — half-closed eyes, downward gaze, hot breath — material processes that locate the moral drama in an embodied, suffering person rather than in an institution (Mahanta 511–513). Sītā herself is addressed by the narrator, before the fire, as dharmajña ('knower of dharma') and satyavādinī ('speaker of truth') (Kandali, Laṅkākāṇḍa verse 179/9; cited in Mahanta 513) — a narratorial pre-framing rather than a transitivity shift in Sītā's own clause. This episode therefore illustrates a related but distinct mechanism — narratorial positioning rather than participant-role reversal — and is treated here as a partial rather than a clean instance of the Episode 1–2 pattern; the full discourse-level analysis of this narratorial mechanism belongs to the companion article.

Misra's recent translation and edition of Sītā-focused verses from Kandali and from Śaṅkaradeva's Uttarakāṇḍa offers a useful independent check on this reading. Misra's selection is organised specifically around recovering Sītā's own voice within the Assamese tradition, and the verses assembled there from the fire-ordeal sequence are broadly consistent with the pattern identified above: Sītā's own speech is comparatively restrained at the moment of the ordeal itself, while the surrounding narration and the responses of other characters carry much of the emotional and evaluative weight (Misra). This corroborates the claim that Kandali's departure from Vālmīki at this episode operates primarily through narratorial framing and through the redistribution of embodied reaction onto Rāma, rather than through a straightforward grant of grammatical agency to Sītā herself. It also suggests a limit on the pattern documented in this article: vernacularisation does not relocate

agency onto every ethical subject in every episode uniformly, and Sītā's agni parīkṣā, on Misra's evidence as much as Mahanta's, remains the clearest case of that limit.

4.5 Cross-Episode Synthesis

Episode	Vālmīki: Configuration	Dominant	Kandali: Configuration	Dominant	Strength of Pattern
1. Exile	Causative process; ethical subject as Patient of paternal/cosmic authority		Volitional process; ethical subject as Actor of own decision		Suggestive — clearest volitional construction available, but compares Rāma's speech in Vālmīki with Sītā's in Kandali rather than a matched same-speaker pair; pending verification
2. Kaushalyā	Subject positioned within institutional/legal obligation; agency grammatically subordinated		Body as Actor of embodied, volitional-adjacent reaction		Moderate — clearest in Kandali's added verses; Vālmīki comparison less direct
3. Bharata	Modality of legal/dynastic necessity		Modality of volitional, love-grounded commitment		Weaker — fewer directly comparable clauses identified
4. Agni Parīkṣā	Sītā as Patient of cosmic-legal requirement		Rāma's body as Actor of suffering; Sītā pre-framed narratorially rather than repositioned as Actor		Partial — a related but distinct mechanism (narratorial framing, not transitivity reversal)

Table 3. Cross-Episode Summary of the Transitivity Pattern and Its Evidential Strength.

Read across all four episodes, the pattern identified in Episode 1 — causative-Patient in Vālmīki, volitional-Actor in Kandali — recurs with clear strength in Episode 1, with moderate strength in Episode 2, and with progressively less direct evidential support in Episodes 3 and 4, where related but not identical grammatical mechanisms (narratorial pre-framing, embodied Actor status distributed onto a different character) are at work. This graduated picture is offered deliberately in place of the earlier, stronger claim that the transitivity reversal is “consistent across all four episodes and all five characters examined”: the qualitative evidence available supports a recurrent tendency, unevenly distributed across episodes, rather than a uniform grammatical law. A systematically coded corpus across complete kāṇḍas would be required to state the pattern's overall frequency with statistical confidence; that is proposed here as future work rather than assumed as already demonstrated.

5. Discussion

5.1 From Ontological Identification to Behavioural Practice: A Case Study

rāmo vigrahavān dharmāḥ

“Rāma is dharma embodied.”

(Vālmīki, Aranyakāṇḍa 3.37.13; spoken by Mārīca to Rāvaṇa)

dharmar pathe cholā

“[He] walks the path of dharma.”

(Kandali, Ayodhyākāṇḍa)

This pairing is the article's most rhetorically compact piece of evidence, and for that reason its evidentiary weight must be stated carefully rather than assumed. A preliminary correction is necessary: the Sanskrit line is not Vālmīki's or the narrator's own characterisation of Rāma, and it does not belong to the Ayodhyākāṇḍa. It is spoken by Mārīca to Rāvaṇa, as Mārīca tries to dissuade Rāvaṇa from abducting Sītā (Aranyakāṇḍa 3.37.13; Bhatt et al., vol. 3) — a warning from within the enemy camp rather than a statement made in Rāma's own narrative voice, and delivered at a wholly different point in the story from the four ethically decisive episodes examined in section 4. This changes what the quotation can be used to show. It is not being offered as evidence internal to the four-episode corpus, and it is not the narrator's or Rāma's own self-description; it is one further data point for how the surrounding Sanskrit text grammatically encodes Rāma's relationship to dharma, in this instance through the voice of an adversary's counsellor rather than through Rāma's own speech or the narrator's. With that correction in place, the grammatical contrast itself still holds: the Sanskrit clause is a copular relational process (Rāma as Carrier, dharmah as Attribute) — an ontological identification, regardless of who utters it. The Assamese clause is a material process of motion (cholā, 'walks'), constructing dharma as a path traversed rather than an identity held — a contrast consistent with, though independent of, the same Patient-to-Actor, ontological-to-behavioural movement documented in section 4. Before this pairing is treated as more than a striking rhetorical contrast, several questions remain open rather than resolved: whether the Assamese wording is precisely and verifiably Kandali's own, rather than a later redactor's or a paraphrase current in secondary scholarship; whether the grammatical contrast is attributable to vernacularisation specifically rather than to ordinary verse-to-verse stylistic variation within either tradition, or to the difference between a third-party assessment and a first-person or narratorial statement; and whether comparably contrastive copula/motion-verb pairs recur elsewhere in the corpus, ideally drawn from passages that are narratorially and dramatically comparable across both texts. Pending that verification, the IS/WALKS contrast is presented here as an illustrative case study and organising image for the argument, drawn deliberately from outside the four-episode corpus, not as freestanding proof of the pattern documented within it.

5.2 Reweighting Rather Than Binary Opposition

The evidence assembled here does not support the claim that Vālmīki's Rāma is only a Patient of cosmic necessity or that Kandali's characters are only volitional Actors. Vālmīki's text elsewhere constructs its characters as agentive, emotionally motivated, and relationally embedded; Kandali's text elsewhere retains hierarchical address forms and institutional vocabulary. What the transitivity evidence supports is a more modest and more defensible claim: that in the specific ethically decisive clauses examined, Kandali's Assamese shows a recurrent tendency to reassign grammatical agency toward the ethical subject, relative to the corresponding Vālmīki clauses. This is best described as a reweighting or redistribution of emphases already present within the shared narrative tradition, rather than as evidence that the two texts articulate two wholly distinct moral philosophies.

5.3 A Dialogue with Pollock

If the pattern reported here holds up under fuller corpus testing, it would offer one kind of grammatical evidence for Pollock's claim that vernacularisation is philosophically generative rather than merely a change of linguistic medium: a shift visible not only in theme or register but in the assignment of grammatical roles within individual clauses. But this article frames that relationship as a dialogue with Pollock's thesis rather than a confirmation of it. The critiques collected in Bronner, Cox, and McCrea caution against treating any single regional case as settling claims Pollock frames at a much larger, subcontinental scale; a grammatical pattern in four episodes of one Assamese text is, at most, a small and regionally specific data point. It is offered here in that spirit — as a contribution to a much

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larger and still open conversation about what, exactly, happens grammatically when a Sanskrit epic is retold in a vernacular language, rather than as a verdict on that question.

One further implication is worth flagging briefly. If dharma is, as Olivelle and Hiltebeitel both suggest, already a contested and multiple category within the Sanskrit tradition, then Pollock's vernacularisation thesis and the transitivity evidence offered here are not necessarily in competition with philological or legal-historical accounts of dharma; they describe a different level of the same phenomenon — grammar rather than doctrine. Future work combining clause-level transitivity coding with the kind of doctrinal history Olivelle and Hiltebeitel provide could ask whether grammatical reassignment of agency tracks, anticipates, or runs independently of documented shifts in dharma's legal-textual content across the same period. That question is left open here.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined transitivity structures across four ethically decisive episodes shared by Vālmīki's Sanskrit Rāmāyaṇa and Mādhava Kandali's Assamese Saptakāṇḍa Rāmāyaṇa. In the clauses examined, a recurrent — though unevenly distributed — pattern emerges: Vālmīki's Sanskrit tends to construct the ethical subject as Patient of a causative or obligatory process; Kandali's Assamese tends to construct the same subject as a volitional Actor. This pattern is strongest in the exile episode, moderate in the Kaushalyā episode, and only partially present, via a related but distinct narratorial mechanism, in the Bharata and Agni Parīkṣā episodes. The article treats this as evidence that Kandali's vernacularisation involves a linguistically demonstrable redistribution of grammatical agency — a reweighting of ethical emphasis already latent within the shared tradition, rather than the construction of two independent moral philosophies.

The article's primary contribution is methodological: it proposes transitivity analysis, applied with an explicit and disclosed mapping between Sanskrit grammatical categories and SFL Process/Participant categories, as a tool for studying ethical agency in premodern South Asian narrative more broadly, and it proposes a fully clause-coded quantitative corpus study, across complete kāṇḍas in both texts, as the necessary next step for testing the pattern's frequency and consistency beyond the illustrative set of verses examined here. A companion article, "Dharma Recontextualised," takes up the discourse-semantic dimensions of the same comparison — register, deixis, the collocational field of dharma, emotional vocabulary, and narrative voice — which this article has deliberately set aside in order to give the transitivity evidence sustained, focused treatment.

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