

**LANGUAGE IN INDIA**  
**Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow**  
**Volume 10 : 8 August 2010**  
**ISSN 1930-2940**

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.  
Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.  
Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.  
B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.  
A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.  
Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.  
K. Karunakaran, Ph.D.  
Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.  
S. M. Ravichandran, Ph.D.

**Classical Language Issues for Telugu and Kannada**

**M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.**

---

**Welcome to the Classical Languages Club!**

It is a welcome step that the Government of India has decided to grant classical language status to Telugu and Kannada. The antiquity of these languages now receives official seal of approval and I do hope that Malayalam will also be awarded soon the classical language status.

**Unique Antiquity of Dravidian Languages**

With these recognitions, we celebrate the uniqueness of major Dravidian languages, their heritage and ways and means by which these languages continued/continue to prosper throughout the history. Because they chose to present themselves in writing early enough, they were able to retain their past in concrete forms of literature and other records. They were able to chart their history in some conscious manner and look back and forward to assess their progress. In addition, the pioneers of these languages must have felt in them something distinct, positive and impressive to keep their identity going, despite many odds. So, we salute these pioneers in literature, arts and other fields including warfare.

**Continuity of the Languages in the Future**

This raises the question of continuity of these languages in the future. What kinds of continuity these languages look forward to? Are there precedents in their history that direct such enquiry in the present for the benefit of the future? A major part of this short paper or note will be devoted

to finding some answers in this direction. I do this analysis in the background of my desire and love for all Indian languages, and, in particular, the duty I feel towards the retention and continuity of my mother tongue, Tamil.

### **What May Constitute Continuity?**

Continuity of a language, for me, is not simply the existence of a language in any form. While change is inevitable, continuity must ensure that we always have adequate provisions in the current language to access the past stages of our language. The model set for continuity of European languages is good, but not adequate enough for Indian languages. Lexical incorporation from the past stages of a language into the present stage for purposes of science, etc. is already done to some extent in these major Dravidian languages.

### **Change Is an Addition**

As our cultural tradition demands that change is only an addition, not a replacement or total negation of what went before (as in most European systems), we have to work out a process by which the speakers of these classical languages in India will acquire skills and admiration for the classical phase of these languages as part of their schooling.

### **Different from the Indo-Aryan Modern Languages Model**

We also do not and should not adopt the Sanskrit model of keeping Modern Indo-Aryan languages aloof and distinct from Sanskrit. The Dravidian model should not elevate the classical phase to a distinct entity and then offer courses separately to those who wish to acquire that distinct entity, for whatever purposes they may have.

### **Tamil versus Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam in Relation to Sanskrit**

The distinction between Tamil on the one hand, and Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam on the other, will continue to revolve around the role of Sanskrit in these languages. Tamil has established itself as a distinct entity from, and is almost opposed to Sanskrit in its struggle to maintain its original roots. Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam are so set up in their writing systems that they have means and desire to receive and be influenced by Sanskrit. But, this in itself is likely to bring in more dramatic changes in these languages if resort to Sanskrit continues to grow in their lexical choice.

### **Some Specific Problems**

These languages also demonstrate that, at the ordinary language level, certain essential aspects of Sanskrit phonology have not taken deep roots. For example, aspirates in the voiced stop category are not that frequent even in the elitist speech. Aspirates in the voiceless stop category are used but, even here, social and regional dialects seem to differ greatly. Unaspirated voiced and voiceless stop distinctions, however, are well established both at the spoken and written levels.

Spelling problems caused by the special nature of the sound representations in the script need to be studied further.

Our language textbooks may be so designed that the learners move from the current style of the language to the classical stage of the literature and other works in some orderly fashion. This would help maintain the continuity of the language. This designing process needs greater investigation.

If aspects of the classical stage of the language are to be actively integrated in the current use of the language, several steps should be taken to redesign the language curriculum.

### **Linking the Present Language with the Classical Language**

Of all the forms of classical language, literary texts assume a pre-eminent position in these languages. And literature, fortunately, continues to play some important role in language textbooks in these languages as an effective means for the transmission of culture and history. The importance of the function of literature in language textbooks may be reduced in due course because of justifiable necessity to introduce forms of modern communication such as technical writing, business communication, and creative writing in the language curriculum. And yet, the culture part of the syllabus should continue to integrate the study of both classical and other stages of these languages. Without such integration and with the unfortunate growth of code-shifting and code-mixing, people will only idolize the classical languages and not enjoy using it in some form or the other.

We need to make actual use of the classical style and texts in a graded fashion in parts of our textbooks as an integral part of the school curriculum. Narrate the story in current language, but let the dialogues be in some sort of classical diction and/or sentences. Introduce classical language proper names and place names. Introduce classical language plant and animal names, names of seasons, vegetables and names of essential objects and kinship terms, etc. These will never replace the current words, but the younger generation will be equipped with a capacity to comprehend and enjoy the past stages of our languages. Explain the special features of these words as part of exercises. In general, comprehension may take precedence over actual use and performance and production of classical diction and sentence construction.

### **An Important Process**

An important process that we should adopt to retain the continuity between the classical and current stages is the restoration of native words from literary texts of the classical language for current use. While Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam may still continue to borrow roots or other expressions from Sanskrit, these languages may focus also on the restoration of native roots, regional and social dialect usages. In fact, this is done effectively by modern creative writers, especially because of their plots and their desire to bring in realism. In my assessment, repossessing native words from classical literary texts and spoken language will greatly contribute to the continuity of the language as intended.

Let these classical languages begin a more vigorous process of creating terms from native roots applying native derivational processes and affixes. Such native roots are abundantly available in their classical stages and these processes, fortunately, are easily understood and better handled than processes borrowed from other languages.

### **Grading of Linguistic Elements**

Grading of linguistic elements such as morphological inflections and derivations, syntactic constructions, and integration of semantic features would need specialist knowledge of the various stages of these languages. And yet we have abundant studies on historical aspects of these languages that reveal the developmental processes at work through the centuries. There is a need for greater collaboration between syllabus framers, textbook writers and linguistics scholars apart from the ultimate handlers, namely, the teachers in the classroom. Even for the modern textbook preparation and teaching such dynamic collaboration is missing throughout India. Hopefully, we all will make more serious effort in developing textbooks that would integrate classical and current stages in a smooth graded manner.

### **Some Useful Activities**

We may perhaps identify a series of episodes from the past and the present and compose graded textbooks on these episodes using both classical and current language use. If the episodes are already known, then, the teacher and the student will face only the problem of re-studying and comprehending the same episode through the graded use of classical language. Appropriate quizzes and language games will still make the reading of the known episode an interesting activity.

Another activity that has already been done by several authors in the past is this: Making classical literature available in current language, in several graded books. However, in this process culture transmission is achieved, but linguistic style transmission is not greatly achieved.

### **The Role of Mass Media: Advertisements**

Advertisement has become a major source of communication in our society. In designing advertisements, language also plays an interesting and sometimes crucial role apart from the visual and other display aspects of the advertisements. Verbal advertisements coupled with interesting nonverbal representations dominate the TV market. We need to take advantage of the development in order to preserve and teach the links between the classical and current stages of our languages.

We need to encourage commercial ads to mix classical terms in some mind-impressing ways – humor, deeper thoughts, subtle metaphors and references, contrast between classical and current meanings for a word or expression or phrase, word picture, double meanings, popular festivals and practices linked with classical expressions, etc. Such gentle and frequent usage will certainly develop a taste for more use of classical language items, even as viewers and readers will gain better understanding of these expressions.

## **Level of Dependence on Sanskrit**

Because excessive dependence on Sanskrit or, for that matter, on any language will stunt the natural growth of the native expressions in these languages, our goal should be to retain the distinct and native identity through the use of classical terms from native roots. This does not mean that Sanskrit should be totally eliminated. In fact, it is going to be impossible to give up Sanskrit relations for Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam, since the lexicon and script receive strong and useful influence from that language.

## **Present Danger from Code Shifting and Code Mixing**

The problems faced by Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam come now mostly from the incessant and growing use of code shifting and code mixing, with English as the donor language for these processes. As English is now offered as a compulsory subject almost from Class I, and as there is an indiscriminate acceptance of words and phrases from English in the speech of all age groups who have some schooling, the speech habits of Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam speakers have been undergoing tremendous changes. It used to be the impression that Malayalam speakers used less English words in their Malayalam speech. The situation is now changed. The use of English and Hindi words and phrases in the spoken language has become very frequent and seems to be a mark of the elite.

Thus, in addition to historically accepted Sanskrit words and phrases used in written speech, these languages will continue to change because of code shift and code mixing from English. This would create a greater gulf between the classical state of the language and the current and modern language.

It is important to recognize such trends and provide adequate practice in deliberately establishing bridges between the classical and modern dialects/styles.

---

M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.  
[msthirumalai2@gmail.com](mailto:msthirumalai2@gmail.com)