

A Note on Freedom of Speech and Linguistic Constraints

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In a recent judgment, Madras High Court Justice A.D. Jagadish Chandira observed that freedom of speech is not a license to transgress limits of decency. He has here focused on the sociolinguistic elements of freedom of speech. All linguistics scholars should read this judgment. Derogatory speech is widely resorted to in political speeches, particularly by the lower-level politicians. Such speech is unfortunately resorted to in caste conflicts. Verb inflection for person and number in Tamil, for example, are exploited for defamatory speech.

The Constitution of the United States of America protects the freedom of speech, but it also makes it clear that the citizens and all who live/visit the United States should not resort to falsely defame someone. The speech of individuals and groups should not be a threat or harassment. The speech of individuals and groups should not intend to provoke unlawful action. Speech should not violate the law of the country.

The Constitution of India Article 19(1)(a) guarantees the right to freedom of speech and expression for all citizens. This includes the freedom to express oneself through speech, writing, printing, and visual representations. However, there are some restrictions on this right, such as defamation, incitement to an offense, contempt of court, decency or morality, and public order. The right to freedom of speech and expression in India was considered the fourth pillar of Indian democracy by the framers of the Constitution. Government's power is restricted in several domains where freedom of speech is considered important to maintain democracy.

In inter-personal speech/communication, in Tamil for example, the correct use of second personal pronouns and their verbal inflections play an important role in regulating freedom of speech. In the past, often people resorted to using second person singular and corresponding verbal inflections to address and refer to economically poorer sections of society, and also hierarchically so-called lower Hindu castes. I have been subjected to this condition decades ago. Fortunately, for all of us, the context has changed. Freedom of speech is now defined differently. If people use second person singular and their verbal inflections to address older people and people of hierarchically so-called lower castes, they trespass their freedom of speech.

Interestingly, all traditional poetic works in Tamil had/have the freedom of speech to address their gods and goddesses using second person singular pronoun and its verbal inflections. In this context, use of second person singular pronoun and its verbal inflections mean no disrespect and lower status, but it refers to deep love and admiration to the gods and goddesses addressed in the poetic works. Here the linguistic elements assume a different role.

On the other hand in the Holy Bible in Tamil, Jesus Christ, the Lord and Saviour, is addressed using *ni:r* (you singular, respectful with familiarity). The relationship between God and humans is presented differently. Use of this second person singular takes us to a different level of freedom of speech. In recent times, however, we also notice the use of second person singular pronoun (*ni:*) in some songs indicating personal relationship.

Languages are structured and the speakers of all the languages follow the rules underlying speech. Freedom of speech/expression within that language is governed by the rules of underlying grammar. Social, historical and economic constraints may be included as part of a language. In addition, conscious attempts to preserve the identity of a language may be included as a grammatical rule in a language. Earliest Tamil grammar *Tolkappiyam* restricts the use of the sounds/letters of the “northern” language (Sanskrit) in Tamil. Freedom of speech of individuals is regulated in order to maintain and preserve the self-identity of Tamil. This constraint seems to be accepted by all – for example, all literary works of the past, especially Bhakti literature and other literary poetic works do not use any Sanskrit (northern) sounds. They all *Tamilize* all the

Sanskrit words using Tamil letters. This happens even in the early prose works in Tamil. Slowly and steadily this condition changed, and a few letters (Grantha letters) were accepted as part of Tamil script.

When *prose* became the dominant medium of literature in Tamil, select grantha letters were used to maintain the “original” pronunciation of words from non-Tamil languages. Borrowing words from other languages increased over the years. Freedom of speech in terms of linguistic rules changed. But the Pure Tamil Movement of the recent past tried to eliminate borrowed words and borrowed pronunciations, etc. At present, the Pure Tamil Movement is primarily reflected in textbooks and government announcements, etc. We also notice that some writers and newspapers use the grantha letters even where the use of Tamil letters would bring out the same pronunciation intervocalically.

Freedom of speech and freedom of speaking are regulated also by the underlying grammatical rules.
