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**Two Trends That Would Deface  
Classical-Modern Tamil –  
How to Reverse These Trends?**

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

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**Change is Inevitable**

As time passes, change in linguistic usage is inevitable in any language. Such changes in grammatical rules are not treated as errors. These changes become part of the regular and normal use of that language. This modern descriptive notion is celebrated also in ancient Tamil grammars. Over a thousand years ago, the author of *Nannuul* clearly enunciated this position.

A language may accumulate changes in wider parts of its linguistic structure. This process is aided and abetted by social and geographical variations in the linguistic and sociolinguistic usage of that language. It can happen through voluntary and not so voluntary adoption of changes initiated by language, social, and political movements. It can happen also through the influence of some other languages, etc.

Because of these and other related factors, the very same language may change a lot over a period of time. Its “normal” variants may become independent languages, developing further mutual unintelligibility between the variants to a lesser or greater extent.

## **Would This Happen to Tamil?**

Did the ancient and traditional Tamil grammarians anticipate this process to happen to their mother tongue, which they sought to deify and characterize as “immortal”? Did they mean that their Tamil would one day become like Sanskrit, a great classical language assumed to be a medium of gods, which, however, has not been spoken for centuries in day to day life of humans?

At least one poet likened Sanskrit to the right eye of Siva and Tamil to the left eye of Siva. There are many such adulatory passages in Tamil literary compositions. They recognized that Sanskrit is here “forever” and Tamil would also be here “forever.” “Youthful continuation” was, however, an added dimension.

Can this added dimension be interpreted as referring to its vitality of usage as a current spoken language? Or, merely its continuation as a written form of language?

Can the tenor of their expressions be interpreted that they imagined their mother tongue to continue “forever,” or as “young as ever,” without transforming itself into a variety of mutually unintelligible languages within the traditional Tamil homeland, Tamilnadu?

## **Emphasis on the Written Variety**

Early grammarians recognized the existence and the use of variation in speech, but their focus was on the written variety. In all early literary compositions, be these individual poems, epics, and/or *puranas*, dialogues are, indeed, recorded, but it appears that these citations within poetic texts were in formal written Tamil. Colloquialisms and spoken variety are not attested, it appears. Prose works were very few and their style resembles written variety, even when dialogues are cited and used to portray the progress of conversations.

## **Conventions of Prosody, etc.**

In other words, we may not be wholly wrong if we conclude that for deliberate materials directed toward literates the preferred form of communication was through the written variety. This variety was composed adopting appropriate conventions of prosody. There were other deliberately composed materials, such as some categories of inscriptions announcing property rights, usage of public places, etc., for which prose in spoken Tamil was generally used. These materials were part of the domain to which everyone had access.

The former types were composed by educated literates who were instructed in the arts of grammar and related expression modes. The latter were composed mostly by artisans under instructions from authority, who may or may not have had such literary requirements to pursue their trade/s.

Consider also the age-old demand that every deliberately composed prosodic work be presented before an educated or elitist audience to obtain the approval of the audience of poets, et al. It was imperative, it seems, that a certificate of merit be obtained before the prosodic work became eligible for circulation.

### **Divergence and Convergence**

It is nothing unusual for the written variety to be divergent from the spoken variety in every language. The spoken language is given, whereas the written language is to be developed deliberately. There are speech communities whose speech is yet to be provided with corresponding written variety. Preliterate speech communities are found throughout the world.

Written language may begin from the base of the spoken variety, but it soon can take a life of its own, divergent or convergent or a mix of both in a language. The importance of writing for the transmission of generational knowledge need not be recognized equally with same appreciation in all human communities. Often level of material civilization and social structure may help establish the relevance and usefulness of written communication.

Written varieties of most languages have both divergence from and convergence with the spoken variety. In the case of Tamil, there is abundant convergence in terms of syntactic patterns, lexicon and meaning domains. However, overt surface forms of both these appear to be very divergent, especially because of phonology, grammatical inflections, and lexical choice, etc. What makes Tamil distinct from such convergence and divergence is the deliberate allocation of functions that usually did not overlap until very recently. Written format is preferred for formal and educational purposes over the spoken variety for a long time.

### **Parallel Nature of Written and Spoken Varieties in Tamil**

These two varieties are certainly parallel, each with its distinctive characteristics and allocated functions. However, there is close relationship between the two, and by working on this underlying relationship, second or foreign language learners of Tamil can actually master the language very well. Unfortunately early mother tongue and second/foreign language teachers focused more on the written variety and deprecated the use of the spoken variety in formal situations, etc. They started with the written language and largely ignored the specific features of the spoken language. However, we can make approximations to the written language through the teaching, learning and use of the spoken variety.

This attitude of preference for the written variety is centuries-old, as I have tried above to explain the existence of both the varieties in historical terms.

## **Growing Importance of the Spoken Variety**

The literacy rate was very low among the Tamils 250 years ago. Literacy in Tamil was limited to mostly men and that too in small numbers. The writings of the Europeans, during the early period of the East India Company, reveal this fact.

Prose, a closely related version of the spoken form of any language, was yet to be accepted and used as an honorable medium of expression for deliberate creative and technical expressions. Dependence on the prosodic form of written language for such deliberate expressions was evident in this pre-modern period in Tamil. It was a dedicated group of western Christian missionaries who would soon reverse this trend.

## **Phonological Differences**

There are many differences between the phonological structures of the written and spoken varieties of Tamil. It is difficult to assume that, in any given time during its continued existence, Tamil ever had a single phonological system that embraced both the varieties and covered the entire social and regional spectrum of the Tamil society. The written variety was influenced by the spoken variety in its phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic and lexical domains. This is easily explained with the help of literary compositions of later periods. And yet the distinction between the two must have been well maintained, according a higher status to the written form.

Precise but adequate description of articulatory characteristics of speech sounds and relating the sounds to the graphemes done in grammars such as *Tolkaappiyam* was perhaps intended to improve upon the speech characteristics of the native speakers of Tamil. This approach could have been a technique to usher in some sort of standardization in speech. But such helpful techniques were available only through formal instruction. As most of the population was not yet drawn to formal education, their speech habits continued to vary, community-wise and region-wise.

As already pointed out, written and spoken varieties continued to exist side by side, establishing their own domains of use, impacting each other to certain extent. In some sense, the written variety is “frozen,” although it has its own dynamic progress within itself. It was more conservative in accepting and adapting to influence from various sources. Preservation of its “purity” as well as its continuity was well established through the convention insisted upon by *Tolkappiyam* that while writing the borrowed words from Sanskrit writers must use only those graphemes available to them in Tamil. The author of *Tolkaappiyam* uses a strong verb of conviction that carries the meaning of “reject and eliminate,” “comprehensively obliterate,” and “forcefully rip or remove,” etc. On the other hand, spoken variety must have had much larger openings to receive influence from a variety of sources. And yet the impact from outside was still manageable as social contacts with the outside world were limited for various reasons including the slow spread of literacy and formal instruction.

## **Opening up the Avenues of Formal Education**

Things have changed over the centuries. Fortunately for all of us, formal education is more widely available to all classes of Tamil society. Schools are established and are found in every region of Tamilnadu. Membership in organized and prestige-bearing social institutions and groups is also more widely open. Participation in and leadership of political organizations is open to all social classes, regardless of status by birth, wealth, and educational attainments. Delivering effective and attractive platform speech in a variety that is close to the written variety, but in a mode that is easily followed, has become a much desired skill. All these have opened the door for wider participation of people from all walks of life, social and economic classes and regions.

A significant development in all these is the ease with which people bring their speech habits to the delivery of both written and spoken varieties. Social and regional differences in spoken variety are no more under the strict regulation of the written variety. This welcome freedom has also resulted in certain strains to the pronunciation patterns in written Tamil text.

## **Coalescence of Speech Sounds and Phonemes**

Coalescence of related sounds has become widespread in spoken Tamil among the members of many social classes and regional groups.

It looks like the distinction between the alveolar and retroflex nasals is almost lost. The word initial occurrence of the dental nasal is also lost. The palatal nasal in its word initial occurrence may soon be lost. In other words, nasals (other than the bilabial) may remain distinct only as context-sensitive phonetic elements, although their retention as individual phonemes at the graphemic level will continue. At the spoken level, the phonemic status of individual nasals may be lost, while such distinctions may be continued at the written level, causing further divergence between both the varieties. Such divergence, if not checked, can lead to the emergence of new languages from out of the existing Tamil language.

Coalescence has already taken place in the spoken variety between the two trills phonemically recognized in Tamil (in the written variety). The only exception so far has been the dialect of Tamil spoken in Kanyakumari district. Here too, growing mobility of people and the impact of movies, etc., slowly eliminate the distinction between the two trills at the spoken level. The intensity of contact with Malayalam in this district is significantly less, and the contact with other social and regional dialects of Tamil as well as the standard pronunciation of written Tamil have resulted in this growing loss of distinction.

Thirdly, the distinctions between alveolar, retroflex and grooved palatal laterals are under heavy strain. Already the retroflex and grooved palatal laterals have coalesced into a single sound (retroflex lateral) in most districts of Tamilnadu. Maintaining the distinct identities has become a

hallmark of sophistication and social class identity, not a feature of ordinary language among the vast majority of Tamils.

Coalescence of alveolar and retroflex laterals seems to be in full swing in the northern districts of Tamilnadu among the first generation users of written Tamil variety. It is a painful process for some of us to listen to songs sung by people with no ability to distinguish between laterals. Especially the merger of alveolar and retroflex laterals sounds jarring to the ears. For the speakers/singers themselves, they seem to be totally oblivious of this distinction. As songs are composed primarily following written language conventions, these singers need to attune their ears to the essential distinctions and be aware of their own shortcomings to rectify their errors. This error persists in areas such as Christian singing where there is greater freedom to compose and sing without formal training since singers are governed by the theological belief of Spirit-led singing. (More about it and other related issues relating to faith traditions, song writing and singing later on in another article.) If this persists, from a three way distinction we will soon have only one lateral sound in the spoken variety but a three way distinction of the category in the written variety.

The free variation between c and s at the word initial position has become widespread. As a result, c may retain its original phonetic quality only as a geminate. Generally speaking, the neatness of the allophonic pattern as applied to stop and affricate consonants is under strain, and may be changed a lot in due course, because of the heavy influx of words from other languages.

All these are natural trends, but these can be arrested, modified and re-directed through schooling. This is where the worst failure begins to shape up. Many teachers of Tamil, who should have a mastery of their language, are not able to bring to the conscious knowledge of their students the “incorrect” speech characteristics they unconsciously follow. Teachers themselves have difficulty in making the distinctions that the written variety graphemic patterns demand.

### **A Possible Remedy**

More than anything else, there is an urgent need to organize a massive re-training program for all the Tamil teachers, covering the elementary, middle, high and higher secondary levels, at first instance. This should be followed by a re-training program in pronunciation in Tamil for all the teachers who teach various subjects using the Tamil medium. Appropriate support from the media will help motivate the teachers. There is lack of desire to acquire better speech habits which will use mostly Tamil sentences with Tamil words, since current speech patterns are based on the tendency to use as many English words as possible in the sentences uttered by Tamil speakers. Using words from English in Tamil speech and Tamil sentences carries great value in the current Tamil society.

This takes us to the next level of trends that continually deface Tamil.

## Code-mixing and Code-switching

Code-mixing and code-switching are widely prevalent in all the Indian languages. Many years ago, students of Tamil literature and Tamil linguistics believed that Bengali and Gujarati speakers greatly avoided the processes of code-mixing and code-switching because of the great and inspiring examples set by Rabindranath Tagore (Bengali) and M. K. Gandhi (Gujarati). There is no such exception in any Indian language right now.

With the spread of formal education which focuses on learning English as early as possible, and with the tantalizing global opportunities for employment, use of English is greatly encouraged and desired. Whether our students learn English well and adequate enough or not, society has moved over from using only native words to using as many English words as possible in the Indian language sentences. In addition, mixing English sentences with the sentences from the mother tongue Indian language sentences has become the most preferred form of expression. This situation prevails in all South Asian nations.

We indulge in **code-mixing** when we insert words from another language (most of the time it is from English) into our Tamil sentences. Nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs are appropriately inflected and used as words in a Tamil sentence. Most of our speech contains such sentences. These sentences may have more English words than Tamil words, but these are constructed and delivered using the normal sentential structure followed in Tamil.

We indulge in **code-switching** when, in our conversations, we move from a Tamil sentence to a sentence in English. Our stretch of utterance thus contains some Tamil sentences and some English sentences. Which ones will be uttered first and in what order in a stretch of utterance is not yet wholly studied. But I get the impression that predictability may not be possible.

What is significant is that our speech is a “colorful” mingle of both code mixing and code switching!

## Effects on Writing

The trend to indulge in code-mixing and code-switching at the spoken level has now penetrated into the writing practices as well. People have hard time remembering Tamil words, and so they justify using both the devices in their writing. They may also justify this practice saying that these devices faithfully and wholly reflect what they want to communicate. This has also resulted in using English words with spelling in English graphemes in Tamil sentences that are partly written with the letters of the Tamil script. Magazines, private TV and Radio channels, and movies have adopted this blend with ease.

Those who are skilled in delivering platform speech employ code-mixing and code-switching to create some impressive effects. Others, who are not masters of platform speech but are called upon to deliver public speeches, are unable to refrain from code-mixing and code-switching

since these two processes are more normal now than delivering speech using only Tamil sentences.

### **Likely Loss of Language as We Know It Now**

Code-mixing and code-switching are unavoidable as contacts between speakers of various languages are established. However, the magnitude of indiscriminate code mixing and code-switching that we see now in our everyday life is rather astounding. These processes will certainly break the dynamic connect between the classical and modern Tamil, and the celebrated continuity between these two stages and forms, distinct to Tamil, will be lost. Not only the loss of continuity but also the loss of even the language may be the result.

### **Can We Do Anything About This?**

Yes, indeed, we can.

Tamil was able to withstand many assaults on its basic structural patterns. *Tolkaappiyam* recognized that appropriate graphemic safeguards by establishing conventions might help in this direction. These guidelines were amazingly followed without exception even by great epic writers like Kamban and prose-commentary writers like Adiyaarkkunallaar and Parimeelazhakar.

Although the context is totally changed, love for the existence of Tamil is not wholly extinguished. Passion for its continuity is still glowing in the heart and spirit of the Tamil community, which has more power than ever as a global community. With insistence on the conventions that would establish generous provisions to indulge in loan translation and loan transliteration, and with a passionate movement for the continuity of Tamil, there may still be an opportunity to preserve both the ancient and the modern stages of Tamil even in the future.

The fact that code-mixing and code-switching do not really contribute to the effective learning and use of English should also be made known widely. And the help of the teachers of English and teachers of subjects taught through the medium of English should be obtained for this purpose. There are also other productive steps we can take up, but I propose to deal with these in another article.

Success is possible if there is disciplined dedication. And dedication will come only when such movement for continuity establishes itself with sound reason.

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