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The Tamil grammatical tradition: a long commute between theory and practice¹

Jean-Luc Chevillard
CNRS, University Paris-Diderot, UMR 7597
(HTL : Laboratoire d'Histoire des Théories Linguistiques)

"Linguista sum; nihil linguistici a me alienum puto"
(Roman Jakobson)

Prologue: Two varieties of Hebrew and three varieties of Tamil

There exists many varieties of language and human beings have many ways of relating with them. Some languages are vernaculars, learnt in a "natural way" by children who arrive in this world. Such languages give their users the impression that they are "self-spoken". I borrow this expression from Ron Kuzar, a colleague from Israel (University of Haifa) whom I recently heard making a presentation in Paris on the resurrection of Hebrew in the 20th century. He was explaining that for many immigrants from Central Europe into what was to become the state of Israel, Yiddish was "self-spoken", whereas Modern Hebrew, a language which was then being invented, was not. These immigrants had at their disposal a vernacular language (such as Yiddish, or Judeo-Arabic, etc.) and many of them were also strongly connected with an ancient sacred language (namely Biblical Hebrew), which had been their defining heritage, learnt and used in special contexts. In addition to that they found themselves involved in a very complex linguistic process, the engineering of a new language, destined to become the common vehicle/instrument for everyday life in a new country. It would progressively become a new reality, "incontournable" [French for "inescapable"], thanks notably to the schooling in Modern Hebrew of all children, who would use it naturally between themselves, and who would progressively teach it to their parents, exemplifying the paradox that what was becoming a "mother tongue" was **not** transmitted from mother to child **but** from child to mother.


And that new language, modern Hebrew, would receive the same name (or label) as the ancient, biblical, sacred language, namely "Hebrew", and most people (i.e. everyone who was not a

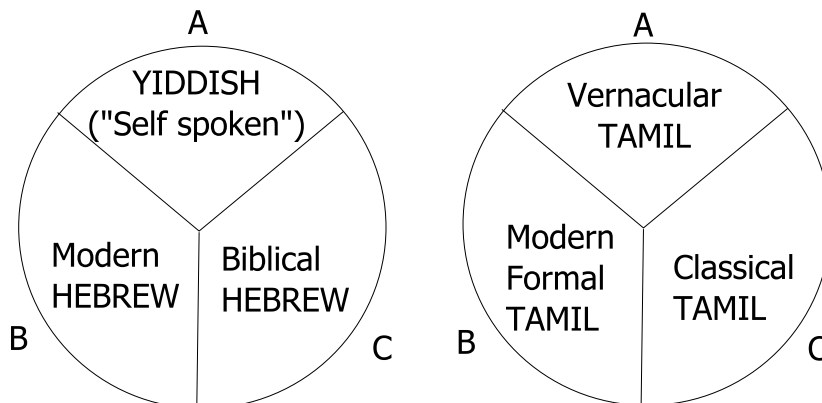
¹ I would like, first of all, to thank my colleague and friend, Professor Umarani Pappuswamy, of Shillong North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU), for inviting me to deliver this plenary lecture at 34AICL and for making my stay in Meghalaya very pleasant. It was the occasion for me to fruitfully interact with many colleagues and for trying to attempt a synthesis of many parallel explorations which I have made during the past thirty years, at the frontier of Linguistics and History of Linguistics, in connection with the bewildering variety of languages which fall under the general label "Tamil". I also wish to thank my colleagues Harold Schiffman, George Hart and Émilie Aussant for reading the version of this paper, which I sent them just after the conference (in its oralized form), and for enlightening me with their comments on how they see the relationship between the various constituents of "Tamil", that "family of languages", to borrow a fit designation from Harold Schiffman. I also thank my friends from Tamil Nadu and from the Tamil diaspora, too numerous to name all, with whom I have constantly been exchanging during many years, mostly on mailing lists, and with whom I have sometimes "agreed to disagree", but always in a friendly way. Finally, I must thank my wife, Eva Wilden, for going carefully through this final version.

professional linguist, or who was not a Biblical Hebrew scholar (or an ultra-orthodox jew) would be convinced that both languages were the same.

Such a situation obtains, partially, for “the” indian language which will be the centre (focus) of my presentation, namely Tamil, although of course with a number of differences. “TAMIL”, which its present users like to describe as simultaneously “living AND classical”, is the common name which is used for referring to several languages, some of them being **(A) spontaneously spoken (dialectal) vernaculars**,² used by various sub-communities of the population of Tamil Nadu, another one being **(B) the (formal) variety** used in schools, schoolbooks, conferences, most books, mailing lists, blogs, newspapers, and a third one being **(C) the Classical variety**, which term covers the ancient form of the language which is found for instance in (C1) two well-known corpora of religious poetical literature, often referred to as “bhakti literature, one concerned with Shiva (the *Panniru Tirumurai*) and the other one with Vishnu (the *Nālāyirat Tivviya Pirapantam*), but also in (C2) another poetical corpus, more ancient than the two devotional corpora, and containing what is called “Sangam literature” (to which must be added well-known works such as the *Cilappatikāram* and the *Maṇimēkalai*, etc.). The Classical variety of Tamil is also represented by (C3) a collection of treatises, among which the most ancient (and famous) seems to be the *Tolkāppiyam*, which consists of 27 chapters, totalling more than 1600 sūtra-s (or cūttiram-s), and it should be added that, unlike the sūtra-s of Pāṇini, the sūtra-s of the *Tolkāppiyam* are in metrical form, just like all the works referred to under C1 and C2, i.e. all the hymns that constitute Bhakti literature and all the poems that constitute Sangam literature.

To summarize, we can recognize in the 21st century three main types of references to Tamil, A, B and C, and in order to make things completely clear, with respect to the topics alluded to in this prologue, I shall now present in the following twin Charts all the elements which have been discussed until now both for Yiddish and “Hebrew”, on the one hand, and for “Tamil” on the other hand, both


chart possessing the same shape, namely .

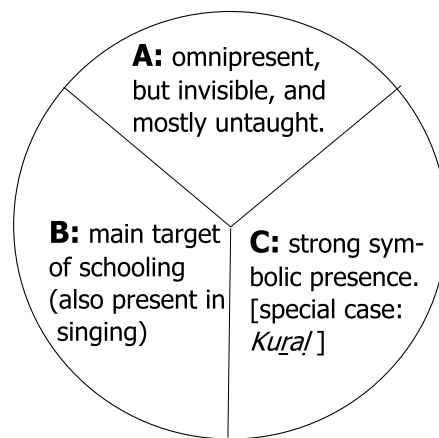


² When using the technical term “vernacular”, I am aware that there have recently been attempts (on the GB-INFITT mailing list) to ostracize or to ban that term (even referring to it as the “V-word”, by analogy with the “C-word”, the “P-word”, the “N-word”, etc.). However, since the term “vernacular” has been used in a precise sense by great linguists such as Leonard Bloomfield, I see no reason to avoid it. Those attempts appear to me as part of a strategy for presenting “Tamil” as an non-analysable whole, which is precisely the contrary of what I am doing here, and I shall simply ignore them. Discussion about the terminology of a field with people who are not trained in that field can hardly be expected to be rewarding.

**Figure 1: TWO languages called “Hebrew”
and THREE languages called “Tamil”**

Do languages sit in Space-Time or in Eternity?

Let us now have a closer look at the three elements which appear in the  diagram for “Tamil”, first of all trying to add a temporal depth to it.³ Among the three, A and B are identifiable as the two components (L and H) of the present Tamil diglossia, which has already been the target of several studies, such as Britto [1986] and others. This is however not the proper place for elaborating on the topic (see nevertheless Figure 2).⁴ I shall simply point out here that, as I remarked somewhere else, there seems to exist, in addition to the link between the use of B and schooling/teaching (already mentioned in the Prologue), some privileged relationship between the use of B and singing⁵.



**Figure 2: some uses of Vernacular Tamil (A),
Modern Formal Tamil (B) and Classical Tamil (C)**

What requires elaboration is the strong presence of C (which is an ancient variety of Tamil) in the public discourse in present day Tamil Nadu, which appears paradoxical, until one realises that it is often present only at the symbolic level, because there exist in fact not that many people who can easily read (or more precisely recite or sing) and understand Classical Tamil texts, with the exception of the *Kural*, a collection of 1300 distychs, whose author is usually referred to as Tiruva||uvar (alias “Saint Va||uvar”).

In order however to illustrate the symbolic role played nowadays by the layer C, the more efficient method probably consists in describing one concrete situation in which these various fields

³ This means among other things remembering that most of the more important Classical Tamil text have been composed between 1000 and 2000 years ago, during the first millennium AD.

⁴ Regarding A inside this diagram, I refer to it as “untaught”, “omnipresent” and “invisible”, because it would probably appear incongruous to a teacher of spoken Tamil to “teach” any of the many vernacular dialects. Unless one is born in the “Harijan community of South Arcot District in Tamil Nadu”, one will not “speak” the dialect which is described in Varma and Ramaswamy [1976]. The dialect can be “picked up” and it can be “studied” (by a linguist) but it can normally not be, in a natural/legitimate way, “learnt”.

⁵ I have recently discussed the Tamil diglossia in Chevillard[2011, 125-127] and the relevance of the concept for understanding the ancient history of Tamil. Regarding singing, although spoken Tamil forms are not absent in the repertoire of songs, those seem often to act as a reservoir of formal Tamil items.

(or points of view) interact, and since we live in the age of internet and since a lot of material for discussion is freely available for everyone to check for themselves, I shall evoke here some elements of **a recent debate which took place** across several mailing lists and in which some (professional) Tamil linguists interacted with several segments of the Tamil population, some of those segments having some practice of the Traditional Tamil shastric treatise called *Tolkāppiyam*, and some of them being (approximately) representative of what could be called “Tamil purism”, besides being active in the construction of the Tamil Wikipedia, which is one of the parameters of Tamil modernity.⁶

The debate took place when some Tamil users took exception with one answer given by Professor E. Annamalai, a well-known Tamil linguist, to one question (Q&A N°42)⁷ addressed to him on a public internet forum called VALLAMAI. The answer which ignited the debated had to do with the use of “oru” and “ōr” in Modern Tamil prose. The person submitting the question had asked for confirmation from E. Annamalai that the best practice was to write *ōr aracaṇ* “a/one king” and *oru maṇṇaṇ* “a/one king”. E. Annamalai had, however, replied that it was legitimate, in modern Tamil, to write *oru aracaṇ* using the form “oru” even before a word starting with a vowel⁸ and this seems to be indeed what most people spontaneously do when they post to mailing lists⁹. Someone, however, objected¹⁰ that this was incorrect and that the usage should be more or less identical with what, according to them, was indicated somewhere inside the first book of the *Tolkāppiyam*, a treatise probably composed during the first half of the 1st millennium AD, in one of its sūtra-s, namely Tol. Eḷuttu, TE455i.

Such is the symbolic authority of the *Tolkāppiyam* that E. Annamalai felt compelled to enter partly into a discussion of the *Tolkāppiyam* sūtra TE455i, by publishing, fifteen days after the first Q&A, a second one (Q&A N°44),¹¹ which contained a pointer to the criticism of his own position already mentioned. However the opposition continued and the debate was transferred elsewhere¹² [after the intervention of the moderators of VALLAMAI]. This was finally the occasion for another Tamil Linguist, Professor Deivasundaram [தெய்வசுந்தரம்] to intervene in the debate and to remind the harsh critics that:

- one could be both a traditional grammarian and a linguist
- there was no need to use strong words¹³ in a scientific debate

⁶ But they might as well be referred to as Tamil “enthusiasts” (ārvalar), because they have a deep, special concern for their language.

⁷ See <http://www.vallamai.com/qa/25849/> (Question and answer N°42, dated 7th september 2012).

⁸ He apparently sees the form “ōr aracaṇ” as a free poetical variant..

⁹ This can be seen by examining the archives of Tamil mailing list (and especially the “subject lines”, if one wants to quickly examine the production of many different individual users on the Internet).


¹⁰ See the message, dated 11th september 2012, on the Tamilmanram mailing list, forwarded by C.R. Selvakumar: “http://groups.google.com/group/tamilmanram/msg/68356e3fb60af205?hl=ta_US”, and containing a statement by Ce. Cīṇi Naiṇā Mukammatu, who had raised the objections to the answer N°42.

¹¹ See <http://www.vallamai.com/qa/26522/> (Question and answer N°44 [followup to N°42], dated 22 september 2012).

¹² See : “https://groups.google.com/forum/?fromgroups=#!topic/tamilmanram/kMIYIB_9Z5s”.

¹³ The strong words used at the end against E. Annamalai were *Tamiḷt Turōki* “Tamil traitor”, a not uncommon occurrence in the 20th history of the Tamil language.

The episode having thus been narrated in a primary fashion, a few remarks should now be made,

from the point of view of the components of .

- In the spoken varieties (A) of Tamil for which we have explicit descriptions, “ōr” does NOT appear as an allophonic variant of “oru” before vowel (see for instance the example “*oru a:lu* (one person)” quoted in Varma & Ramaswamy [1976:41])
- In the classical (archaic) variety of Tamil (C), it is indeed the rule that “oru” and “ōr” are allophonic variants, the second one been found before vowel-initial words. However, all those occurrences are occurrences with a numeral value (“one, single, unique”) and they cannot be considered as identical with the modern occurrences of *oru*, which has tended to become a kind of indefinite article, a feature which did not exist in the ancient language.
- as far as Modern Written Tamil (B) is concerned, the statistics of the usage seem to show that Tamil users (in that case) write as they speak, which means that “ōr” does NOT appear as an allographic variant of “oru” before vowel. For instance, people write: *oru uṇmai* “a truth”.
- Returning to the ancient level of Classical Tamil (C), even if it were granted, by a *fiat*, that the rules of the Tolkāppiyam can be arbitrarily applied to Modern Tamil prose, it must be emphasized that the rule TE455i quoted by E. Annamalai’s contradictor is misapplied. There is, in fact, inside the set of 483 sūtra-s of the TE, a subset of 70 sūtra-s devoted to numbers (and related items) and among those 70 sūtra-s, 47 are contained inside the last chapter of TE, which is devoted to the sandhi of words ending with an “over-short *u*” (*kurriyal ukaram*), which is the case for nine of the ten most basic numerals¹⁴. From the point of view of the TE, forms such as “*oru*” and “*ōr*” do not exist as such but are simply two different sandhi variants of the base form *oṇru*. As far as the sūtra quoted by E. Annamalai’s opponent is concerned, what it does in fact is to tell us which is the sandhi behaviour of the numeral *oṇru* “one” when combining with length measurement and weight units, and could not be directly understood without reading several other sūtra-s belonging to the same group.¹⁵
- Finally, it must also be emphasized that those who promote the idea that the ancient Tolkāppiyam (C) should govern the Modern Tamil prose (B), never seem to suggest the use, in everyday prose, of the many archaic forms which the Tolkāppiyam explicitly generates, such as: *orupaḷtu*,¹⁶ *irupaḷtu*, *oṇpāṇ*, *patiṛrakal*, etc.

¹⁴ See: *oṇru*, *iraṇṭu*, *mūṇru*, *nāṇku*, *aintu*, *āru*, *eṭṭu*, *oṇpatu* and *pattu*, the exception being *ēl*.

¹⁵ The sūtra TE455i reads: *mutalīr eṇṇiṇmuṇ uyirvaru kālāit // tavalēṇa moḷipa ukarak kiḷavi // mutaṇilai nīṭal āvayi ṇāṇa*. A literal translation of this elliptical Tolkāppiyam sūtra, is however insufficient for conveying its meaning. It says roughly: “ahead of the first two numerals” (*mutalīr eṇṇiṇmuṇ*), “when there comes a vowel [at the beginning of the word following the numeral]” (*uyir varu kālai*) “the [final] *u* disappears” (*tavalēṇa moḷipa v-ukara-k kiḷavi*) and “the initial [of the numeral] is lengthened” (*mutaṇilai nīṭal*), “in that case” (*āvayiṇāṇa*). The “first two numerals” here referred to are, according to Iḷampūraṇar, *oṇru* “one” and *iraṇṭu* “two”, which both end in over-short *u*. However, just like in other Indian shastric treatises, some terms are to be taken over from the preceding sūtras, and it is impossible to understand this sūtra in isolation, without also explaining several other sūtras, the logical group containing this sūtra starting in TE446i and ending in TE459i.

¹⁶ Interestingly, the form *orupaḷtu* (accusative: *orupaḷtaṇai*), generated by TE200i (and TE438i & TE439i), among other possible outputs such as *oṇpāṇ*, etc., reminds one of the form “*oruvatu*”, which exists in the Harijan dialect of Tamil, as a variant of *pattu* “ten” (See Varma & Ramaswamy [1976:40]).

Linguistics, Shastric grammar and the history of conceptions about language and languages

After this brief evocation of some passionate discourses (belonging to modernity), I shall try to bring us closer to my central topic, which is an attempt at determining the best use which can be made of texts such as the *Tolkāppiyam*, when one does not try to make them into eternally valid characterisations of “THE Tamil language” (a misleading singular, as we have seen). This includes effecting a more or less explicit comparison between the goals of **(α) Linguistics** and **(β) Shastric grammar** (on the one hand). This also entails for me examining the goals of **(γ) History of Linguistics** and **(δ) History of Shastric grammar** (on the other hand), drawing on my experience of the past thirty years, during which I have been in contact with many linguistic varieties present in Tamil Nadu, as well as with many dimensions and many components of the literature, technical and non-technical, by which this plural language is represented in history.

That would also mean (if we had enough time) enumerating the varieties of Tamil for which linguistic descriptions are available.¹⁷

And that also means questioning the status, in this respect, of ancient treatises such as the *Tolkāppiyam*? Are those treatises linguistic descriptions? Are they something else? Should the linguists of today see the author (or authors) of *Tolkāppiyam* and the authors of other treatises as eminent ancient colleagues, in the way some linguists view Pāṇini as a colleague? These are some of the questions which underlie this presentation and the short (anticipatory) answer is that, even though there are similarities between the approach seen in the *Tolkāppiyam* and the activity of descriptive linguists, there are also a great number of differences and it is very important to point them out.

Therefore, at this point, it seems an inescapable duty to try to (at least sketchily) define the fields **(α, β, γ and δ)**, or **points of view**, which appear inside the initial paragraph of this section. I call them “points of view” because, although the present paper is submitted within the framework of a conference in **Linguistics (=α)**, an important scientific discipline, everyone knows that that discipline has not always existed, although the object which it studies, Human language (and/or Human Languages) has been with mankind since human beings are human beings. And we also know that the interest of human beings in language (and in languages) long predates the birth of modern linguistics, and is evidenced for instance in the development of **Shastric grammar (=β)**, of which the *Tolkāppiyam* is a beautiful “échantillon” (or sample). As for the points of views **γ** and **δ**, they do not necessarily have to be distinguished, because they are both attempts at understanding (or at least producing a preliminary narrative on) the creation and transmission by human beings of the

¹⁷ The list contains for instance Beschi’s 1728/1738 *Grammatica Latino-Tamulica, ubi de Vulgari Tamulicae Linguae idiomate கொடுந்தமிழ் dicto [...]*, which is currently freely available at <http://books.google.co.in/books?id=7ajFAAAAcAAJ&dq>. This is one of the several grammars composed by Beschi and it deals with what must have been the B variety of Tamil in his time. The three other grammars composed by Beschi [two in Latin and one in Tamil (*Tonnūl Viḷakkam*)] deal with the C variety. See Chevillard [1992] for more details on Beschi’s work.

Leaving aside Beschi, and returning to the more general question, one can observe that there does not exist many descriptions of dialects (the many descriptions published in the seventies in the linguistic series of Annamalai university (such as K. Karunakaran, 1971) are very interesting but they all seem to concern mostly the phonology and the morphology. They also do not contain collections of sample texts, although they include vocabulary. The study of A (i.e. “Vernacular Tamil”) is thus apparently the new frontier of Tamil linguistics.

“knowledge” which they possess and value, and are both subfields of the vast field called “History of Science and Technology”. It may however be useful to distinguish them because the types of difficulties which they face with their objects are not the same. Therefore, let me now examine each one of them in its turn, and first of all α and β .

(α) Linguists (descriptive linguists) are generally supposed to be looking for **truths concerning the manner in which native speakers of a language spontaneously use their language**, in every possible circumstance, and, although primacy is generally given to the ORAL use of language, there are ways of extending this enquiry to language circulated through WRITTEN MEDIUM, especially in the modern world where (almost) everyone is having a portable phone and is sending weekly hundreds of spontaneous E-mails and short messages.

(β) Shastric grammarians are concerned with a goal which I shall try to characterize presently, but, before that, I wish to say that I have decided to use the expression “Shastric grammar” [which I use for translating இலக்கணம்/*ilakkaṇam*, alias *lakṣaṇa*] instead of “Grammar” because modern linguists themselves make frequent use of the term “grammar” in a sense which does not coincide with the one which I am considering here,¹⁸ and which I am sure everyone in a linguistics conference is familiar with.¹⁹ More to the point, a shastric grammarian [*ilakkaṇa nūlar*/இலக்கண நூலர்] is first of all concerned with the precise transmission of a body of knowledge (a *śāstra*) concerning an object (or a collection of objects) which one calls *lakṣya* (“the thing to be characterized”) and which is handed down by tradition. In the case of “śāstric grammar”, the object can be an existing literary corpus (a body of compositions) but it can also be perceived as wider than that, and include potential compositions, not yet composed.

The main target of the *Tolkāppiyam* is Poetry (or metrical literature)

In the case of Tamil Nadu, if we base ourselves on the *Tolkāppiyam*, which seems to be the most ancient preserved Tamil shastric text, the object is stated by the preface [attributed to Paṇampāraṇar] to consist of *ceyyuḷ* and *vaḷakku*, and indeed a number of verses (or *sūtra*-s) inside the *Tolkāppiyam* [which is a VERSIFIED grammar] mention “*ceyyuḷ*”, or “*vaḷakku*”, or both, although my gut feeling tells me that from the point of view of the *Tolkāppiyam*, *ceyyuḷ* is probably the most important of the two, but I also perceive that if one had had only *ceyyuḷ* (and no *vaḷakku*), the language complex called *centamiḷ* would have been perceived as incomplete.

Let me now try to be more explicit, especially for the sake of those who have never been exposed to *centamiḷ*: What is CEYYUḷ? A broad translation is “(poetical) composition”. I have put the specifier “poetical” between brackets because the listener/reader will probably think that I am referring to a “metrical” composition, which is indeed the case most of the time, and also because the word “composition” (or the word “creation”) is sufficient for rendering the word *ceyyuḷ*, which is derived from the verbal root CEY “to do, to make”.

¹⁸ When I say “shastric grammar”.


¹⁹ Who has never heard of “Universal Grammar” (UG) ?

I have said that *ceyyuḷ* is “most of the time” metrical, because when the *Ceyyūḷiyal* (“chapter on *ceyyuḷ*”), which is the 26th chapter of the *Tolkāppiyam*,²⁰ enumerates the seven loci (*nilam*) which constitute *ceyyuḷ*, one of them, called *urai* “speech/commentary” is most probably a kind of prose composition, whereas the six others are most probably metrical compositions, these six others being *pāṭṭu* “song/verse”, *nūl* “treatise”, *vāymoḷi* “mantra”, *pici* “riddle”, *aṅkatam* “satirical poem” and *mutuḷ* “proverb”. The listener/reader may think that there is no necessity for a treatise (or for some of the other loci) to be a metrical text, but it is a FACT that all known treatises in Tamil ARE metrical texts, that the title of several of those *ilakkaṇa nūlkaḷ* (shastric treatises) indicates in which meter they are, and that their being metrical certainly played a role in their transmissional history.

What about *vaḷakku*? What does the term refer to? The answer is that it literally means “usage”. But we should understand that it is not everyone’s usage, but only the usage which is practiced by a restricted group²¹ (or maybe under restricted circumstances).

I was saying at the beginning of this characterisation that a shastric grammarian is concerned with the transmission of the characterisation [lakṣaṇa/ ilakkaṇam] ((which we might also term “theory”)) of an object, a thing to be characterized, a *lakṣya* [ilakkiyam]. In modern Tamil, the word *ilakkiyam* is usually translated by “literature”, and therefore we might want to say that the goal of a shastric grammarian who teaches (or comments on) the *Tolkāppiyam* (or other similar treatises) is to transmit the theory attached to a literature, which is mostly versified, as well as transmitting the theory attached to the literary language in which the literature is already composed or will be composed, all this taking place on a “path”, a *mārga*, a *tuṟai*, a *neṟi*, which IS the tradition in which the shastric grammarian is an agent (or a driving force), and which he sees as his duty to maintain

Another interpretation of the diagram

I have already pointed to the fact that the  diagram is dissymmetrical when seen from the point of view of the 21st century, because our A-s (Vernacular Tamil dialects) and our B (Modern Formal Tamil) sit in the present, and are available respectively to all speakers and to school-educated users of Tamil, whereas our C (Classical Tamil) sits in the past [or in the eternity], and is readily/fully available only to very erudite pulavar-s (poets) or to pandits.

Let us however conduct a thought experiment, using a time machine in order to try to reduce the linguistic distance between the three elements A, B and C. For that purpose, I shall first rephrase the characterisation I have given of the three, concentrating on what is central for those three registers, namely

- “Oral communication” for A.
- “Prose writing” for B (or maybe simply “written communication”)

²⁰ See Chevillard [2011a] for an overview of the *Ceyyūḷiyal*.

²¹ TP638i says : *vaḷakkeṇap paṭuva tuyarntōr mēṟṟē // nikaḷcci avarkaṭ ṭāka lāṇa*.

- “(Metrical and/or musical) poetical expression”, which means, in practice, preparation of “non-spontaneous” language utterances, to be performed by a performer, on ritualized (or highly codified) occasions.

The new formulation for our diagram is the following:

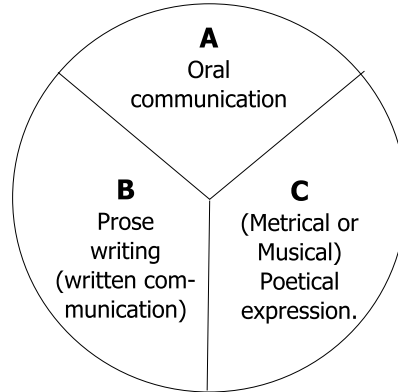


Figure 3: A, B and C seen as three registers

If we make the hypothesis that parts of the *Tolkāppiyam* were composed in the 5th century²² and if we remember that writing was well attested at that time (as every epigraphist can tell us), not denying of course that people could already speak (and have oral communication), we obtain a mental image of a society where the distance between the three registers is probably much smaller than it is nowadays.²³ However, that does not mean that no distance existed at that time between the three registers A, B and C, and that it was a time of unity.

As a matter of fact, many formulations inside the *Tolkāppiyam* itself seem to be looking back to the past, or to some special knowledge, already handed down by predecessors (as evidenced by formulations such as “eṇṇmaṇār pulavar” [“so say the learned/poets”]) contained in many sūtra-s.

And in addition to that, it clearly appears from some sections of the *Tolkāppiyam* that many dialects already existed in its time, as evidenced by expressions such as *Paṇṇiru nilam* “the twelve countries”, and that the *Centamiḷ* “Straight/Correct Tamil” which the *Tolkāppiyam* puts forward was probably a kind of poetical standard language, shared by twelve provinces inside the global Tamiḷakam, which seems to have contained both Kerala and modern Tamil Nadu, as seen on the following map, which I reproduce here from an article of mine, on the topic of *Ticaic col* “regional words”.²⁴

²² Or if we mentally consider some part of the Sangam corpus, falling under C, which may have been composed in the 5th century.

²³ In modern Tamil Nadu, the diglossic set-up, which combines A and B, is transparent for most educated speakers, who can switch effortlessly between A and B, but C remains very difficult to integrate, except for exceptional people.

²⁴ See Chevillard [2008] : “The concept of ticaiccol in Tamil grammatical literature and the regional diversity of Tamil classical literature”.



**Figure 4: Map of the *Paṅṅiru Nilam*
(on the basis of an old *Veṅṅpā*)**

In this perspective, both B and C appear as independent modes of standardisation, one of them being triggered by the use of writing and one of them being linked to a special type of performance, having its roots in the twin spheres of the sacred and of the entertainment, which target the gods (and the kings), on the one hand, and the general public, on the other hand, as evidenced by the pair of technical terms, *Vēṭṭiyal* (derived from *Vēntu* “King”) & *Potuviyal* (from *potu* “common”), which is used for characterizing two types of dancing (or theatrical performance).

(Sacred) language and (ritual) performance

That pair of terms is seen in a passage from the third canto (*Arāṅkēṅṅu Kātai*) of the well-known Tamil masterpiece called *Cilappatikāram*. That passage is contained in a series of descriptions of the skills of the six teachers and artists who are involved in the training of (and in the accompaniment of the stage performance by) *Mātavi*, the dancing girl²⁵ who is one of the three main protagonist of the story. In English translation, the passage reads:

There was, again, **the learned composer of songs** whose knowledge of the Tamil language was complete and known to the whole Tamil land surrounded by the noisy sea. An authority in the art of dramaturgy he had a knowledge of the two branches, *vēṭṭiyal* and *potuviyal*, and exhibited it in his compositions. Realizing the improper expressions employed by others (his rivals), he scrupulously avoided such defects in his own dramatic poetry.

(*Cilappatikaram* [Canto 3: Arankerrukatai], p.107,
translated by V.R. Ramachandra Dikshitar, 1939)

In the sequence of six teachers and artists enumerated in this passage, the “composer of songs” is the third. The others are, in this order, (1) the dancing master, (2) the music teacher, (4) the drum (*mirutaṅkam*) player, (5) the flutist and (6) the lute player.

²⁵ The word “sacred” in the title of this section should have been explained by the fact that *Mātavi* is an expert in performing dances which have a religious/ritual importance, such as the *Paṭiṅṅōrāṭal* “eleven dances” (enumerated in the 6th canto of the *Cilappatikāram*). But time does not permit me to elaborate on that aspect.

We see clearly from this passage (which might reflect the situation around the middle of the first millennium AD) that shastric grammar was not kept in an ivory tower. The composer of songs is a scholar, who interacts with other scholars (or artists). We may imagine him as one of the potential users of a treatise like the *Tolkāppiyam* (or of a posterior treatise). As I wrote in a forthcoming article, about the succession grammatical treatises, those treatises were “incomplete attempts at capturing the ideal forms of Tamil literature which were meant as a help for those who had the desire to create, preserve, recite and/or understand ‘poetical compositions’ (*ceyyul*).”²⁶

What we shall not talk about ...

At this stage, a comprehensive presentation of the Tamil grammatical tradition should connect the preoccupation of the “composer of songs” with two of the recurring topics inside the *Kiḷaviyākkam*, which is the 10th chapter inside the *Tolkāppiyam*, namely the notion of *vaḷu* “deviant usage” and the notion of *vaḷuvamaiti* “acceptable deviation”. However, space does not permit this and I shall here suggest the reader to examine Cēṇāvaraiyar’s discussion of the seven types of *vaḷu* under TC11c (See Chevillard [1996: 55-57]).

I would also be possible to mention *sūtras* in the *Tolkāppiyam*, where performance is discussed, in connection with the types of poems/songs which are appropriate for them, such as TP56i²⁷ and also that the 24th chapter of the *Tolkāppiyam*, the *Meyppāṭṭiyal*, seems to have had as an object some parameters of stage performance, but there again, I must send the reader to consulting the original texts.

I should also mention the relationships between the three components of what came to be called *Muttamiḷ* “Triple Tamil”, namely *iyaṛṛamiḷ*, *icaittamiḷ* and *nāṭakatamiḷ*, and how important an element music was,²⁸ but that must also remain a promise to fulfil later.

Finally, I should mention that the *Tolkāppiyam* contains a lexicographic component but that lexicography took an independent development only from the time of *Tivākaram* onwards.²⁹

Post-Conclusion: The Dharma of Historians of Science

I have not yet tried, as announced, to characterise what the task of (**γ**) **an historian of Linguistics** is, but it seems to me that it is highly time to concentrate here on characterizing what the task of (**δ**) **a historian of shastric grammar** is, because after all, this is the main concern of this presentation and because both **γ** and **δ** are, as already said, subdisciplines in the wider field of History of Science (and Technology) (or history of Human knowledge). Besides, linguists know that their discipline is young and historians of linguistics need to know what happened before their discipline was created and before there were professional linguists, teaching and doing research in modern universities. A historian of shastric grammar and a historian of linguistics are people who read and try to understand (which is often not easy) shastric literature or linguistic literature about language (and

²⁶ Chevillard, forthcoming A.

²⁷ *nāṭaka vaḷakkiṇum ulakiyal vaḷakkiṇum // pāṭal cāṇra pulaveri vaḷakkam // kaliyē paripāṭṭu āy iru pāviṇum // uriyatu ākum eṇmaṇār pulavar* (TP56i).

²⁸ I have spent a number of months editing a corpus which is part of *icaittamiḷ* “musical Tamil”, namely the *Tēvāram*. See V.M. Subrahmanya Ayyar et alii (2007), alias *Digital Tēvāram*, in the bibliography. See also Chevillard (forthcoming C), for a description of its meters.

²⁹ See Chevillard (2010a) and Chevillard (2010c).

languages) but in an **agnostic** way. This is of course slightly paradoxical because if one does it seriously, it does not require less intellectual effort to read (and understand) a body of theoretical texts [and the data attached to it] with the agnostic attitude of a historian, than it would be to do it as a practitioner, aspiring to become a *pulavar* (or a pandit). But the final result of that effort is that one does not acquire the feeling to know something about something, but what one acquires is a **suspended knowledge** which one will be able to compare with other pieces of suspended knowledge, which are possibly contradicting it. A historian of Human knowledge (or content-transmission) is therefore looking for contradictions and will eventually (hopefully) be able to explain how these seemingly contradictory elements of suspended knowledge can coexist inside the history of human intellectual endeavours.

At this stage, one might want also to mention a problematic notion, the notion of **progress**. Does a historian believe in progress? I shall not give here a personal answer (although everyone has his/her personal beliefs] but I wish to say that believing in progress can have as a consequence a defect called “teleonomy” (teleological vision) although many people find it useful, when they ask for financial support from institutions, to connect somehow their historical researches with a certain notion of “progress”. And this is understandable because everyone is part of a human community which has certain beliefs. However, whatever one’s convictions are, everyone can certainly admit that there are moments in real history when knowledge decreases and that a bright scholar may be followed by students who are less bright. But that of course is also part of history.

My own perception is that it is useful to have as complete as possible a knowledge of the totality of history and that a historian often has to read [and try to understand] texts which he would certainly not read if he took the point of view of a practitioner.

And descriptive linguists will also find, I am sure, an interest in doing this, as an exercise in “décentrement”.

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