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Tamil: A Family of Languages

Harold Schiffman

South Asia Studies. University of Pennsylvania

Abstract

As is well-known, the Tamil language is one of the oldest languages on the Indian subcontinent, dating from the early centuries of the Common Era, if not before. It is commonly divided into a number of 'stages', beginning with the earliest period (Sangam Tamil), followed by Medieval Tamil (or Middle Tamil), and then the Modern Literary Language, which dates from about the 13th century. I would also add a fourth stage, that represented by the spoken language of today, which differs sometimes quite radically from its written form. This presents a formidable challenge to non-Tamils who wish to learn to both read and speak Tamil, since Tamil society offers little help to those wishing to speak, even though most authentic communication between live speakers goes on in Spoken Tamil, and learners who wish to learn something about Tamil culture will not get far without a knowledge of the spoken language. Ignoring the modern spoken language also hides the tremendous diversity among dialects of Tamil, especially those that differ radically from what I call "Standard Spoken Tamil" or SST (Schiffman 1998). Sri Lanka Tamil is one of those dialects that are not mutually intelligible to many other speakers. For this reason, I propose that we should cease treating Tamil as one language, and begin to think of Tamil as a *family of languages*, related of course through history, from the oldest stages to the most modern. In historical linguistics terms, we would treat the oldest stage as Proto-Tamil, and later stages as 'daughter languages' or even 'granddaughters'.

The Accessibility Problem

Foreigners who wish to learn Tamil are confronted with enormous challenges. Tamil culture tends to value the study of Classical Tamil and its 'daughter' languages (Medieval Tamil, modern Literary Tamil) but not its 'grand-daughters' i.e. the spoken dialects used by all Tamils for most of their interpersonal communication. Foreigners who attempt to learn spoken Tamil are discouraged from doing so in various ways:

- *scolding* the learner for 'corrupting' the language
- 'correcting' the spoken form by repeating the LT form
- Ridiculing the learner by laughing at him/her for using spoken forms

As an example of the first strategy, when I was doing research on spoken Tamil in my first visit to India in 1965-66, students who were influenced by DMK came to me and asked me to cease and desist from studying spoken Tamil, because it 'contributed to the downgrading' of the language. An example of the third type, ridicule, happened to me while passing through customs from Singapore into Malaysia—I spoke Tamil to the customs agent, who had a Tamil name and looked to be of Indian descent. Her response was "*You talk just like my Granny*!"

The Sociology of Language

One of the things that Tamils are famous for is their 'love of their language' which, however it can be measured, has got to be more intense than any other expression of 'language loyalty' found on the Indian subcontinent. More Tamils have died for their language than any other language group, and this intense loyalty has of course attracted attention by scholars who study other parts of India. I came to India to study Tamil syntax and write a dissertation on that subject, but I soon found myself being asked to comment on the Tamils' language loyalty, which of course in 1965 had resulted in various forms of extreme (and sometimes violent) resistance to the imposition of Hindi as the national language.

When asked to write something about this topic, I did so, but soon found myself inadequately prepared to approach this topic without preparation in a field that was far from what the discipline of Linguistics had prepared me for. Fortunately for me, I was drawn into what is known as the Sociology of Language by the appearance of a book on the German language in America (Kloss 1963), which drew me into the topic of my own linguistic heritage as an American of German descent, and with more reading, I decided to offer a course on the topic of 'Language Policy.' My experience with Tamil helped widen my approach to this topic, and I taught the course both at the University of Washington and the University of Pennsylvania for almost 35 years. I soon discovered that there was an extensive body of literature on this subject, including but not limited to the work of Fishman, Ferguson, Haugen, Hymes, and many others, which helped me to understand topics such as 'language loyalty' and to present them to students.

The study of language policy soon became my primary research interest, and because I had once concentrated in Slavic Linguistics and had visited the Soviet Union and gotten a taste of its linguistic diversity and its language policy, coupled with the fact that I had also lived in France for two years, which has its own kind of linguistic chauvinism, gave me a range of experience to deal with various kinds of language policy issues.

What keeps a language alive? The point I want to make about this is based on research about what keeps a language vital and alive, and what leads to language shift, and language death. Much has been written about what the effective methods for language vitality and preventing language death, but one of the most important claims for effectiveness was made by Fishman (1991) who proposed that 'intergenerational transfer' is the most crucial factor in keeping a language alive. That means that all other strategies, such as using the language in education, or recording the words of the last viable speaker, or any other strategy that may be proposed, are all *ineffective and useless*, unless **intergenerational transfer** takes place. For the case of Tamil (and in fact for any 'threatened' language), this means that Tamil must be learned and spoken *in the home*. If it is not spoken in the home, but only learned at school, it will not survive, and some other language, probably English, will replace it.

The Case of Singapore. One of the crucial cases that illustrates this problem most clearly is the case of Singapore. In Singapore, as is well known, Tamil is one of the 'official' languages and receives support from the educational system along with other 'mother tongues' of the Singapore population. But Tamil is increasingly not the language spoken at home in many Singapore Tamil families, and many researchers now fault the educational system, which until recently insisted on teaching only Literary Tamil, but giving no support to the spoken language. Without this, English takes over as the dominant language (or its Singapore variant, Singlish). In research I conducted in Singapore in 1994, Tamil students in the system revealed to me that they did not feel that Tamil was *their language*; it belonged to someone else, they said, and they saw no use in learning it, especially since it had no economic value in Singapore. They also voiced the complaint that no matter how hard they tried, they could never satisfy their teachers, who always faulted them on their poor knowledge of Tamil. This research is buttressed by research by others who have studied the Tamil system in Singapore, e.g. Gopinathan, Seethalakshmi, Saravanan, and others.

One might argue that Singapore is different from Tamil, and that in Tamilnadu, where Tamil is the ambient language, this is not a problem. But increasingly, I find that Indian Tamils who have been educated in English medium schools do not handle Literary Tamil well, and speak a kind of spoken Tamil that is heavily mixed with English.

What I am saying is that we make an error if we assume that supporting the study of *one* kind of Tamil, such as Classical Tamil or modern Literary Tamil, will solve all our problems, and keep Tamil alive. We need in fact to treat Tamil as a *family of languages*, and support all of the members of that family. The branch of the family that gets the least support typically is that of spoken Tamil and all its variants. This is the true 'mother tongue' of all Tamils, the one they learn first, the one in which their emotions are centered.

This notion is often ridiculed by Tamil experts, but in the discipline of Linguistics, we know that by the age of six, about the time when children start school and start to acquire literacy, they have solidified their knowledge of their mother tongue, the one they learn at home at their mother's knee. Our educational systems tend to assume that their only responsibility is to teach the literary language, but in fact the literary language will not be learned if the spoken language is not used as a *resource*, instead of treated as a *liability*. Educational systems that try to 'kill off' the spoken language (whether English, Tamil, French or any other language) will also probably kill the language that they are attempting to teach.

Spoken Tamil as Resource. Let me give an example from my own experience of teaching Tamil. One of the hardest things for learners of Tamil who have no home background in Tamil is the syntax of relative clauses in Tamil. In English, we can take the example of two sentences, that are combined using a relative pronoun such as 'that' or 'which' or 'who' and make one sentence:

1. That boy came yesterday.
2. I saw the boy.

→I saw the boy **WHO/THAT** came yesterday.

In Tamil, of course, this is done differently. There is no relative pronoun, but instead, the verb of one of the sentences is converted into an adjective, and placed before the co-referential noun:

1. anda payyan neettu vandaan.   That boy came yesterday.
2. naan payyane paatteen.   I saw that boy.

→naan **neettu vanda** payyane paatteen I saw the boy who came yesterday.

These are obviously two very different kinds of syntactic structures, and what I have found in my thirty years of teaching Tamil to both Americans with no background in Tamil, and some Tamils whose parents were born in India, is that Americans with no background have a very hard time with these structures—they have to be drilled over and over to master them, whereas students with a Tamil background at home have no problem with these sentences, either in spoken Tamil or in Literary Tamil.

In other words, knowledge of the spoken language is not only not useless, it is an asset, and needs to be built-upon, rather than exterminated.

So where shall we start?

First of all, we need data in the form of a database of spoken Tamil materials, in order to be able to conduct some much-needed research on what is the most appropriate form of Tamil to teach. I suggest that we organize to create this database using the following sources:

- Tamil 'social' films. There are hundreds if not thousands of Tamil films whose soundtracks could be digitized, transliterated, and made searchable for examples of all kinds of spoken Tamil, but mostly what I call 'standard' Tamil. (Schiffman 1998)
- Tamil radio plays and television sitcoms also constitute a source for more spoken Tamil.
- **Linguistic Survey of India**. The LSI, compiled early in the last century, has transcription of spoken Tamil of various sorts, and recently gramophone records of some of these samples have been digitized and will soon be made available for study.
- The *English Dictionary of the Tamil Verb* has sound files for more than 9,700 spoken Tamil example sentences. These sentences could be easily adapted for use in a 'matched-guise' type study.
- **Field recordings**. Many researchers, myself included, have made tape recordings of Tamil speakers in various dialect areas, and could pool these resources to add to the data-base.

The Matched Guise Test: One of the effective ways to study spoken Tamil and discover how mother-tongue speakers conceive of various forms, including which examples of spoken Tamil constitute the most useful and 'acceptable' form to be used as models for students to imitate and learn, is the research methodology known as 'Matched Guise' testing. Matched guise tests originated in Canada in the 1960's as a way to determine Canadians' attitudes towards the 'other' language, i.e. attitudes of Anglo-Canadians towards French, and attitudes of Franco-Canadians towards the English of Anglo-Canadians. Over 100 such studies have been done on languages around the world, comparing the language attitudes of bilinguals and bidialectal people, and recently some studies have also been carried out in Singapore as a way to study attitudes of Tamils towards various forms of Tamil (Seethalakshmi et al. 2005, 2006). More needs to be done on this among Tamils in Tamilnadu, since attitudes toward Tamil among Tamils in Singapore seem to be different from those found in Tamilnadu.

The effectiveness of matched-guise testing comes from the fact that subjects are asked to evaluate, not the *language* of other speakers, but the *speaker* him/herself.

Matched-guise tests are constructed utilizing bidialectal or bilingual speakers, who are recorded speaking in each of their two variants. Then the recordings, typically of five bilinguals, are scrambled—they are mixed with those of other speakers, and played to subjects who are themselves bilingual/bidialectal. Typically, the subjects fail to recognize that the same speaker has been recorded twice, so when they hear the samples, they think they are hearing *ten* different speakers. Asked to judge the speakers on variables such as level of education, what kind of job they might have, what kind of earning power they might have, as well as other social variables, the subjects rate the 'guise' of one of the bilinguals more highly than the other guise.

In Canada, English 'guises' are ranked higher than French guises, even by French speakers; subjects even rank English speaker-guises as *taller*, although French guises are usually ranked as 'more friendly.' In all the matched-guise studies I have looked at, there is always a differential in these areas—there is never 'equality' of rank, despite any attempts in various societies to create social equality.

In case the notion that speakers can tell if someone is tall by listening to their voice, consider the following cartoon, which seems to assume that speakers can imagine all kinds of physical characteristics of other speakers by their voices!

P. BYRNES.
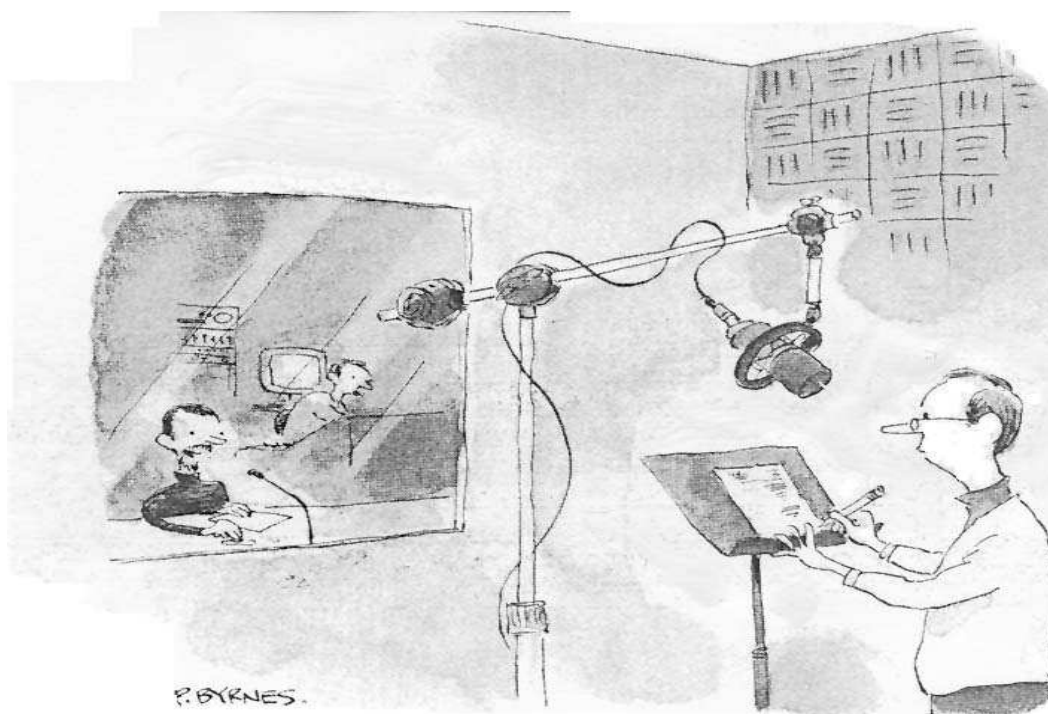
"Great! O.K., this time I want you to sound taller, and let me hear a little more hair."

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Conclusion

So who will volunteer to join me in this endeavor? There are a number of problematical issues we will need to deal with:

1. We will need to convince many people in the Tamil establishment that Spoken Tamil is something worth studying and collecting data for.

2. We will need to seek funding to support the collection of data, its transcription, and a method for accessing forms on-line. This will involve 'tagging' of forms, since Spoken Tamil is (in some ways) morphologically   more complex and less transparent than Literary Tamil.

3. We will need to get legal permissions to copy the sound tracks of Tamil films, and other material that already exists 'out there.'

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