

Linguistic Demands of Electronic Tamil

R. Natarajan,

Asst. Editor, *The Hindu*, Chennai

When there is plenty, the Tamils are obliged to be frugal; that is the paradoxical plight of Tamil language in this versatile electronic era. How to be frugal amidst plenty? Receptivity and brevity hold the key.

Tamil has a luxuriant orthography since ages. During the palm-leaf age and the treadle press days, the 247 character Tamil language did not pose problems to users of stylus or compositors of the lead types. However, when typewriters made their advent, the keyboard meant only for 26 letters of English was too small to carry all the characters of Tamil language. Now there is relief; computers can handle easily languages with any number of characters, thanks to the hospitable and pliant font software. And, there is the electronic pen too, the modern stylus. One can write with it; the text is typeset without the need to pound on the keyboard. Thus our orthography can stay as such.

What matters in the computer age is stylistics. Any communication should be shorter and faster. As in the global business milieu, it is not the big eating the small, but the fast eating the slow. With cellular phones and SMS we have to out-Pitman Pitman! Hence 'How are you' is Hw R U and 'You are in queue' is U R in Q. This is not English language; but electronic language. Such expressions, once a fun for school kids, now form the core of SMS and E-mail of adults. Similar ones are to be coined in other languages too. And, they would be.

The aforesaid abbreviations need not be considered travesties anymore. Users do not wait for the approval of the so called Purists nor care the censure of orthodox grammarians. Communication is complete not as it leaves, but as it reaches the destination. If understood by the addressees the inebriated abbreviations acquire a meaning. Hence, part of them could form the written language of a remote if not near tomorrow.

With due reverence to grammar and the grammarians, Tamils should be alive to the www realities. The so-called *Purists* exist in other lingual families too; but they are fewer and older. Tamil has a larger and louder lot, but they are also in the waning age group. Their call for *Purism* has become a lone cry in the web wilderness. That does not mean that any modern language is impure; but modern Tamil is admittedly a mix.

What psychologists call generation gap in the society is manifest in the lingual realm too. For a Tamil glued to the TV, Parimelazhagar's prose is far above his head, but not the slum dweller's slang. Half of the Tamil film dialogue is an admixture of English. The titles are also in English. Tamil journals sport English names such as *Ladies Special – Employment Special – Kumudam Reporter – Junior Vikatan, Capital Market, Pocket Novel* and so on. Tamil magazine writing is punctuated with English expressions. The idiot box no different. Hence there is a need to translate *Sangam* Tamil into modern Tamil for those of this generation. None to blame. Times; times and again times.

If I tell you a sentence that stays in my memory for over 35 years, *Thane thahe cyning sohte he haefde mid hym tamra deora umbeboshtra syx hund* or another sentence *Ealles Saturdaeges weorkum daeges* –don't be dismayed as to what language it is; this the language that you know. Yes, it is English, Anglo- Saxon or the old English version. Rendered in modern English, the first one would read “*When he met the king he had with him six hundred untamed animals.*” The other means, “*All Saturdays are working days.*”

English language has changed very much over the centuries. Changes are perceptible in modern Tamil prose and poetry also. But the Tamils are not that much receptive as the English people to changes in tune with the times, in being a willing receptacle for inflow from other languages. English etymological dictionaries state that about 35 to 40 per cent of English words have been adapted and assimilated from Greek or Latin in an anglicised format. Ironically the later day English idiom – it's Greek and Latin to me – means I do not understand. This idiom has emerged, by efflux of time, to mean the unintelligibility though Greek and Latin handsome contribution to English vocabulary. This illustrates the generation gap in English language.

A Tamil Purist movement surged in the early 20th century. Some enthusiasts bestowed pure Tamil names on themselves. What about their genetic and political progeny? How chaste are they in their expressions, oral and written? Will the cause Tamil be served by purist names alone? For long, Tamils have been deifying their language. Slogans like -“*Hail Tamil*”- will not help Tamil grow in any frontier. Now there is a need. There should be an action plan to attune Tamil to the exacting demands of the electronic age. What could that plan be?

The Tamils should be receptive to phonemes from other languages. They have to spell and pronounce phonemes like F, J and Z also. But some purists are averse to the use of   Can anyone aver that these phonemes cannot be uttered by the Tamils? When they can be pronounced, why can't they be spelt? It is not disability on the part of the users, but an adamant disposition. With greater interaction between fast growing global languages, the Tamils should overcome their own mental blocks towards receptivity. Another phoneme that needs to be imported is the diphthong ae.

Most of us pronounce diphthong in words cat, fat, rat, mat and so on. Awful are our ways to transliterate these words. When we write *Cat* in Tamil, it is either cot or gate, certainly not Cat. Fat is somewhat like pot or pate. Rat is either rot or rate. Mat is mot or mate. We have no character for the diphthong. But this deficiency could be made good with by using differently the character *rettai kombu*. Instead of the curve facing the right, we can twist it to the left. That is the simple way to add one more character to Tamil. The phoneme Z could be had with our *Aayutha Ezhuthu* prefixing.∴, just as it is done for F, with ∴.

When words *Milagtanny* and *Katamaran* enter the English dictionary, we are proud over our export. But in import, we are hesitant. We consider it demeaning to accept the lingual nuances from other people. Do we not accept money when it comes from anywhere in any form? Why don't we then accept phonemes, words and idioms? Despite the purists' fiery talks at stray meetings and flamboyant articles in less read journals, Tamil has become an undesirable mix in our journals, the idiot box and real-life situations, the users take liberties with grammar.

Once we give up grammar and resort to unchaste expressions, the soul of the language would be lost. I, for one, uphold the canons of grammar, but plead for some reforms towards simplifications in sentence construction. The first step should be to use minimal words to avoid repetitions. Where six words suffice, the seventh is superfluous. It should be discarded. Instead we, the Tamils have an insatiable appetite for adjectives. What a modern English grammarian has said – *An adjective is the natural enemy of the noun* should open our eyes.

We should be keen on economy in use of language. We should get the maximum effect with minimum words. Chiselled out expressions will stay in the mind of the reader and he will be provoked into action, not laboured, labyrinthine sentences. But in many books you can find such expressions. It is like an inveterate bore of speaker going beyond bounds, but saying every now and then, *I will be brief; I will finish my speech in a short while*, yet blabbering interminably long.

This irritating excess is reflected in our writing too. The best way to write is to hit the nail on the head at the start. But our traditional pieces start with a quote from ancient literature and ever so many quotes run through the essay; it is also capped with one. The writer may choose to display his erudition. But in the maze of quotes the message is lost.

Modern presentation is no better than the traditional one. News delivery in Tamil dailies is a boring repetition. Because time is precious the next generation of readers will not suffer such excesses and repetitions. Newscasts in TV are also equally boring. Somebody writes; some one else reads. The pity is, no one tells news. Tamil in the print and electronic media should be crisp, but it is not. There should be a new style in writing and spoken Tamil, with brevity as the soul, without sacrificing the essentials of grammar.

If one reads pieces of *Sangam* literature or later day metaphysical and mystical works, or even the devotional songs one can note that Tamil poets had been very precise. Could there be a better example for brevity than Tirukkural? Sickening excesses are of recent origin. Politically motivated post Independence Tamil prose is ornate; it has permeated into modern literature. There were takers for it then, not now.

The need of the times is to attempt a different way of writing. Old grammarians, modern writers, English knowing Tamil journalists and translators should put their heads together to bring out a handbook for stylistics to present specimen newspaper writing and telecast Tamil. They could present examples as to how a poetic line could be converted into a phrase – how a phrase could be replaced by a word. But we brag as to what Tiruvalluvar has said on employing words, without practising what he prescribed. Even in quoting Tiruvalluvar, who prescribed and practiced brevity, we should exercise restraint. That is the way to honour him, not by squandering words. He cautioned us against excesses, and instead of quoting his couplet verbatim, we should state it is

சில சொற்களில் மட்டும் மொழிபெயர்த்து விடுவது போல

Tamil literature should be so imparted in the classrooms that the moment the above phrase is employed, the reader should identify the source. It is lamentable that teaching Tamil language has touched an all time low. Tamil daily *Dinamani* reported recently that those who wrote civil service examinations through Tamil scored low marks. The reporter was suggestive that those who valued the answer papers were to blame. What is forgotten is that the examiners, chosen in deference to their age and experience, belonged to the previous generation. The

performance of candidates taught by the next generation of teachers, had fallen below their expectations. This implies that teaching Tamil should be revamped. But it should not be remedy aggravating the malady, as it was with English teaching in colleges in the early 70s. The rot in teaching English that got set then has not been remedied yet.

Let me cite an instance. It was 1970. I was a Tutor in English in a college in Madurai. I was collecting Rs. 5 each, from my colleagues as contribution to host a farewell party to the University Professor of English, a Briton sponsored by the British Council. My learned colleague Prof. S. Lakshminarayanan asked for the cause. I told him of the farewell party. He thundered, "I will give you ten rupees; ask him not to come back." When I asked naively why was he so provoked at the outgoing Professor, he simply cited Shakespeare: "*The evil that men do lives after them.*" He has been prophetic. English teaching is still in a rut. Some Tamil teachers also deserve a never-be-back farewell!

If Tamil language teaching reforms should not be a sad repeat of the above instance, much planning should support teaching Tamil in this electronic age, when kids start with English medium as they enter the school. We have to take into consideration that there is a large chunk of NRI Tamils living in many parts of the world. They should be taught Tamil only through English. The methodology should be worked out succinctly because the NRI Tamil children are computer savvy.

Deifying of Tamil would not cut ice with them any more. To them language a tool, only a tool; nothing more; nothing less. Empty slogans will not carry conviction with them. They should be taught the nuances of Tamil language, grammar without tears, ancient literature in the idiom of the day, without the overtones of Purism. For their benefit, old classics should be re-told to suit the gadgets of the electronic medium, TV, computers and the Internet, without losing the moral import. This calls for the setting up of a cell of considerate and judicious experts.

The electronic medium is receptive and flexible, not so the mindset of the Tamils. But the Tamils cannot rest content with their ancient glory. Politically motivated eloquence on Tamil language is not going to make either the language or the people rich. On the other hand rich people can enrich the language. If the Tamils realise it, they would not be after the clichéd conundrum "If the Tamil language flourishes, the Tamil people would flourish." It is putting the cart before horse.

The cloistered Tamils of Tamil Nadu should realise that if the Tamils, flourish, their language can also flourish. Only the outbound Tamils having interaction with the international community get up conferences like this. They are rich and quick at uptake. Reforms originated from them. Tamil chauvinists or their votaries cannot go anywhere, lead anyone anywhere and make their mother tongue survive and grow in a highly competitive electronically motivated global lingual milieu, by bragging on their past glories. This is the time they should wake up to the rigours and demands of an electronic age and respond with alacrity.

The delegate is a journalist, writer and translator. E-mail: hindunatarajan@hotmail.com. Tel: + 91 44 815 1160 TeleFax: + 91 44 815 2211. Mailing address: 16/2 Jagadambal Street, T. Nagar, Chennai 600 017, Tamil Nadu, India