Attitude of Tamil speakers towards Tamil Computing

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Abstract

This paper deals with the 'Attitude of Tamil speakers towards Tamil Computing'. It introduces the status and position of Tamil and reiterates the importance of Tamil as a language to make Tamil Computing more relevant. It explains the research methodology and presents an analysis of the findings. Based on the findings, the paper makes suitable recommendations to ensure that Tamil Computing thrives at least within the Tamil community.

1.1 Introduction

Language is not just a tool to communicate, it is the identity of a society, repository of knowledge and forms the fundamental to succeed in any field. English language continues to dominate the internet with over 55% of the internet content being in English. It is interesting to note that native French speakers the number of whom is almost equal to that of Tamil speakers but Tamil accounts less than 0.1% of the contents in the internet while little of 4% of the internet content is available in French.[1] There has been sincere efforts to promote Computing in Tamil in the last few years but it is felt that understanding the 'attitude' of the end users and their interest so as to add value to the contribution was more important. This paper discusses the result of a research and makes a few recommendations based on the results in order to make Tamil Computing more popular.

1.2 Status of Tamil and position of Tamil speaker

Tamil is the only official language of Tamil Nadu, one of the official languages in Puducherry, Andaman Nicobar Islands and Singapore. It has Official and National status in Sri Lanka. It is a recognised minority language in Malaysia, Mauritius, Reunion Island and South Africa and it is possible for native Tamil speakers to learn and use the language in these countries to a great extent. It is to be understood that the 'Official Language Act 1976' of the Indian Union is not applicable to the state of Tamil Nadu.[2] It is therefore expected that Tamil should perhaps be the only medium of communication within the state. According to the 2001 census about 90% of Tamil Nadu speaks Tamil as first language.

2. Research Methodology

Since this research is about Tamils using the language on internet and technology, it was felt that the most appropriate method to get responses from the users whose first or second language is Tamil was via an online questionnaire. Since the objective was to evaluate the attitude of Tamil users towards Computing in Tamil, social networking sites like Facebook was chosen to observe the behaviour of certain groups and users. The first questionnaire was bilingual encouraging all Tamils to participate regardless of their ability to read Tamil. The second and third questionnaire was only in Tamil as it was felt that a participant must at least know to read the language in order to make it more meaningful. The three questionnaire were open to the same audience and it was

left to their choice. The participants were made aware of the DPA (Data Protection Act). A consent from the participant was sought in relation to contacting them via e-mail if there was a need to clarify or get to the next level to understand them. This research facilitated Tamils regardless of their geographic location to participate and was targeted over an estimated 100,000 Tamils via networking sites. It was ensured to the maximum extent possible that only credible responses were recorded and were taken into account for statistical analysis. A minimum of 30 response is required for statistical analysis and all the three questionnaires exceeded the threshold.[8]

3. Result

The 'தமிழ் மொழி கருத்து கணிப்பு' research survey was entirely in Tamil and 100% of the respondent had Tamil as their first language of which 82% were from Tamil Nadu and about 6% were from other Indian states. 80.73% of the respondents **claimed** they were extremely fluent in reading, writing and speaking while 12% of the respondents said they couldn't speak Tamil without using English words but were able to read Tamil. To a question: 'உங்களுக்கு தமிழில் எந்த அளவிற்கு புலமை இருக்கிறது?1 - ஒன்றும் தெரியாது 5- ஏதோ ஒரளவுக்கு தெரியும் 10 - எல்லாம் தெரியும்', about 5.36% said they didn't know anything in Tamil and about 50% of the respondents were either average or below average in using the language. 33.90% of the respondents said they wouldn't use Tamil in any of the technological devices while 7.63% said they would use in all devices such as Mobile phone, laptop, desktop etc. Mobile phone emerged as a most preferred device to use in Tamil. It is observed that a vast majority of the respondents are unable to speak a sentence in proper Tamil i.e. without using an English word in daily life. 95.89% of the respondent said they studied Tamil in their own interest while a little over 50% said they spoke in English mixed Tamil with their Tamil teacher. Close to 28% of the respondents use a foreign word to greet another Tamil friend or person. Despite Tamil numbering system being made available in Tamil keyboards, over 80% of the respondents had no knowledge.

'**Role of language in Technology**' to an extent helps in understanding the mind-set of the Tamil people. 75.86% of the respondents agree that 'proficiency' in language is extremely important in understanding technology. 80.65% agree that Tamils must have proficiency in Tamil in order to further in the field of Tamil Computing/ Technology. 90.91% of the respondents are of the opinion that if Tamil becomes the dominant language in business atleast in Tamil Nadu to begin with and if learning Tamil had a monetary value attached to it, it could help the language grow and sustain in other fields including Computing. 57.58% said they understand the technical term 'recycle bin' better than 'மறுசுழற்சிக்கூடை'. 93.94% agree that if a language is not encouraged and spoken within the community, it cannot find a place for itself in Technology- in this case- Tamil. 54.55% are of the opinion that Tamil Nadu people will refuse to accept monolingual (Tamil medium instruction with an option to choose a second language which may not necessarily be English) education as practised in most European and Western countries. 100% of the respondents welcomed a compulsory Tamil Computing subject from Grade I to XII.

100% of the respondents agreed that if Tamil did not grow in the field of Technology it could be an irreparable loss to the Tamil society.

'Tamil Computing Research survey': 96.5% of the respondents rated their computing skills to be average or above average and 36.48% of the 96.5% rated their Computing skill to be excellent. Close to 80% of the respondents admit that they don't bother to check if their device support Tamil before purchase. 77.39% agree that Tamil needs to catch up with technology. Little over 50% say Tamil is their most preferred language on social networking sites like 'Facebook' and 'Twitter'. 86.58% are 'waiting' for technology to support Tamil so they can use it. 52.88% of the respondents opined that any latest technology in Tamil would remain a distant dream. 40.06% of the respondents hold the 'attitude' of Tamils responsible for the slow growth of Tamil in technology, 34.29% hold the Government of Tamil Nadu responsible, 18.59% see English as a major block in Tamil's development, 13.78% feel Tamil language not being valued or respected in other countries as a reason. About 41.67% feel all the above equally contribute to the slow growth of Tamil in Technology. 87.50% were for a law that makes Tamil as a compulsory medium education which must open employment opportunities in Tamil speaking countries.

3.1 Analysis and findings

It is found that the majority of the respondents have unanimously agreed on two points:

a. Compulsory Tamil Computing module from Grade I to XII
b. They acknowledge that lack of growth in the field of Technology could have an impact on the Tamil society.

A vast majority do realise the importance of the role 'language' plays in understanding technology however, anecdotal references and observation suggests that a vast majority of the Tamils favour English or undermine the potential of their own mother tongue. Languages like English, French, German to name a few are seen more as 'technical' or a 'must know' languages to be perceived as a 'professional' but for some reason choose to overlook languages like Korean, Mandarin and Japanese that have managed to be largely monolingual societies and yet leads the world in some of the leading technologies. All the above mentioned societies are largely monolingual societies within their country. These languages are used almost everywhere in their respective countries and remains the sole medium of instruction when it comes to education. It must also be noted that most of these societies promote bilingualism and encourage learning a 'second' language of their choice. It is rather bizarre that in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry students 'cheer' when they don't have to study Tamil as a language which is not only the first language of most students but also forms a 'linguistic identity'. Interestingly, Tamil is the only Indian language that is more widespread (Official in three countries and officially recognised in four countries that makes it a total of seven countries) despite less number of speakers. On the contrary, 100% of the English students in England will know English and would have studied English as a 'language' regardless of their first language.

A few participants were found to 'alter' the results by taking the survey multiple times. It is worth noting their interest and eagerness to get the language to a certain standard but, it also

reflects a manipulative attitude to 'get to where it needs to be' when it actually isn't or doesn't deserve.

It was also observed that a vast majority of the respondents who chose 'Tamil' as the most preferred language on social networking sites actually used 'Roman' script to convey their thoughts. For instance: *Vanakkam, nalaikki pakalam.*[4] For the purpose of this research, they were rejected and were not classed as Tamil. Modern Tamil especially the spoken variety has quite a few English words which suggest that the Tamils although largely bilingual are actually not bilingual in strict sense. It is interesting to note that most Tamils use an English phrase or a word to explain a meaning of a Tamil word. Example: *Madikkanini* –Laptop. It was also observed that Tamils abroad (Strictly speaking United Kingdom) unite based on 'language' and not 'Nationality'. This anonymous randomly selected UK based Tamil group on a social networking site was observed over period of three months. The group was made aware that I have randomly selected the group for my research but the group was not informed of the elements that I will be observing. Out of about 83 posts/updates, only two posts/updates were in Tamil (2.3%). And both these posts were on a day that is culturally significant to the Tamils. This shows that clearly, English not Tamil is being used as a medium of communication within the Tamil community abroad at least on social networking sites.

3.2 Limitations and further scope

This paper recognises the limitations in this research. It recognises the need to an alternate approach like a face to face interview or an activity based research to verify the results of this research and they are scheduled around Christmas 2014 or early 2015. It is acknowledged that a strictly monitored and follow up on questionnaire is essential to get to the core of the issue however, keeping in mind the population of the Tamil society, only a limited random sample can be taken.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

The results of this research is more relevant to Tamil Nadu since over 82% of the respondents were from Tamil Nadu. The result of this research indicates that an overwhelming majority of the Tamil Community regardless of their geographic location have got average computing skills. It is found that proper Tamil is hardly used even as a language of communication within the Tamil community and a majority Tamils have an indifferent attitude towards using their mother tongue in various fields including Computing. The unavailability of Tamil keyboard is the main reason given by a majority of the Tamil users for not typing in Tamil but in reality it is found that an overwhelming majority do not have the 'will' to type in Tamil despite presenting them with alternatives. The research has to an extent exposed the 'double-standards' towards the language. This paper recognises the importance of basic knowledge in English language. The paper further highlights that Tamil is the only official language of Tamil Nadu and Indian Union being a federal entity, it is recommended that Tamil Nadu Government make Tamil as mandatory medium of instruction in all schools across Tamil Nadu with options of choosing a compulsory second and an optional third language to promote and preserve a

multicultural identity. It is observed that medium of instruction plays a vital role in understanding the technical terminologies. This will also increase the numbers of people who speak Tamil as a second language which could in turn help in gaining a prominent presence on the internet and related technologies. The compulsory second language could be offered from early years so a child can be expected to develop a 'reasonable' fluency in his 12 year schooling.[5] Since Tamil is a compulsory subject in Tamil Nadu, in the interest of largely Tech savvy Tamil society, Tamil Computing needs to be introduced as a compulsory module. In order to further appreciate the importance of language, a Tamil Proficiency Test needs to be introduced by enacting an appropriate law. This must be applicable across all sectors in Tamil Nadu especially for employment regardless of their chosen field or sector (Private/ Government). It is also recommended that the Tamil Nadu Government enact a law along with stringent penalties for violators to ensure only those devices that support Tamil fonts and keyboards are sold in Tamil Nadu. In order to passively motivate everyone to learn Tamil, it is further recommended that the Tamil Nadu Government make Tamil only signboards mandatory across all establishments and impose deterring penalties including revoking the license for violators. If these are implemented, it is believed that Tamil Computing will find takers within the Tamil community and there could be significant change in the 'attitude' of Tamils. The research further reveals that Tamil needs a more 'holistic' approach much more than the Tamils who usually perceive it to be just a mother tongue or a language for communication with fellow Tamils. A more vigorous approach towards the language is indeed required to promote Tamil Computing within the Tamil community.

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