

# The Diglossic Nature Of Tamil and its Impact on the Learners of Tamil in Malaysia

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## Introduction

In Malaysia, Tamil is the medium of instruction only in the Tamil Primary Schools, that is from standard one to standard six. There is no Tamil Secondary School in this nation. Thus, the Tamil Primary School graduates join the Remove Classes in Secondary Schools for a year, after which they join the Form One Classes. From the Remove class to Form Five (a period of six years), the Tamil Language is taught as the pupils' own language (POL) if there is a minimum of 15 students whose parents request for such classes.

However, the POL classes do not begin at the beginning of the year. Normally they begin around the middle of the year. In 1986, the general public as well as certain organizations concerned with the interests of the Indian community in Malaysia had to appeal to the Education Department in Kuala Lumpur to get the POL classes started as early as possible. However, in response to a statement by the POL Action Committee jointly set up by the National Union of Plantation Workers (NUPW), the Malaysian Dravidian Society, Confederation of Malaysian Tamils (Comata), National Union of Tamil School Teachers of Peninsular Malaysia, Tamil Youth Bell Club Council of Malaysia, Tamil Writers Association of Malaysia and the Hindu Youth Council of Malaysia, the Deputy Director of Education in Kuala Lumpur then replied that, "the department is looking into the requirements of the schools now and by the end of this term, directives will be sent out to have the POL classes started by the beginning of next term" (*Straits Times* 24.3.1986). This clearly indicates that the teaching of Tamil POL classes in secondary schools in Kuala Lumpur began only at the beginning of the second term. This means that during the duration of the students' secondary school education from Remove Class to Form Five (there are no POL classes in Form Six), a period of six years, the students have to forego POL classes one term per year. This works out to a total of six terms which is two years. All schools in Malaysia have now opted for semester system. But sad to say that the teaching of Tamil POL classes has yet to see any improvement or changes.

In schools where there are no Tamil POL classes owing to the lack of pupils, the interested students have to study on their own or attend private tuition classes, or as a final resort, drop the Tamil Language subject and concentrate on other subjects. This being the case, it should not be surprising to come across working members, Tamil teacher trainees and undergraduates who had their Tamil education formally only up to the sixth standard in primary schools and thereafter did their own studies.

It is therefore very demanding to expect the Tamil teacher trainees and about 20-30 first year undergraduates who sign up for Tamil Studies Courses in University of Malaya (the only University in Malaysia that offers courses in Indian Studies) to possess a high standard of Tamil, although in reality it is what is expected of them. One of the main reasons for the poor standard of Tamil attained by learners of Tamil at all levels is the diglossic nature of Tamil itself.

### Spoken and Written Tamil

The primary school pupils who begin their learning of Tamil formally in schools are already very fluent in their spoken Tamil. When they are taught formally in schools, they begin to realize that the written Tamil is very different from the spoken discourse (*Shanmugam Pillai, 1977:210*). This is because as Karunakaran states, "it is a diglossic language in which exist two varieties, namely, the literary variety and the spoken variety which are differentiated structurally as well as functionally" (*1978:8*). His view is shared by *Devanesan (1955)*, *Caldwell (1956)*, *Meenakshisundaram (1965)*, *Rama Subbiah (1966)*, *Sethu Pillai (1974)*, *Meenakshisundaram (1974)*, *Andronov (1975)*, *Annamalal (1975)*, *Yesudhasan (1976)* and *Irulappan (1980)*. They are of the opinion that spoken and written Tamil differ phonologically and structurally so much so that they might almost be regarded as different languages. The ordinary speakers of Tamil as well as more highly educated Tamils do not use the written forms of Tamil in their daily conversation. One feels out of place to use the literary language during normal conversation (*Shanmugam Pillai 1977: 1-2*). It is only accepted in Radio, Television News, stage speeches, seminars and other similar official occasions. Even on such occasions we do not fail to see the impact of spoken language. While the interviewer over the Radio and T.V. uses the literary form, the interviewee uses spoken discourse (*Karunakaran 1975:94- 98*). In the formal occasions, immediately after the talks, the spoken discourse rules the day during even the question and discussion time among the highly literate Tamils (*Ibid. 220-221*). Andronov states that, "the modern literary language does not serve as a means of oral communication for the population of any portion of Tamilnadu. It is in fact a dead bookish language that is ordinarily used only for writing" (*1975:8*). Meenakshisundaram reports:

The twentieth century through its radio, its newspapers and its textbooks intended to spread universal education, is introducing a uniformity in usage through the standard dialect which is not however the dialect of any one region or social group but the literary dialect. But in spite of this, the non-literary dialects exist and thrive (*1965:194*).

Why should two varieties of the same language exist? Sethu Pillai seems to think that, "the insistence on a strict adherence to the laws relating to literary usage naturally widened the gulf between literary Tamil and colloquial Tamil" (*1974:4*). He also gives numerous examples of the differences between the two under the headings namely:

phonetic, grammatical and lexical (Ibid: 4-62). Anyone who goes through these examples will not hesitate for even a minute to admit that these two varieties could be regarded as two different languages.

Yesudasan says:

It is a well known fact that Tamil like many other South-East Asian languages has multi - dimensional dialectal variations, of which geographical, social and stylistic variations are the major phases of linguistic variations.... The spoken language of a community is liable to change according to the speakers' region, socio-economic position, education, sex, age etc., which are the parameter of speech variations (1976: 495).

Spoken and written Tamil differ very much at the phonological level. Many letters and thereby many words are not properly pronounced as they should be. Devanesan says:

The letter **ஊ** is peculiar to Tamil, and is not properly pronounced even in words of which it is an integral part. Tamilians attach much importance to the letter for the reasons that it sounds sweet to the Tamil ears and that it occurs in many words signifying an excellent object or idea ..... Another letter peculiar to Tamil is the hard **஑**. In many words of semitic origin, it is unscrupulously substituted for the medial or liquid **ஔ** (1955:20)

Karunakaran gives the following sets of lexical items in which certain sound changes are found. It is because the Tamils pronounce such words wrongly that they write them wrongly too. The following are some examples. Sets are presented here in linear order starting with the literary form followed by the modern usage and their variations in Tamil.

Source: K. Karunakaran, 1978. *Studies in Tamil Sociolinguistics*, Madras, Annamalai University, P.18.

Change Correspondence	Norm	Usage 1	Usage 2	Gloss.
1) i - elo	tiṛa piṛappu piṛaku miḷaku piḷa	tera perappu peraku meḷaku pe la	tora porappu poravu moḷaku po la	"open" "birth" "afterwards" "pepper" "split"

2) i - i/u	pīi pīippu pīi	pīi pīippu pīi	puīi puīippu puīi	"catch" "attachment" "squeeze"
3) u - i/u	munnāl	miṇṇālē	munnālē	"before"
4) a-a/e	kaṭṭu kayaru	keṭṭu keyru	kaṭṭu kavru	"tie" "rope"
5) u - a/u	aṟu aṟuppu	ara arappu	aru aruppu	"cut" "harvest"

As there is a widespread belief that the spoken language strongly influences the written, one can theorise that most of the errors committed orally would readily be found in the written language too (*Yap Soon Hock, 1973:29*). The difference between spoken and written Tamil is so great that one who is fluent in both the spoken and the written versions can be regarded as bilingual. This is supported by Rama Subbiah who says that, "both Standard Tamil and Colloquial Tamil have been found existing side by side and most educated Tamils even now are bilinguals" (*1966:1*)

The present Tamil situation is contrary to the views of Sobrielo who says:

The aim of all language teaching should be good speech, that is, to enable the learner to speak the language fluently and correctly. From the ability to speak can be developed the writing skill, but being able to use the language well orally must come first.

With this point in mind therefore, any corrective measures in language teaching should come in the sphere of the spoken rather than the written. Indeed, often, errors in written work have their origins in faulty speech habits (*1968:1*)

Her suggestion is not practicable in the Tamil situation. This is because the primary school children who step into the school premises for the first time are already fluent in spoken Tamil which is quite different from the written form. This is supported by Irulappan who says that, "the linguistic rules which are operating on the written medium are much more different from the rules of the colloquial medium" (*1980:198*). However, the writer strongly believes and supports Sobrielo's view that often errors in written work have their origin in faulty speech habits.

The Tamils who are "bilinguals" both in the written and spoken Tamil are careful in their conversation according to the situation. On a formal occasion they use literary language, and in the informal situations spoken Tamil dominates. The literary Tamil, if spoken out of the formal situations will bring forth a response of derision from the folks.

Watts says:

Success in securing good written expression will depend, of course, upon success having already been achieved in securing good oral expression, though the subsequent development of each may proceed independently of the other (1955:119)

This may be true with the languages which do not vary much in the written form and the spoken discourse. However, in the Tamil situation this seems to be impossible.

According to Rama Subbiah many novelists and short story writers of the 19th and 20th centuries — the period of Tamil Renaissance — use regional and caste variations in their works (1966:4). The local writers in Malaysia are no exception. They introduce dialectal forms of speech, very often in their short stories, novels, poems and other written forms and thus try to give a true picture of the spoken form. We can therefore say that the native speakers of Tamil are exposed to the spoken Tamil all their waking hours while they probably hear and/or use the written Tamil only during the class hours or while taking part in formal occasions (*Shanmugam Pillai, 1977: 1-13*).

The writer believes that the above discussion thus far is sufficient to emphasize the fact that the written and spoken Tamil are different structurally and phonologically. Taking the above discussion into consideration it is the writer's contention that the native speakers of Tamil, while learning written Tamil formally encounter the same or similar problems that students face in learning a second language. Lim Kiat Boey states:

A question often discussed with regard to second language learning is whether it is the same as first language acquisition. The answer depends on the stage at which the second language is learned. If it is learned at an early age before the first language is thoroughly mastered or almost simultaneously with the first language then second language learning parallels first language learning. If it is learned at a latter stage in the formal school setting, there are several observable differences. (1975:107)

By the time the Tamil pupils begin to learn written Tamil in the formal school setting they are very fluent in the spoken discourse. On the basis of the above notion of Lim Kiat Boey, it is obvious that the Tamil pupils are prone to the influences of bilingualism. The Tamil pupils in Tamil primary schools learn written Tamil being the medium of instruction, while their spoken Tamil dominates in their conversations among their peer groups and teachers during the school hours and among others outside the school premises.

### **The influence of spoken discourse in written Tamil**

Taking the discussion thus far into consideration, we can expect learners of Tamil at all levels to commit errors in their written Tamil due to the influence of spoken Tamil.

Because of the inadequate development in linguistic studies in Tamil, error analysis is not fully used in the field in studying the learners errors in Tamil even though two

decades have passed since Corder (1981) introduced EA to analyse the errors made by second language learners (Ramiah, 1989:24). However, the very few studies on error analysis in Tamil are sufficient to exemplify the errors caused due to the influence of spoken Tamil.

Irulappan analysed the errors in written Tamil of 30 subjects randomly selected from the 6th, 7th and 8th standards in an educational institution situated in a Tamilnadu village. One of his findings is that, in many cases the written sentences are influenced by the colloquial words like amman instead of avvalavu "that much", -le instead of il locative case markers (1980:202). Furthermore, Ramiah reports that Irulappan (1980) in his studies in India has pointed out that the influence of the spoken dialect is very much in the written form. Untouched by modern influences he could find the influences of the spoken Tamil on their written Tamil (1989:76).

Sreetharan (1986) identified and classified the errors in dictation test made by 33 final year students of a Teacher Training College in Kuala Lumpur. He reports that:

The other way was theoretically supposed to be very easy. If they (the students) pay careful attention to the pronunciation of the dictated words, then they should face no problem at all in selecting and writing the appropriate letters. However, in reality this is not the case. The subjects are so used to incorrect pronunciation and also so used to listening to incorrect pronunciation that the good and correct pronunciation did not seem to be of any help to them in writing the words correctly. Therefore the occurrences of these errors seem to be a clear indication of the influence of faulty speech habits in the spoken discourse interfering in the learning of written Tamil (1986:89)

He adds that the faulty speech habits are transferred to the written language and this transfer contributes to the large number of errors (1986:89)

### **Recommendations**

Tamil is a diglossic language and the linguistic rules which operate on the written medium are very different from the rules of the informal local variety of Tamil. Learners of the Tamil Language are normally exposed to the written medium only in schools and other educational institutions. They learn the written medium at the same time as they acquire and use the spoken medium. Although the teachers and lecturers in educational institutions exert continuous efforts to improve their pupils'/students' standard of Tamil, the learners always seem to be exposed to different types of errors in using the written medium as exemplified by the local newspapers and other publications. The local Tamil newspapers and magazines contain all kinds of errors. It is noted with regret that no proper attention is given to provide the readers with error free articles and reading materials in all our local publications. It is the writer's earnest hope that all Indian organisations catering to the interest of the Tamil speaking community in Malaysia, will take the initiative to urge the publishers of dailies, magazines, books and all sorts of other printed

materials not to be lax in adhering to all aspects of Tamil grammar. A little sacrifice and contribution on the part of these publishers in making sure of error-free products will certainly go a long way in assisting the learners of Tamil of all levels to achieve a good standard of Tamil.

It is true that good speech habits are an asset in learning written language. However, to expect the Tamil speaking community to improve their pronunciation in order to improve the speech habits of the future generation is out of the question and is something that is not likely to materialise. Therefore remedial exercises in educational institutions seem to be the only alternative. But then the remedial work in schools and institutions and the corrective measures of publishers of dailies and other materials should be carried out simultaneously. Failing this, the remedial work in schools and institutions is bound to be set back each time the learners of Tamil read the dailies and other materials.

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