

**Streams of Language: Tamil Dialects in History and Literature**

**Note on the Proposed International Conference on Dialects**

**Organizers: Department of Indology, French Institute of Pondicherry  
Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore**

The aim of the Conference is to examine the place of dialects in history and contemporary Tamil culture in a comparative perspective, with respect to other south Indian languages and the European experience. Bringing in different methodologies from philology, linguistics, literature and cultural history, the Conference aims to bring together perspectives that will enable us to explore and develop tools, to comprehend and situate diversity in the production and circulation of language. Some of the areas that the Conference seeks to cover are:

- a) the state of dialect studies in south India
- b) dialects in historical sources
- c) dialects in living practices, techniques
- d) dialects in literary production, folklore and media
- e) dialects as vehicle for construction of identities, regional and social
- f) dialects, standardization and language policy

The duration of the conference will be for two and a half days at the conference will be held at the Jawaharlal Nehru Conference Hall, French Institute of Pondicherry.

The dates of the Conference will be 23<sup>rd</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> August 2006.

## Perspectives of Textual Dialects in Dravidian in General and

### Tamil in Particular

R. Kothandaraman

Both as a classical and living language, Tamil is diglossic in character. Diglossic languages are associated with a parallel dialectal system involving H-dialect namely high dialect, and L-dialect namely low dialect. H-dialect is a standardized version of L-dialect used throughout length and breadth of entire linguistic area marked with multiplicity of L-dialects. L-dialect has the prestige of being mother tongue of a particular speech community or diverse speech communities of a particular region. The H-dialect need not necessarily be used as mother tongue. If a particular contemporary L-dialect assumes the status of H-dialect, then this dialect will naturally be the mother tongue of a particular speech community or speech communities of a particular region. However, in due course possibly over a period of centuries, the H-dialect is likely to lose its mother tongue status due to standardization. Consequently, H-dialect becomes passive lacking susceptibility to any structural change motivated by mother tongue speakers. L-dialect is however active, vibrant, and productive because of its having the mother tongue status. So long the diglossic system persists in a language, the L-dialect vigorously acts upon H-dialect for reasons stated above, and enables it to undergo structural changes of replica type.

2. As a matter of fact, the dialectal interference in diglossic languages particularly Tamil is unidirectional, and there is very little scope for bidirectional interaction. Tamil as a diglossic language is susceptible to unidirectional linguistic interference from L-dialect to H-dialect. Notice the constructions *avan celvam ilan* (Puram: 180.1)(mtd! nry;tk; ,y;d;), and *pa:ri ma:ynt+ena-k kalan;ki* (Puram: 113.5) (ghup kha;e;njdf; fyq;fp), for instance, of classical dialect have been replaced by *avan-iTam celvam illai* (mtdplk; nry;tk; ,y;iy), and *pa:ri ma:yntat-a:l kalan;ki* (ghup kha;e;jjhy; fyq;fp) under the impact of replica function of L-dialect. The creative works of Kamban, Thirikuda Rasappak Kavirayar and Subramaniya Bharathi also are good cases in point in this respect.

3. It is significant that although H-dialect of modern Tamil is intelligible to illiterate speakers of L-dialect, the former is not the mother tongue of any speech community. H-dialect happens to be a standardized scholastic version used in definable contexts, and since it is not practiced as mother tongue any change in its linguistic system is either restricted or blocked. In such a case, the H-dialect may get enriched its overall

system by placing its own the productive strategies at its disposal without any reference to L-dialect. Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam heavily depend on Sanskrit source to expand its lexical base, whereas Tamil is still productive striving to enrich lexical base through its own linguistic resources.

4. As for Tamil, the impact of L-dialect on the fabric of H-dialect has a history of its own. L-dialect has profusely contributed to the standardization process of classical dialect causing the emergence of H-dialect that is preserved in Sangam and post Sangam texts. Such expressions as *taru:um* (< = tarukum) 'will give', *te:Tu:u* (< = te:Tupu) 'searching continuously', *talu:ukam* (< = taluvukam) 'will embrace-we', *uNpatu:um* (< = uNpatuvum) 'will be eating and', *eli:i* (< = eluvi) 'causing to wake up', *kuri:i* (< = kuruvi) 'sparrow', *tali:i* (< = taluvi) 'having embraced' etc., are L-dialect material retained in H-dialect. The symbol < = explains that the text material is derived in one dialect and the source material is retained in another dialect. Despite Tolkappiyar has recognized the use of L-dialect i.e., *tici-c col* in H-dialect (Col. Ce:na.: 397, 400), prosodic requirement does not seem to be the conditioning factor for the presence of the former in the later during classical period. The presence of L-dialect material in classical dialect of Tamil in large scale suggests that a particular L-dialect of southern region of Tamil Nadu has been elevated to the status of H-dialect. However this trend has changed since Kamban of middle Tamil period. The presence of L-dialect material in Kamban and post Kamban poetic works is due to prosodic requirement. Consider in this respect the use of *pa:yutu* 'flows-it' and *pirakkutu* 'comes into being-it' used in Bharathi's poem of *centamil na:Tenum po:tinile:.* However this is not true in all cases. In short stories, novels, and new verse (Putu-k Kavitai) of modern Tamil, the L-dialect is widely and extensively used.

5. The use of dialects in Tamil literature from classical period to modern times as also inscriptions of different periods remains to be studied closely from different perspectives namely linguistics, literistics, anthropology, history etc. The dialect situation in Tamil has to be identified in relation to its use in literary works and inscriptional texts. Broadly five dialect situations are identifiable in Tamil namely classical dialect of early period, scholastic dialect, standard spoken dialect, regional dialect, and caste dialect. Of these, classical dialect is confined to Sangam and post Sangam works. Scholastic dialect is standardized modern Tamil without being used as mother tongue. The remaining three dialects have the privilege of being used as mother tongue. The use of *pe:cuta:n /*

*pe:cuka:n* 'speaks-he', for instance represents regional dialect. The Brahmin dialect is distinctly an instance of caste dialect. The use of *pe:cura:n* / *pe:caran* 'speaks-he' is noticed in standard spoken dialect. If a linguistic feature is noticed in more than one caste, then that feature may be considered to belong to regional dialect. On the basis of this classification of Tamil dialects, the study of dialect register in Tamil literature and inscriptions has to be planned.

6. Study of dialects is a painstaking venture. Availability of trained scholars in dialectology is a major problem. The only source at the moment to initiate systematic study of Tamil dialects is the literary works. The findings of dialect study contribute to the understanding of the linguistic system both vertically and horizontally i.e., in terms of diachronic and comparative perspectives. Added to this, it helps to capture the ethnicity and the directions of migration of ethnic groups to the extent possible. Pedagogically also the study of dialects registered in literary works is very much indispensable. For instance the dative constructions *makar-ku* 'to the son', and *makaT-ku* 'to the daughter' of classical dialect cannot be explained without any reference to *makanukku* and *makaLukku* of L-dialect as also scholastic dialect respectively.

7. The proposed seminar on Perspectives of Textual Dialects in Dravidian in general and Tamil in particular provides ample opportunities to study the interplay of dialects in different aspects. The area is wide open. Scholars participating and presenting their findings may do well drawing dialect material in terms of diglossia from classical and inscriptional texts to literary works of modern period. As for modern Tamil, the participants are required to have recourse to dialect novels, short stories, and poetical works. They may also note that it is not suffice to collect the dialect material from literary and inscriptional sources. The material shall be properly and theoretically processed indicating the conditional factors that contribute to the use of dialects in the fields under reference.

## **Gleanings on dialects etc.**

**Francois Gros**

The title selected is a good metaphor, which can easily be expanded into a presentation of the expected content of the seminar. Because emphasis is on diversity and fluidity: one who speaks a dialect is in search of identity. The usual differentiation between dialect and language is the diversity and call for identity against a feeling of unity, which can be viewed as the merger of so many small streams into a major river. At the meeting point it happens that the minor stream keeps the colour of its water for some time before merging indistinctly. Further the permanence of the main river is contrasted with the intermittent small streams, which can end up on their way or disappear due to dryness. They are also less impetuous than the main stream, which can suddenly become devastating, overflowing and, during the floods, its waters can carry any kind of residual material. The metaphor illustrates also the fact that no language nor dialect are 'pure', all carry witnesses of their vagrancies and the river banks are to be overflowed or even shifted sometimes; the river is a wealth but is also unpredictable.

In more prosaic words, the general topics are framed within some classical approaches of the linguistic problems. A dialect is defined as a variance with the language, usually understood as a regional variance, said to be '**diatropic**', linked to space; hence the part of geography and proper mapping in any dialect survey which simultaneously draws a cultural geographical configuration of space. All that is the field of linguists and a conference on dialects tends to remain a linguistic technical debate, which generates more monographs than original ideas. But it is essential to include that regional variance within the complex network of the other variances, which can also be tentatively termed and classified. The most obvious change or variance is due to time and history, it is the '**diachronic**' type of variance which is as important as the previous one and links the history of the language and the history of the dialects into a complex confrontation which is not limited to the history of a language, generally much richer in phonetics than in any other area, like etymology, lexicography and syntax, to say nothing of the incidence on literature. In terms of social history it opens all the Pandora boxes of technical vocabularies, symbols etc. as well as various problems of identity in political terms and of course in terms of conflicts.

Another variance is depending on the social condition of the speakers and, as a '**diastatic**' variance, calls for a thorough examination of the society concerned, its different types of

stratification and a precise study of their mobility. One cannot avoid political innuendos here also and the fact that one also speaks of 'sociolects' to designate that aspect of the dialects only demonstrate that sociolinguistics claims the dialect as one of its specificities. But how many sociolinguists are good sociologists? One may also consider here the 'diglossia' though the use of two languages is based on a strategy of communication and code switching which overlap with the last, but not least, variance.

That one has been termed as '**diaphasic**' variance; it is mostly observed at the individual level and linguists concerned with the theories of 'actance' and 'code switching' may insist on it. It deals with the situation of the speaker, the circumstances of his speech and his relationship with the persons he addresses (from superior to inferior or vice versa, formal or relaxed, public or intimate, sex, age, etc.). But it has also a collective level, where a very interesting question is that of the 'pidgins' which are used strictly as tools of communication in business transactions but never have a domestic use and are, for that very reason, distinct from any dialect, neither they have any vocation to creative writing. They are usually ephemeral and fast changing but when, by historical accident, one happens to persist and stabilize it become a 'Creole', which has both a domestic and artistic vocation. It upgrades into more than a dialect the moment it gets an official recognition and then it even somehow reaches the status of a language; see the linguistic problems of Creole in Haïti, in Mauritius, in La reunion or of Cajun in Louisiana where the word 'Cadjin' would be probably preferred.

It is clear that the dialect is one element of the language panorama, important for sure, but certainly never alone! Whatever is mentioned above only tends to demonstrate that a dialect can only be studied in all its contexts. This starts with the trivial opposition between language and dialect: two speakers of two different languages don't understand each other, but two speakers of different dialects can communicate, which does not mean that the language is either the stem or the result of its dialects! That is the linguistic debate. To which is added the lexicographic debate, the part played by dictionaries, which filter the entries into the standard language, both creating uniformity and sometimes enriching the language in a voluntarist manner. More generally we know that orality tends to preserve the differences and the written language tends towards uniformity. Another debate would deal with the socio-historical factors of change, such as, for the tradition, the part played by fairs, pilgrimages and festivals, and, everywhere, by priests and

merchants, and, for the modernity, urbanisation not to speak of course of educational policies and their implementation, not surprisingly controversial.

If in quest of exoticism we try to look at other areas as samples of cultural phenomena involving dialects, one could venture into the case of Italian, particularly fascinating for what it offers both in terms of the relationship between language and dialect and for its magnificent examples which could help in deepening the analysis of the very delicate problem of dialects and literature. Italian is probably the language in which the 'great' literature is substantially the only one whose dialectal patrimony keeps an innermost (visceral!) and undissociable co-substantiation with the national patrimony. The linguistic situation of medieval Italy has it that for long no dialect could claim the status of "older phase of the national language". So several dialects survived, not only as prose for utility requirements, but in all literary genders, without any hierarchy or discrimination between them. Not only dialects remained the predominant spoken form of the language, but the future national language, instead of being mostly a tool of communication written and official, remained also for centuries a language of culture, on par with the other idioms. It is only from the political unification of Italy (1861) that, very gradually, the national language became the standard spoken language, thanks to education and mass communication. The result is that, on one side, even in the second half of the XIIIth century, great writers wrote in Umbrian or Milanese, and in a variety of dialects other than Toscan or Florentine, the two 'dialects' which developed as the national language without ever being labelled as 'higher' as opposed to 'lower' ones. And, on the other side, the extraordinary wealth and diversity of this linguistic patrimony has also contributed to the fluidity of Italian through space and time, comforting the absence of fracture between ancient and modern, as the understanding of medieval Italian by average readers remains far superior to the understanding of medieval French by modern French speakers. However, this situation is changing fast in the present context...

Keeping in mind this background we may have a look at the crucial but difficult question of the relation between dialects and literature. The key is certainly the creation of the writer, who draws inspiration from dialects but is not writing in the dialect: he should not be enslaved by the dialect but create instead his own idiom out of it. Here again the Italian experience is taken (but who can speak on that?) out of two references. One is obviously Gadda and the other one is Dante's lesser-known work, *De vulgari eloquentia*, a never completed treatise on the common eloquence, written in Latin between 1304 and 1307. Its

argumentation articulates well with the way Gadda writes, creating a language of his own which mixes a minimal 'lombardism' (the dialect of the Milano area) with all the resources of Italian, standard, local, technical, philosophical, popular and highly refined as well. The result may be the cosmic vertigo into which Gadda drags his readers and the somehow metaphysical game with some kind of chaos he tries to master, a demiurgic and fascinating attempt.

When doing so, he illustrates to a large extent what Dante imagined in an original and quite revolutionary vision. Dante goes back to Adam, the first man, who has no mother, therefore no mother tongue, but receives the faculty of speech directly from God and, first of all, addresses God ('el') himself. We are in the register of the Absolute and the Sacred: Adam does not want to hear, he wants to make himself heard, in his extreme singularity, in his capacity to express his unique paradisiacal experience of joy and happiness which also means his unique relationship with God, expressed in front of God through his language. It is that language which Dante describes and extols in his *De vulgari eloquentia*, that idiomatic language everybody speaks to make himself heard, a language which is always changing, in a perpetual quest to represent again and again the original bliss of happiness. Adam, any man or poet, must in fact keep always present the sacred reference to the paradise, lost but remembered, and measure, through the yardstick of this remembrance, all the new contexts of his encounters, as an exile whose language varies ceaselessly according to spaces and time. Dante puts those encounters in the various regions of Italy, with their various dialects, and also in those larger areas which delimitate his linguistic world: Germano-slave, Greek, Southern Europe, i.e. French, Common Italian, Hispano-occitan. Man's fate is this permanent quest for the best word to make oneself heard, a word which may come from any idiom, but always a word which satisfies the criteria of that original experience and enables him to express his uniqueness and to re-enact the original dialogue with God, whatever essential experience the word signifies, from the void which stimulates the desire to the Creator. We are given to understand here how the creative power of the poet or any original writer must transcend by the uniqueness of its nature all the norms of dialects and standard languages, and we can come back to Gadda with a fresher mind...

Incidentally, in Dante's vision, the Babel episode illustrates the fundamental confusion of the men who, forgetting to express their singularity, tried to get on well together as if there were all the same, but having nothing to say. Their failure and malediction remind



us, by the way, to what extent the language is much more than a problem of communication...

P. S. For further comparative quest of exemplary case studies, the collective work of Certeau (M. de), Julia (D.) and Revel (J.), *Une politique de la langue, la Révolution française et les patois: l'enquête de Grégoire Paris, 1975*, remains fundamental provided the fate of this seminal attempt to establish a standard French language all over the country is completed till the present time by an evaluation of the language policy of France in terms of primary education namely under the Third Republic and, for a counter-example, by an objective history of the extreme example of the survival of Breton in Brittany, where the amazing profusion of living dialects has been the most evident obstacle to a standard language.

The rise and fall of Cajun (Cadjin) in Louisiana is also a fascinating case of a dialect which became a language and which is now hardly surviving the surrounding pressures, both political and economic.