

Nalla Tamil: What Makes Tamil Good and Why?

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Tamil is well known for being decorated with a rich array attributes like the attributes of an endearing woman by poets from the earliest (Krishnan 1984:79, 98, 134, 158) to modern times. One such attribute is *nalla* and its formal variants. The core meaning of this word is ‘good,’ which is an attitudinal and evaluative term and as such covers a range of cultural perceptions. An illustration of the range of cultural perceptions is that the term is indexed differently as an adjective and as an adverb when it is used with reference to Tamil:

“*Ava nalla/nallā Tamil pēsura.*”
‘She speaks good Tamil / Tamil well.’

As an adjective, the term refers to an attribute of the Tamil language, which is the imagined cultural norm of the language. As an adverb, the term refers to an attribute to the speaker of Tamil, which is proximity to the ideal native speaker and her flow of language. The adjective *nalla* itself exhibits a range of cultural perceptions of ‘goodness’: *nalla vācanai* (‘desirable fragrance’), *nalla viṭu* (‘house with desirable qualities such as layout, amenities’), *nalla cāvu* (‘death that comes without long suffering’), *nalla peṇ* (‘woman with desirable qualities that satisfy cultural norms [such as domesticity, light skin color in the cultural context of marriage]’), *nalla niram* (‘desirable light skin’), *nalla nēram* (‘desirable time for getting good results’), *nalla eṇṇam* (‘beneficial thoughts’), *nalla katai* (‘enjoyable, well laid out story’), *nalla vilai* (‘appreciable price’), *nalla pāl* (‘milk

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that is its ideal [without dilution]’, *nalla veyil* (‘excess of normally experienced sunshine’), *nalla karuppu* (‘excess of normally found black color [of skin]’), *nallenney* (‘sesame seed oil [the prototype of oils because of its good qualities for health]’), *nalla pāmpu* (‘cobra [the prototype of cobras because of its frightful quality]’).

It will be seen that the meaning of *nalla* covers three attributes: desirable (by the cultural norm), above the (experienced) norm, and norm-defining (i.e. prototypical). The common feature by which these attributes are defined is the meaning of ‘norm’ or ‘normal.’¹ The idea of norm is shared culturally by the linguistic community. The antonym of *nalla* is not *keṭṭa* (‘bad’) in most of its combinations with noun given above. When the noun is the language *Tamiḷ*, the opposite is *koccai-t Tamiḷ* (‘raw/coarse Tamil’), not *keṭṭa Tamiḷ* (‘bad/rotten Tamil’), which refers to the Tamil of obscene expression. The opposition is clear between *nalla vārttai* (‘words of advice, praise, good prediction’) and *keṭṭa vārttai* (‘words of obscenity’).

The first attestation of *nalla* with *Tamiḷ* in the form of *narramiḷ* is in *Puraṇānūru* (50:10, cited in Krishnan 1984:78). The attribute is derived by grammatical commentators from *nanmai* (‘benefit’). The *Puraṇam* poem points to the fact that well-rounded knowledge of Tamil is beneficial (to the poet) in that the king did not punish him with his sword for violating the court norms by sleeping on the couch of the royal drum. The king’s beneficial act is motivated by the poet’s mastery of the beneficial Tamil. *Nanmai*’s meaning here of ‘benefit’ is a specification of the generic meaning of this word: ‘goodness.’ This meaning is found in the modern Tamil word for good governance *nallāṭci* (‘beneficial, benefit giving rule’).

Another specification of the meaning of the word *nalla*, as pointed out earlier, is a ‘norm.’ When these two specifications are collated *nalla* gives the meaning of a ‘norm that is beneficial.’ This is the sense in which *nalla* in *nalla Tamiḷ* is used by the traditional Tamil scholars of the modern period. It refers to the normative Tamil the use of which is beneficial to the Tamil language in maintaining its authenticity and continuity over time; it is beneficial to the speakers of Tamil as well, in making them exceptional by the above-mentioned qualities of their language.

Another attribute of Tamil, *tūya* (‘pure’) and *tani* (‘standalone’) is a modern one associated with a social, political, and linguistic movement that began in 1930s to eschew loan words, predominantly those of Sanskrit origin, from the Tamil language (Annamalai 2011:19-40). This was a movement to purify Tamil and to show that it is an autonomous lang-

uage. It was incorporated with the non-Brahmin political movement that sought social, political, and economic justice to the majority of the population. It became co-terminus with the Dravidian movement for political autonomy, which made Tamil nationalism its arch pin. The linguistic purism movement succeeded with the written Tamil of public domains and finding a place for it in the language policy of the government. Though *tani-t Tamil* ('autonomous Tamil') conceptually is expansive to exclude loans from all languages, the focus was on Sanskrit; though it was inclusive of all components of the language, the focus was on the lexicon.

The campaign for *nalla Tamil* ('good Tamil') is a late companion to the 'pure Tamil' movement. It is self-evident to the campaigners that pure Tamil is good Tamil. Some authors of the books on what 'good Tamil' is (see, e.g., Mascrenhas and Dakshinamurthy 2005, Devaneyya Pavanar 1940[2000]) give native Tamil equivalents for the Sanskrit (and English) words commonly used in Tamil. 'Good Tamil' adds grammatical purity to lexical purity. Grammatical purification eschews the structural changes that have occurred in Tamil, particularly those perceived to be in the colloquial language, and so are errors and not natural, evolutionary changes. Such grammatical purism is stringent with the spelling of words, which would cover the inflected words in Tamil, a language with rich morphology.

The advocates of 'good Tamil' are the progeny of the 'pure Tamil' movement and they are drawn from Tamil scholars in colleges and universities. Politically, they subscribe to Tamil nationalism. Inclusion of grammatical authenticity to define 'good Tamil' inevitably goes beyond the language to traditional metalanguages of Tamil; in particular, those codified in grammatical treatises of the past. Thus, the 'good Tamil' of the present is anchored to the past.

It is thus seemingly natural that the definition of good ('*nalla*') with regard to Tamil for these scholars is 'being faultless' grammatically (see, e.g., Suddhananda Bharati 1943, 1964; Parantamanar 1955[2012]; Paramasivanandam 1961). This fits with the meaning 'norm, normative' of *nalla* described above. Normative grammars that prescribe usage of language, of course, are found in many languages with a written history. The special characteristic in the case of Tamil is about more than the style of language; it is to define modern Tamil itself. Such normative grammars define what Tamil is and typify all differences in usage "inauthentic."

Furthermore, fault is any deviance (called *valu* in the old grammars or *pilai* in contemporary grammars) from the metalanguage of the past, for which the *Nannul* of the 14th century is taken to be the representative text. The *Nannul*'s authority comes from the shared belief that this grammatical work follows the earliest grammar of Tamil, *Tolkappiyam* of the pre-Common Era, unlike other medieval grammatical treatises, such as *Virachozhiyam*. This dependence on ancient grammars is driven by the ideology that the Tamil language is unchanging; it remains a 'virgin,' as expressed in the phrase "*kanni-t Tamil*" ('virginal Tamil'). This ideology is not totally non-cognizant of the changes that have taken place in Tamil in its history of more than two thousand years. But such changes must be sanctioned by a grammatical treatise. *Nannul* accommodates some changes in the language from the time of *Tolkappiyam*. Such a sanction is conditioned by the change having been attested in poetic literature. Other kinds of writings such as inscriptions do not have this status. Since poets were acknowledged as scholars ("*pulavar*"), this is suggestive of scholarly control of Tamil.

The grammatical treatises of the past had a limited scope in that they took the grammar to be a necessary aid to interpret literature. The grammar of Tamil and the language of poetic literature were thus mutually binding. With this delimitation, the old grammars do not cover all the usages of Tamil. Contemporary grammars, on the other hand, are not limited to the poetic literature and its scholarly commentaries. There is prose, literary, and non-literary usages. The grammatical descriptions of 'good Tamil' of the modern period ignore the grammatical structures of modern Tamil that are not dealt with in the old grammars. They thus get included in the description of 'good Tamil' by default. The grammatical structures and forms that are specifically excluded from 'good Tamil' are those described in old grammars, but have changed since their times.

The prime factors that define 'good Tamil' in spelling include integrity of the alphabet (avoiding new letters including the old *grantha* letters used in inscriptions) and of spelling (avoiding representation of colloquial pronunciation found in inscriptions), and preservation of external *sandhi* restricted² to the doubling of the stop consonants (non-adherence to this *sandhi* rule is called *orru-p pilai* ['consonant error']). With regard to grammar, the following are included in good Tamil: maintenance of the distinction between neuter singular and plural in verb agreement, distinction between the negation of existence and identity, and the disallow-

ance of certain syntactic structures (such as the cleft sentences, where the sentential subject is in neuter and the predicate is human). These in effect exclude some near universal usages in modern Tamil. There are other exclusions as well. The prescribed linguistic characteristics of ‘good Tamil’ are manifestations of an ideology and so show variability in their insistence.

The context for the advocacy of ‘good Tamil’ is the new role envisaged for Tamil after the national freedom in 1947 and after the redrawing of the boundary of the state with Tamil as the dominant language, after which, in 1956, Tamil was made the official language of the state. Such advocacy, however, is a continuing crusade, as recent publications—both reprints of the old publications and new texts—on the subject of ‘good Tamil’ show. There is a spurt in these publications after the classical language status was accorded to Tamil by the Government of India in 2004 (Mascrenhas and Dakshinamurthy 2005; Naina Muhammed 2013; Paranthamanar 1945[2012]). Devaneyya Pavanar (1940[2000]) belongs to this list though the title of his book does not have the attribute *nalla* modifying *Tamil*, but has *iyal* (‘natural’) in reference to prose. This book is meant for high-school students and is graded to match with the school curriculum.

Tamil has acquired new power and opportunities, and new adversaries in the view of the advocates of ‘good Tamil.’ The new power includes the availability of the resources of the state to shape the language; the new opportunities include the spread of literacy and expansion of formal schooling and college education, popular expansion of the print media, and elevation of science as quintessence of knowledge; the adversaries include the promotion of Hindi at the national level and the clout of English at the global (and thus local) level. The creative appeal of spoken Tamil in fiction was also a threat as was the emergence of alternative grammars written by scholars trained in modern linguistics. This was the political and social environment for the felt cultural need to ensure promotion of ‘good Tamil.’

The ideology of ‘good Tamil’ is culturally produced and politically conscious. Paranthamanar (1955:vii), who was a Professor of Tamil at Thiagaraja College, Madurai, and whose book was first serialized in the newspaper *Tamil Nāṭu*, believes that editors of Tamil newspapers and magazines, authors of children’s books, publishers and printers, and clerks in the government need a manual like his (which he calls a “Ready Reference Book”) to write Tamil without faults. Paramasivanandam

(1961:3), who was a professor of Tamil at Pachaiyappa's College in Chennai, claims in the Introduction to his book, which was first serialized in the magazine *Amutacurapi*, that language, and by implication Tamil, is more than a tool of communication that is pliable to suit this purpose. Rather, it is life itself as lived by tradition (*"marapu"*). Suddhananda Bharati (1943[1964]:6), a nationalist poet and a spiritual teacher, says that the lute and the flute are sweet, and for them to be sweet, their players must know the rules of music; similarly, Tamil is sweet and for it to remain sweet, its players must know the rules of grammar³. The grammar is viewed by these scholars as embodying the tradition and nature of Tamil, which is the *centamiḷ* ('straight, refined Tamil') of poetry.

'Good Tamil' is focused on grammatical continuity, as mentioned above. The grammatical rules of 'good Tamil' are presented in modern prose for easy comprehension rather than in verse (in *sutra* style). There was also a desire for the good Tamil to be simple, so to be accepted by its new users. It was a challenge to balance the old grammar with easy comprehension. This was solved basically by defining simplicity of language not in terms of bringing its grammar closer to the grammar of the spoken language that was becoming standardized through education and cinema, but by preferring shorter sentences and accepting punctuation marks. Relaxing the rules of sandhi across words mentioned above was also to meet the need of simplicity. This also extended to the lexicon by relaxing the purity of words. Paranthamanar (1955[2012]:29), for example, admits in 'good Tamil' common loan words from Sanskrit and English. He calls this allowance the middle path (*"naṭu vaḷi"*). Not all advocates of good Tamil gave this allowance resulting in a range in the linguistic characteristics of good Tamil.

Paramasivanandam (1961:15) recognizes the social change that Tamil has moved from the hands of 'scholars' (he uses the word *"pulavar"*) to 'ordinary people' (his word, *"cātāraṇa manitan"*). He cautions his readers that they should not imagine that the 'good Tamil' he is proposing is high literary Tamil. The time of writing incomprehensible prose, he suggests, is gone. Rather, what is needed is a 'simple Tamil' (*"eḷiya Tamil"*) that everyone understands; ordinary persons, who have no passion for Tamil (*"moli-p parru"*) nor have any interest in language study should be able to speak and write Tamil without making errors when they want to express themselves for their needs in life. Parantamanar (1955[2012]:18) says that 'good Tamil' is meant for those who write in the media and write creative

fiction; they should be able to write Tamil that does not have faults without having to memorize the rules stipulated by the old grammatical treatises. There are, he argues, simpler ways to acquire ‘good Tamil’—i.e. the rules of grammar to write it—through books like his.

‘Good Tamil’ for these scholars aims at including the common man who needs enabling tools to practice it. They admit that the traditional grammatical treatises keep away the common people from the grammar and conclude that this is the reason for making errors in Tamil. Hence they want to make the traditional grammar palatable and comprehensible to the ordinary writers of Tamil. They, however, never consider the possibility of writing a new grammar based on the empirical data of contemporary Tamil⁴ and are contemptuous of any such grammar that could be written by a linguist. The simplified grammar thus retains the content and organization of the traditional grammars including, for the most part, the illustrative examples given in them. Some (Mascrenhas and Dakshinamurthy 2005; Paramasivanandam 1961) include a section on the prosody and poetics of ancient and medieval poetry inappropriate for modern poetry. In general, the goal is not to simplify the written language but to simplify the language of the grammar. This is a simplification of the medium of the *metalanguage* in order to conserve the goodness of the actual language.

The conflation of opportunities and threats of mentioned above merged the ideology of development of Tamil with the ideology of protection of Tamil. This conflation of ideologies in shaping the perception of the advocates of ‘good Tamil’ helps to understand the ideological alignment of the advocacy of ‘good Tamil’ with a number of resistances and advocacies: resistance to the rise of Hindi as the official language of the Union (in the 1960s) and advocacy for the elimination of Hindi from the language curriculum; resistance to English medium of instruction in education and the mixing of English in Tamil speech; and the dismissal of spoken Tamil as ‘corrupt’ and ‘lazy’ talk. The fueling force in the correlation of opportunities and threats is the ideology of exceptionalism of Tamil, which is constituted by the beliefs of Tamil antiquity (i.e. no language is older than Tamil) and virginity (i.e. no other language has remained immaculate and immutable; Schiffman 1996:177–178).

What is the ‘ideology’ of Tamil for the analysts from the outside is the ‘theory’ of Tamil for the insiders, which explains Tamil in the sense of what is included and what is excluded axiomatically. For analysts,

“ideologies about language, linguistic ideologies,” following Silverstein (1979:193), “are any set of beliefs about language articulated by the users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use.” Language ideologies are theories articulated by the language’s practitioners. The grammatical and lexical structure of ‘good Tamil’ advocated by its practitioners is based on the ideology of Tamil mentioned above. And, importantly, the advocated good grammar is the proof of the validity of this ideology, or the proof of this theory. Language ideology and language grammar thus reinforce mutually each other. Displacement of the ancient grammar of good Tamil (“*centamiḷ*” is the name for its historical version) in the contemporary period will in-validate the Tamil ideology on which it is based. The passion about Tamil is about its goodness. Even unlettered Tamil speakers who sacrifice their life out of passion for Tamil (Ramaswamy 1997:1) do it for this Tamil of their ideological imagination, not for the ordinary Tamil they speak every day.

The intertwined relationship between Tamil development and Tamil protection defines the nature of the central role of Tamil in cultural politics, and its appropriation of a large share of the political economy of Tamil Nadu. The ideology conflating development and protection serves as the “interpretive filter in the relationship of language and society” (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994:62). This relationship is through the love of Tamil (*Tamiḷ-k kātal*, *Tamiḷ anpu*), which, among other things, is expressed through mastering ‘good Tamil.’ Doing any good to this Tamil, be it creating literature in it, teaching it to the natives and outsiders, fighting a political battle for its sake, is doing ‘service’ (*tonṭu*) to Tamil out of love. It is a love that obligates the lover to protect the loved from any perceived sacrilege by the ideology of ‘protection’ (*kāval*).

Another expression of love is admiration for ‘good Tamil.’ Political orations coded in this Tamil attract crowds in spite of their partial comprehension of it because ‘good Tamil’ evokes admiration for the orators for their “spectacular literacy” (Bate 2009:28). But it is not admiration of its use in all contexts. When the same ‘good Tamil’ is used in the conversational language it indexes anachronism; it stereotypes the speaker in social films as an oddity. This shows that ‘good Tamil’ is not a universal cultural linguistic entity irrespective of the ideology behind it that is universal.

‘Good Tamil’ has captured school education, which uses textbooks in this Tamil and tests students’ linguistic competence in it. Schools are the

sites for training generations of students in good Tamil. This is the case with the literacy textbooks also for adults. This is now challenged (Cody 2013) and the struggle between the Tamil representing the elite and the Tamil representing the common folks is going on.

The Tamil in the popular print media is not fully committed to 'good Tamil'; it has many errors from the point of view of 'good Tamil' (even when sloppy proof reading is discounted). There is an increasing amount of use of colloquial Tamil, which violates the rules of grammar that 'good Tamil' advocates, in domains with minimal editorial control such as discussion groups on the net, social networks, and on-line reader comments on newspaper and magazine articles (even when impulsive and sloppy writing is discounted). At the same time, there are efforts to sanitize this Tamil. The same digital technology that makes possible writing without editorial intervention is used by the advocates of 'good Tamil' to provide a forum for its propagation and for the condemnation of other varieties of Tamil. This technology is used by these advocates to automatically edit out deviations (largely the loan words) from 'good Tamil' that are found in freelance entries in content-creation sites such as Wikipedia. A linguistic culture war goes on in the cyber world, though it is hard to hold that those who do not write in 'good Tamil' culturally reject it.

Protection of Tamil goes beyond external threats at the political level, and has a cultural consequence in knowledge production. The advocates of 'good Tamil' have the power from the support of the State to moderate the language of science, social and physical. The inhibition among scientists is that they are not competent enough in 'good Tamil' to write on scientific topics in Tamil. More generally, the public intellectuals hesitate to write in Tamil about the issues they are concerned with. The cultural consensus is that anything of intellectual content written in Tamil should be done by persons competent in 'good Tamil' irrespective of the level of their competence in the subject they write about.

What makes Tamil felt to be 'good' is the ideologically driven properties of its grammar and lexicon. It is the felt necessity to protect Tamil from the grammatical changes evolved in it and from the influences of other languages in contact with it in the past and in the present. Its desired autonomous existence also excludes colloquial Tamil from impacting it. It provides to Tamil continuity with a past that is imagined to be unbroken and thus protects its authenticity from mutability. But its

practice in non-institutional settings such as in creative literature, communication by the public (as in mass media and on-line), and entertainment activities (including jokes and caricatures) move away from the ideologically defined 'good Tamil.' Such a dichotomy is probably the natural state of any language ideology, and it is true of the ideology of Tamil also.

Notes

- 1 The word *nalla* is used in the sense of a proto-type (of languages) with reference to Tamil by Sekaran (1992), a freelance researcher set to prove that Tamil is *the* proto language of all the languages of the world. The title of his book in Tamil, *Can We Forget the Good Tamil?*, asks rhetorically about forgetting the mother of all languages.
- 2 Other rules of external *sandhi*, for example, change of one sound/letter to another are relaxed. The phrase "*pāl kuṭam*" ('milk pot') is accepted as good, relaxing the old rule that would give the phrase "*pār kuṭam*." The addition of a stop consonant is also relaxed with regard to all environments that require this *sandhi*.
- 3 The title of the original publication of his book in 1943 has the title *Iniya Tamil Ilakkaṇam* ('Grammar of Sweet Tamil'). It could also mean 'Grammar for Sweet Tamil'.
- 4 Suddhananda Bharati (1943[1964]) is somewhat different in giving passages written in modern Tamil to illustrate grammatical points.

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