Beauty and Power

A commentary on the essays of the Chicago Tamil Forum – Poesis/Politics of Language and Space in Tamilagam (May 25–27, 2017, The University of Chicago, Chicago, IL USA)

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The relation between poesis and politics, or poetics and the term poet is synonymous with the term pulavar in the Tamil literary tradition. Pulan is any of the five senses and its variant pulam means ‘knowledge.’ It is the knowledge of language—the grammatical, lexical, metrical, metonymical, and metaphorical aspects of language—which a poet puts into play to excite the aural or visual sense, as well as cognitive ability in the readers or listeners. This power is not political power in its material sense but it is the power, or prowess, as David Shulman calls it, over language, which is employed to exercise power over the senses and minds of people. This exercise of power over the audience has certain linguistic techniques that Tamil poets exploit and, to cite Shulman (2017), experiment. The device Shulman explicates vividly through a number of selected poems is the repetition of sound sequences (maṭakku) which produce ‘overlapping’ senses in the mind by intersecting meaning-bearing words (and intersecting and overlapping in more than one way). The experience of the audience is thus simultaneously aural—which is immediate—and cognitive—which comes after deliberation. The poetic performance is one of the merging of singing and telling, entertaining and communicating.

The skill of maṭakku (the aforementioned ‘folding’ of sounds and senses) has been nurtured to demonstrate verbal mastery in poetry from the period after Sangam poetry. Here is an example from the Tirukkural (350):

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Arunagirinathar (15th century CE), three centuries before Cinṭāṭampi Pulavar (who Shulman discusses at length), is famed for displaying this skill. An oft cited verse to demonstrate this skill of his is from Kantar Antāṭi (verse 54), an antāṭi (a poem where the last syllables of a verse is the first syllables of the next verse) on the sibling of the person who the Jaffna poet address and describes. Here it is:1

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புதிய புதிய இணைய புதிய இணை

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This verbal skill, or word play, is not only the play of poets, but also of song writers. It can be seen in the new media of our times, movies. Here is a lyric of Kannadasan from the movie Paava Mannippu (1961) that plays with the morpheme tūn (துண்).
This skill is also exhibited in public oration to persuade listeners to embrace the political ideology of the orator. It was employed successfully by C. N. Annadurai in this new genre of linguistic modernity, as shown by Bernard Bate (2009) in *Tamil Oratory and the Dravidian Aesthetic*. This genre of public oration demands the use of prose (plain order of words) rather than poetry (metrical order of words). It was adopted by Annadurai’s followers in his party, the DMK, and embraced by the speakers of opposition parties. Bate tells us that this prose genre uses Dravidian aesthetics drawn from the past. This aesthetics is for an audience that includes people who would not have been exposed to the special language of poetry and who are far removed from it. Yet, they enjoyed the oration and were entertained by it. Persuasion, the defining metric of public oration, cannot happen, arguably, in a language that is not understood. But entertainment, of course, is also a reason for an audience to listen to oration. This attraction to the orator’s speech comes to be transferred to the speaker, creating a relationship of trust. When there is trust in a person it is, in turn, transferred to his message. Entertainment leads to persuasion in this way.

This persuasive power of this aesthetics of language permeates into political campaign slogans, be they in speech or posters on the wall. One may remember the seductive (i.e., persuasive) power of slogans created by Annadurai in the 1957 elections.

Political education of his followers included alliterating sentences such as these in the public writings of public speakers.

The word play moves from aural reception to visual reception.

The above shows that the folding language of premodern poetry, which Shulman (2017) deconstructs, has been adapted in the public sphere and for mass communication in the modern period. One feature of
adaptation is making the folding simpler by not obliterating word boundaries. Ordinary people, while seeing beauty in it and being entertained by it as they would be by a music performance, hear a language of some degree of comprehensibility. They applaud the power that the speakers hold over the language of their heritage and are thrilled by its beauty.

To understand this thrill, the question to be asked, as Shulman asks, is “Where does beauty lie?” This question is poignant in the context of a statement Shulman (2017:2) makes in the beginning of the paper:

“Why should we be interested in a poem that cannot but appear to us today as arcane, overly configured, often impenetrable (at first glance), a display of linguistic and metrical prowess that seems and sounds remote from the kind of expressive and imaginative drives that we naturally look for in great art?”

In other words, where does beauty lie in the midst of the difficulty of verbal incomprehension? In its form, even when its content is not apparent? This is a question relevant not just in premodern poetry of kind discussed by Shulman, but also in the modern public speech that carries such aesthetic qualities from the past.

There is a story about the verbal difficulty of the maṭakku poem of Kantar Antāti mentioned above. Here is that story passed down from mouth to ears:

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Let me add to this folk story what a Tamil literary scholar has to say about *maṭaku* and such “extreme poetry.” Mu. Varataracan (1967:128), revered by Tamil nationalists as an embodiment of Tamil literary modernity connected to Tamil’s classicalness, cites approvingly in his *Ilakkiya Āraiycci* V. G. Suryanarayana Sastri, praised for his earliest commitment to Tamil purism:

Generations of Tamil students (including mine) were trained by such Tamil professors to ignore, if not condemn, literary works verbal skill such as the one described by Shulman. But these very students were also attracted by the orations and lyrics (and film dialogues) which display the same verbal skill.

Two questions that Shulman’s (2017) paper raises for me are as follows. First, are the listeners of ornamental public speeches, who do not have full competence to unpack what is said, swayed by the sonic experience? In Shulman’s analogy, are they satisfied with the instrumental music without the vocal, with singing without communicating? Can the power of poetry, or public speech, reside in its sounds alone? Shulman’s answer is a no; the aesthetics of sound makes listeners suspend the meanings that are opaque when they are listening and then makes them move up to command their cognitive faculty to make those meanings transparent. The meaning waits to be found. Martha Ann Selby (2017) would say engagement with the beauty of the language is a prerequisite to persuasion by meaning; while a short story writer stops with engaging the reader, a public speaker will go an extra mile to persuade. For Francis Cody (2017), the answer is in the metonymy of finding meaning in the body of the speaker more than in her words; the medium becomes the message. Constantine Nakassis (2017) would say it could be explained by
the notion of ākupeyar, which is transferring one meaning to another; the meaning of the sounds of poems or words in speech is transferred to have a meaning thought to be appropriate to and drawn from the context. Rajan Kurai Krishnan (2017) may explain why such a hiatus is a natural consequence of “double articulation” of interiorized and exteriorized Tamil, which are not mutually exclusive in the Tamil mind. Interiorized love for Tamil is like that of love for god; both attract devotees to the wonders they produce, but both may be incomprehensible. Sumathi Ramaswamy (2017) would answer that the gift a Tamil person receives is expected culturally to be cherished and praised (and so is the deliverer of that gift), and it is not for analysis for meanings. An inference from Susan Seizer’s (2017) paper would suggest that it does not need any courage to return to the past language of traditional poetry (and its rhetoric beauty) when there is no stigma per se, though the practice of communication would normally assign stigma to that language calling it archaic. Mythri Jegathesan (2017) would suggest that the answer may be not in the language, whether it is enchanting or crude, but in the speaker of the language and the commanding position he has acquired—the command he has as the master of the aesthetic (and hard) language, in one case, and the command he has as the master of listener’s labor who could get away with a colloquial language of cryptic orders, in another case; in both cases listeners do what they are expected to do by the speaker, but the crucial difference is that in the former case it is the mastery of the language that puts the speaker in a position to influence the behavior of his listeners.

A second question is, how far back in history we are willing to go to discuss the poesis of power? Is the boundary line drawn between modern and premodern artificial? Can Bernard Bate’s (2009) idea of modernity in public speech be taken to premodern poetry of Tamil so as to ask if the aesthetics of old poetry that David Shulman (2017) discusses is innovating (and is thus modernizing in a generic sense) in its time? The answer seems to be yes. It is now, as it was then, about speakers’ or writers’ power (i.e. mastery) over the language they employ and the way a particular potential property of language such as maṭakku exercises power over a particular audience at a given period of time that provides a joy of sound and of sense simultaneously or sequentially.
Notes

1 You can listen to the singing of this verse here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qerSLBU4ew, last accessed June 1, 2017.

2 You can listen to the song here: http://www.raaga.com/player4/?id=124201&mode=100&rand=0.7267454186049671, or here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VCgOHiU0aDw, last accessed June 1, 2017.

References Cited


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