

# 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)**

E. Annamalai\*

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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\* E. Annamalai is Visiting Professor in the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, The University of Chicago, Chicago IL, 60637 USA. E-mail: annamalaie@uchicago.edu

பற்றுக் பற்றற்றான் பற்றினை அப்பற்றைப்  
பற்றுக் பற்று விடற்கு

Arunagirinathar (15th century CE), three centuries before Cinnattampi 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 Antāti* (verse 54), an *antāti* (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 addresses and describes. Here it is:<sup>1</sup>

திதத்தத்தத் தித்தத் திதிதாதை தாததுத் தித்தத்திதா  
திதத்தத்தத் தித்த திதித்தித்த தேதுத்து தித்தித்தா  
திதத்தத்தத் தித்தத்தை தாததி தேதுதை தாததத்து  
திதத்தத்தத் தித்தித்தி தீதீ திதிதுதி தீதொத்ததே

இதற்குக் கிருபானந்த வாரியார் தரும் உரை:  
திதத்தத் தத்தித்த – “திதத்தத் தத்தித்த” என்னும்  
தாளமானங்களை,  
திதி – திருநடனத்தால் காக்கின்ற  
தாதை – பரமசிவனும்  
தாத – பிரமனும்  
துத்தி – படப்பொறியினையுடைய  
தத்தி – பாம்பினுடைய  
தா – இடத்தையும்  
தித – நிலைபெற்று  
தத்து – ததும்புகின்ற  
அத்தி – சமுத்திரத்தையும் பாயலாகக்கொண்டு  
ததி – தயிரானது  
தித்தித்ததே – தித்திக்கின்றதென்று  
து – உண்ட கண்ணனும்  
துதித்து – துதி செய்து வணங்குகின்ற  
இதத்து – பேரின்ப சொருபியான  
ஆதி – முதல்வனே!  
தத்தத்து – தந்தத்தையுடைய  
அத்தி – அயிராவதம் என்னும் யானையால் வளர்க்கப்பட்ட  
தத்தை – கிளி போன்ற தெய்வயானைக்கு  
தாத – தொண்டனே!

தீதே – தீமையே  
 துதை – நெருங்கிய  
 தாது – சப்த தாதுக்களால் நிறைந்ததும்  
 அதத்து – மரணத்தோடும்  
 உதி – ஜனனத்தோடும்  
 தத்தும் – பல தத்துக்களோடும்  
 அத்து – இசைவுற்றதுமான  
 அத்தி – எலும்புகளை மூடிய  
 தித்தி – பையாகிய இவ்வுடல்  
 தீ – அக்கினியினால்  
 தீ – தகிக்கப்படுகின்ற  
 திதி – அந்நாளிலே  
 துதி – உன்னைத் துதிக்கும்  
 தீ – புத்தி  
 தொத்தது – உனக்கே அடிமையாகவேண்டும்

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 *tān* (தான்).<sup>2</sup>

அத்தான், என்னத்தான்.  
 அவர் என்னைத்தான்  
 எப்படிச் சொல்வேனடி!  
  
 அவர் கையைத்தான்  
 கொண்டு மெல்லத்தான்  
 வந்து கண்ணைத்தான்  
 எப்படிச் சொல்வேனடி!  
  
 ஏனத்தான், பாரத்தான்,  
 கேளத்தான் என்று சொல்லித்தான்  
 சென்ற பெண்ணைத்தான்  
 கண்டு துடித்தான், அழைத்தான்,  
 பிடித்தான், அணைத்தான்.  
  
 மொட்டுத்தான், கன்னிச் சிட்டுத்தான்,  
 முத்துத்தான், உடல் பட்டுத்தான்  
 என்று தொட்டுத்தான்

கையில் எடுத்தான், வளைத்தான்,  
பிடித்தான், அணைத்தான்.  
எப்படிச் சொல்வேனடி!

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.

வடக்கு வாழ்கிறது, தெற்கு தேய்கிறது  
அரியலூர் அளகேசா, ஆண்டது போதாதா, மக்கள் மாண்டது  
போதாதா?

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

மாற்றான் தோட்டத்து மல்லிகையும் மணக்கும்

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:

வில்லிப்புத்தூரார் என்னும் ஸ்ரீவைஷ்ணவர் ஒருவர் தமிழ்  
வாதுக்கு புலவர்களை அழைக்கும் வழக்கத்தைக்  
கொண்டிருந்தார். வாதில் தோற்றவர்களின் காதை ஒட்ட  
அறுத்து விரட்டி அடித்துவிடுவார். இதனால் பல புலவர்கள்  
அந்த வட்டாரத்திற்குள் நுழைய அஞ்சியிருந்தனர்.

அப்போது அருணகிரிநாதர் அங்குச் சென்றார். அவரையும்  
வில்லிப்புத்தூரார் வாதுக்கழைத்தார். அருணகிரியோ ஒரு புது  
நிபந்தனையைப் போட்டார். அதாவது, இருவர் கையிலும்  
காதறுக்கும் துரட்டி இருக்கவேண்டும் . வென்றவர் எட்டித்  
தோற்றவர் காதை அறுத்துவிட வேண்டும். அருணகிரி, முதல்  
பாடலைத் தானே சொல்லி, அதன் பொருளைக் கேட்டார்.  
வில்லிப்புத்தூரார் விதிர்த்துப்போய் அமர்ந்துவிட்டார்.  
ஏனெனில், அந்தப் பாடல் தலையும் புரியவில்லை; காலும்  
புரியவில்லை. அது ஏகாட்சரப் பாடல்.

Let me add to this folk story what a Tamil literary scholar has to say about *maṭakku* 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 Ārāycci* V. G. Suryanarayana Sastri, praised for his earliest commitment to Tamil purism:

இடைக்காலத்துத் தோன்றிய சிலர் சொல்லின்பம் நாடுபவராய்ச்  
சொல்லணிகளைப் பெரிதும் வழங்குவாராயினர். இவர்கள்,  
யமகம் திரிபு முதலிய செய்யுட்கள் பல இயற்றினர். பின்னர்த்  
திரிபு அந்தாதிகளும் யமக அந்தாதிகளும் சிலேடை  
வெண்பாக்களும் அளவிறந்தன எழுந்தன. இவையனைத்தும்  
பெரும்பாலும் பொருட் செறிவிலவாய் வீண் சப்த ஜாலங்களாய்  
மட்டில் முடிந்தன. இக்காலத்தில் தென்னாட்டிற் புலவர் பலர்  
யமகம் திரிபு பாடுதலையே பெரிதாக எண்ணி வாணாளை  
வீணாளாகக் கழிப்பர்.

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.

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## Notes

- 1 You can listen to the singing of this verse here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qerSIBUI4ew>, 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=VCgOiHU0aDw>, last accessed June 1, 2017.

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