

My Take Home of “Never Alone”

A commentary on the essays of the *Chicago Tamil Forum – Never Alone: The Linguistic Ecologies of Tamil* (May 23–25, 2019, The University of Chicago, Chicago, IL USA)

E. Annamalai*

The idea that Tamil was “Never Alone” was the prompt and theme of this year’s workshop. The sub-heading, “The Linguistic Ecologies of Tamil” was meant to frame the discussion, which we felt to be a richer framework than, for example, a more common framing such as “Tamil in its Multilingual Milieu.” At the end of the three days of our free-flowing discussions, I have come out richer in my understanding of Tamil as it lived and lives, and also of its complex linguistic ecologies.

“Linguistic ecology” is not a description of the functional relation between languages, but—as the papers by Sonia Das and Christina Davis showed—is a study of discourse-in-use in relation to language users. This is a different view than the older sociolinguistic and communication studies’ paradigm of who-speaks-what-to-whom-and-why; rather, it is a new paradigm of what the linguistic community does to itself and to others through the use and misuse of its language(s). Such ecological relations are underpinned by the language ideologies at play in the community. By this, the concept of linguistic ecology transcends its biological analogy.

* 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

As Whitney Cox showed in his paper, ecology is also about creating new power relations through the symbol of language, that is, language *as* symbol. A language and its ecologies change mutually, proving that language is not a predefined and immutable species (to use another biological analogy) but is constantly reconstructed; it is important for us to understand the social processes that produce “Tamil” (as symbol, code, and ideology) and *keeps* producing it. Through such processes new linguistic tools are created, as Srilata Raman’s study showed. Her paper explored the interaction of new (Western) ways of learning/writing and older—but continuing, if metamorphosed—lexicographic resources (ones not simply written down but committed to the mind); such mutations take place, as my paper also tried to illuminate, not only in the “contact” between languages in everyday speech, but also in the realm of ideas and their formulations, as interactions between metalinguistic grammatical traditions (e.g., between grammatical thought in Tamil and in Sanskrit, and their multiple elaborations). There is transfer of “genes” between languages, as in the ways of religious expression in Hinduism and Christianity, as Srilata Raman’s keynote demonstrated, or Islam, as Torsten Tschacher’s paper demonstrated.

Further, as Torsten Tschacher’s and Sascha Ebeling’s papers showed, translation or transcreation is another tool in the “mutation” process, that may include the crossing of the (linguistic) species boundary. But again, in difference from biology, such crossings are the result of the interpretive (and thus ideological) intercourse between the producers (and readers/hearers) of languages, and in particular, about the literature’s recourse to the realism of the environment, as Preetha Mani’s study of the short story form in mid-twentieth-century Hindi and Tamil literature revealed. Such an intercourse brings linguistic ecologies closer to each other. The linguistic ecologies of Tamil make it possible for it to draw from other languages to improve its evolutionary advantage, as it were, and vice versa.

B. ANNAMALAI

Being in the autumn of my academic life, such intellectual deliberations and the fragrance of new ideas make it a spring.