

A Note on Grammatical Knowledge in Early Tamiḷakam

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Abstract

The article seeks to examine the historical context of the formulation of *Tolkāppiyam*, the earliest available grammatical text of the Tamil language and the nature of its relation to the early Tamil literature, popularly called the Sangam literature. It discusses the structure, composition and linguistic features of the text, which provide insights into the methodological aspects of textualisation. Based on a fairly big database drawn from the traditional linguistic usages within the geographical limits of the Tamil speaking area, both from the literary texts and from colloquial practices, the author, Tolkappiyar, has produced this monumental work, treating in the first two sections the phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics of the Tamil language and in the third section with prosody and literary composition. A versatile scholar both in Tamil and Prākṛit/Sanskrit, the author was familiar with the northern grammatical works of Pāṇini and others and was influenced to some extent by them. But the treatment is quite original in keeping with the genius of the Tamil language. The third section, by its elaborate treatment of the *tinai* classification and its rich semiotic codes, provides the very key to understand the Sangam poetry. And in this respect it has differed remarkably from the Sanskrit grammatical tradition, which relegated the matters relating to literary composition to separate texts called *alankāra-śāstra*. The treatment of the subject matter in *Tolkāppiyam* is partly analytical and partly paradigmatic whereas that of Pāṇini is highly analytical.

Key words: Grammatical tradition, Literary composition, Pāṇini, Phonology, Sanskrit, Semantics, Standard and colloquial usages, Syntax, Tamil, *Tinai* classification.

1. INTRODUCTION

Among the South Indian/Dravidian languages, Tamil has the earliest literature, the so-called Sangam literature, comprising nine anthologies, which were made sometime before the fifth century AD. Most of the individual songs included in these anthologies seem to have been composed in the first couple of centuries AD and thereabouts by several bardic poets who lived in various parts of Tamiḷakam (present day Tamil Nadu and Kerala together). *Tolkāppiyam* (hereafter *TK*), the earliest extant Tamil grammatical work, is usually treated as part of this early literature, though it is not recognized so by some for various reasons (Shanmugam, 1989; Zvelebil, 1975). The name *Tolkāppiyam* is mentioned in a brief preface

(*pāyiram*) to this work by one Panmapāran, supposed to be a contemporary of the author Tolkāppiyar (Tolkāppiyar is polite form). The Preface mentions that the work, named after the author, was made public in the court of a Pandya king in the presence of a *brāhmaṇa* scholar/critic Atankōṭṭāsān. Apart from this preface, the antiquity of the work may be inferred from the reference to this work in the 8th or 9th century commentary on *Kaḷaviyal* (otherwise called *Akapporu!*) a grammatical work on love theme alone said to be written after some centuries later than *TK*. The introduction to this commentary, rather legendary in nature, refers to the existence of three successive literary academies called *Sangams* along with the names of some poets and

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literary works associated with them. Though the account of the first two academies is steeped in myth, there is some quasi-historical basis for the third one as the literary works said to be associated with this tally more or less with the existing corpus of ‘Sangam’ literature. *TK* is said to have been a standard (grammatical) treatise (*nūl*) for the poets of both the second and third academies. In any case the Sangam legend is not helpful to get some concrete date for *TK*. The above legend also says that the work *Akattiyam* written by an Akattiyar was another treatise used in all the three academies. Legends that gained currency in some commentaries on *TK*, dating from the 12th century onwards, assert that Akattiyar (identified with the sage Agastya) was the teacher of Tolkāppiyar as well as Panampāran who wrote the preface to *TK*. But either of the disciples does not refer to the teacher in any way. All the imaginative and exaggerated legends which associated Akattiyar with Tamil and treated him as the author of a premier Tamil grammar are found to be late and useless for the present discussion (Vaiyapuri Pillai, 1988, pp.46-48; Zvelebil, 1975, pp.61-67).

Though *TK* is quite popular now among Tamil scholars and is adored as a great work, there is as yet no critical edition of the text in the real sense. It was mostly recovered part by part from the several commentaries on it from 1847 onwards and pieced together. The earliest commentary covering the entire text was made by Iḷampūraṇar in the eleventh or twelfth century. The other important commentaries, which, however, cover only some portions each, are those by Pērāchiriyar (c. 13th century), Nachchinārkkiniyar (c. 14th century), Sēnavaraiyar (13th-14th century), Deyvachchilaiyār (c. 16th century). There are a few more. The so many commentaries vouch for the popularity of *TK*, in spite of the subsequent appearance of some simplified grammatical texts in Tamil.

TK has three major sections or books called *atikāram* (*adhikāram* in Sanskrit), each

section being divided into 9 chapters (*iyal*). Each chapter has a number of *chūttiram* (Tamil form of *sūtra*), otherwise called as *nūrpā* in Tamil which are in stanzaic form, and range in length from one to fifty-nine lines. The total number of stanzas is nearly 1600. Since the meaningful splitting of some stanzas differs from one commentator to another, the exact number is difficult to arrive at present.

The first section called *Eḷuttu* (literally alphabet) with 483 stanzas deals with phonology and morphophonemics. Interestingly there are four stanzas which describe the characteristic shapes of letters standing for the vowels and consonants. This description would apply exactly to the forms found in the developed stage of the Tamil-Brāhmi script when a diacritical dot was introduced for differentiating the pure consonant from the vocalic consonant of Aśokan Brāhmi (Mahadevan, 2003, pp.230–31). This section also has rules regarding the generation of speech sounds, the *sandhi* (*puṇarchchi* in Tamil) involving vowels and consonants in different combinations, casual/non-casual relations, and so on.

The second section on *chol* (‘word’), in about 460 stanzas, deals with morphology, syntax and semantics. It has syntactical rules in forming discourse/sentences, cases, case-variation, classes of nouns and verbs, particles (*iṭai-chol*) and qualifiers (*uri-chol*). The correct usages are said to be derived both from the colloquial usage (*vaḷakku*) and the practices in poetry (*cheyyul*). The nouns are classified according to *tiṇai* (human/non-human) and gender (*pāl*) in addition to number (single, plural and epicene). Verbs are conjugated for three tenses, two numbers and three persons.

The third section is on *poruḷ*, literally meaning/matter, here the subject-matter of poetry. This section is the longest with 660 and odd stanzas and deals with poetical themes, aspects of rhetoric, prosody and traditional usages. The two

major poetical themes are *akam* (interior aspects) covering pre-marital love and wedded love, and *puṛam* (exterior aspects) covering warfare, panegyrics, contemplation on the meaning of life, and so on. The first two chapters, respectively on *akam* and *puṛam*, discuss the respective themes on the basis of *tiṇai*¹ or landscape classification that was peculiar to the early Tamil poetry. The next three chapters (3 to 5) elaborate on the love theme. Chapters 6 and 7 treat respectively sentiments (*meyp̄p̄ātu* in Tamil equivalent to *bhāva* in Sanskrit) and simile (*uvamai/upamā*). Then follow the chapters (8 and 9) on prosody (*cheyyul*) and on traditional usages (*marapu*).

The date of the composition of *TK* has been hotly debated among scholars taking extreme positions. On the basis of the Sangam legend mentioned earlier, this work was given a hoary antiquity by some scholars. Some would place it before the date of Pāṇini to assert that Tamil had a more ancient literature and grammatical tradition than Sanskrit. Another vexing problem is to decide the place of *TK* with reference to the early Tamil anthologies, whether it preceded or followed them. On the basis of certain linguistic features, it was thought by some that *TK* should have preceded the said literature. But some other analytical studies of the same features would suggest that *TK* need not be anterior to the anthological literature. The clinching evidence is the date when a proper writing system was available to the author. A grammatical work like *TK* could not come into existence without a proper script. At the earliest, such a script was available only in the second century AD or thereabouts. That is, as noted above, the mature form of the Tamil-Brāhmi script with the *puḷli*-marked consonant characters and with the differentiation of short and long forms of ‘e’ and ‘o’. Moreover this would be also the juncture when the anthology making started by the process of writing the Sangam poems, which

until then were oral compositions.

What is the necessity of writing this grammatical work? What is the social and cultural context? What was the database of the work? The answers partly lie in the work itself. In several places in the work the author refers, either explicitly or otherwise, to *cheyyul* or composition (of poetry/prose) as the ultimate goal of the grammar. Thus there are only four kinds of words (*iyaṛ-chol*, *tiri-chol*, *tichai-chol* and *vaṭa-chol*) that go to make *cheyyul* (2:9:1). In fact the penultimate chapter in the third section is entitled as *cheyyul-iyal* (3:8). Among the different components of composition, he starts with speech sound (*māttirai/mātra*), letters (*eḷuttu*), and so on (3:8:1). In the subsequent stanza (3:8:2) he says that the first two components have been discussed above, meaning his treatment of letters in the first chapter of the first section. By the way this is actually a case of cross-referencing across the sections.

There is no doubt that *TK* dwells upon the structure of Tamil language in the first two sections — phonology, various parts of speech, sentence pattern, and so on. However, throughout the work his interest was directed to inculcate the prospective composers in the right kind of language use to make their composition. This aspect has been emphasized by more than one scholar (Kailasapathy, 1968, Shanmugam, 1989, Vijayavenugopal, 2009). The *tiṇai* classification with its diverse semiotic codes is used as the basic concept to explain and appreciate the exact import of the earlier poetry and thereby give guidance to his contemporaries and future generations in the composition of literary texts.

In several places he refers to the views of other scholars either predecessors or contemporaries without mentioning their names while explaining his rules, implying the existence of some earlier indigenous grammatical tradition.

¹ It may be noted the term *tiṇai* is used in *TK* in two different senses, ‘human’ and ‘region or landscape’, perhaps in the extended sense of ‘inhabited landscape’.

Also he points in certain places how his rules are different from those of the Sanskrit scholars. His central discussion is mostly confined to the traditional usages within the Tamil-speaking country (*tamiḷ kūru nallulukam*). According to the preface mentioned above this area is said to be bounded by the Venkatam (hills) on the north and Kumari on the south. *TK* himself defines the normal Tamil word (*iyar-chol*) as that current within the area of standard Tamil (*chen-tamiḷ*) and whose meaning causes no ambiguity to anybody. Elsewhere he also mentions the land within the four boundaries under the rule of the three (meaning the traditional three Tamil kings: Chēra, Chōḷa and Pāṇḍya). He also refers to the words found in dialects current in the ‘twelve’ areas adjoining to the standard Tamil region. It is also to be stressed that he was not averse to the inclusion of words from the northern tongue (Prākṛit/Sanskrit) provided the northern letters (meaning aspirates and voiced stops) are properly assimilated into Tamil.

This brings us to the final problem. That is, to what extent the knowledge base of *TK* is indebted to Sanskrit grammatical tradition. It is A.C. Burnell (1875) who first suggested similarities between *TK* and the Sanskrit work *Kātantra* in the arrangement of sections, the nature of technical terms used and the treatment of cases. He also suggested that the latter work belonged to a Pre-Pāṇinian grammatical school by name Aindra. But subsequent more exhaustive comparative studies point to the fact that *Kātantra* is just a popular, simplified work following Pāṇini’s *Aṣṭādhyāyī*. This was made most probably in the third century AD under the patronage of the Sātavāhana court. Meenakshi avers that Burnell’s conclusions are superficial and did not take into account the vast differences between the two works (Meenakshi, 1997, pp. 445–52, 456). P.S. Subrahmanya Sastri, a scholar both in Sanskrit and Tamil, in his fairly detailed English commentary to *TK* observed in several places the parallels

between *TK* and Sanskrit works and suggested that *TK* is modelled on those works. But he also made the following pertinent statement: ‘Tolkāppiyar has worked out a beautiful Tamil grammar on the models of Sanskrit *Prātiśākyas*, Yāska’s *Nirukta*, Pāṇini’s *śikṣa* and Pāṇini’s *Aṣṭādhyāyī* ... without doing the least violence to the genius of the Tamil language’ (Sastri, 1934, p. 3). More significant is the reappraisal of K. Meenakshi who made a detailed comparison of the first two sections (*eḷuttu* and *chol*) of *TK* with *Aṣṭādhyāyī*. She has drawn our attention to the fact that most of the previous Tamil scholars who commented on the Sanskrit sources to *TK* depended more on secondary studies than caring to look into the originals and hence made sometimes even misleading statements, for instance in the *TK*’s treatment of cases. She has stressed three important differences between *TK* and Pāṇini’s *Aṣṭādhyāyī*. Pāṇini’s treatment is highly analytic whereas *TK*’s is both paradigmatic and analytic. Majority of *TK*’s rules are concerned with sentence pattern while that of Pāṇini is mostly concerned with correct word formation (Vijayavenugopal, 2009). In *Aṣṭādhyāyī* there is no parallel thing to *TK*’s third section on *poruḷ* dealing with literary composition. This is a subject usually treated in *Alankāraśāstras*, not in regular grammatical works in the Sanskrit world. The real purpose of Pāṇini to write his grammar seems to have been to preserve the purity of *bhāṣa*, the language of his times, spoken by the elite in north-western parts of India. *TK* did not have any such avowed purpose towards the language *per se*. Meenakshi of course admits the possibility of influence of the Sanskrit grammatical tradition on *TK*, especially when a strong grammatical tradition had existed much before *TK*’s time.

There is a difference in saying ‘influenced by’ and ‘modelled after’. If we say *TK* modelled his grammar after Skt grammars, it is tantamount to accepting *TK*’s dependence on Skt grammatical texts. But the internal evidences prove to

the contrary. His description of Tamil language reflects his independent approach despite his profound knowledge in Sanskrit and Prākṛit particularly in the *sūtras* where he makes statements comparing his method of description with that of *brāhmiṇs* (*antaṇar*) meaning Sanskrit.

Meenakshi, 1997, pp.459–60.

Some scholars consider some chapters in the third section (like that on *kaḷavu*, *karpu*, *meypṭātu* and *uvamam*) as showing much influence from Sanskritic works. Thus John Ralston Marr has made a detailed comparison of the sentiments (*meypṭātu*) mentioned in TK:3:6 with those mentioned in Bharata's *Nāṭya Śāstra* and other Sanskrit works and suggested that TK is much dependent on the latter for his ideas in the field of dramatic theory (Marr 1985, pp. 56-68). But he has also noted there is no one to one correspondence. In this connection the comments of Vaiyapuri Pillai, a profound and critical Tamil scholar on these points are worth mentioning:

These chapters on sentiments and figures of speech are no doubt based upon works like Bharata's *Nāṭya Śāstra*; but the treatment shows a rare inwardness, a brilliant expository power and crystal clear formulation peculiar to the author. His sub-sections on prosody and on literary usage are master-pieces of their kind. His deep knowledge of the works of the earlier grammarians, his thoroughness on the mechanistic side of prosody and his accuracy in ascertaining the usage of words have not been approached by any grammarian since his time.

Vaiyapuripillai, 1988, pp.52–53

Commenting on the chapter on prosody (*cheyyuliya*), G. Vijayavenugopal (2009) also observed that it not only deals elaborately with the forms of literary compositions but also with other essential features like context, the speaker, the hearer, time and other literary techniques, resembling very much the theory of

communication. The other chapters in the last section (*poruḷatikāram*) on similes/comparison and on conventional usages of words if taken together with the related things explained in the chapters on *iṭai-chol* (particles) and *uri-chol* (qualifiers) in the second section (*chol-atikāram*) go a long way in understanding the poetic diction of the ancient poems. 'Thus one may conclude that the last part in *Tolkāppiyam* really focuses on the body of literature called ancient Tamil poems (also identified as Caṅkam poems) by a deep and penetrating analysis.'

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