Caste in and Recasting language

Tamil in translation

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This paper considers translation in Tamil as an internal process of changes within the language itself and focuses on how it has negotiated the pressures of the other classical language, accommodating and resisting Sanskrit sounds, words and literary concerns. This negotiation has been influenced by factors that contribute to the power structure—religion, caste and political patronage. Although early in the second millennium there was a movement to write a mixture of Tamil and Sanskrit, Tamil identity has consolidated around the idea of a classical language and culture distinct from that of Sanskrit. This led to repeated purification campaigns, some conducted on clear caste lines. The paper examines how Tamil was translated into a hybrid language and how in turn it has purified itself, especially over the last century.

Tamil and Sanskrit: A fraught relationship

When discussing translation and Tamil, it is important to read translation in terms of long-term cultural processes, in terms of history and politics. In this paper the notion of "translation" is extended to refer to internal translation within the Tamil language itself—i.e., changes that were driven by factors such as linguistic and cultural pride and that were far more consequential to the evolution of the language than was interlinguistic translation activity, even though that also occurred, at least in the form of the transcreation typical in Indian languages.

Tamil is one of two classical languages of the Indian subcontinent, with Tamil belonging to the South and Sanskrit being typically associated with the North. Tamil has a literary tradition that is more than two thousand years old, one that is distinct from that of Sanskrit. Yet Sanskrit belongs as much to the South as it does to the North, and as much to the South as Tamil does, since it was the language of learning and high culture in South India. These two linguistic/literary cultures

interacted to varying degrees at different periods of history, no matter how much Dravidian Tamil enthusiasts might want to disown this Sanskrit history.

Tamil is unique among classical languages in that it is also a living language. Tamil literature and language have continued to evolve according to the dictates of time and socio-political changes. Tamil's status as a non-Aryan (i.e., Dravidian) language also means it has been used to define the political contours of Tamil society, acting as the flag-bearer of difference from Aryan North India and Sanskritic culture. Thus how one views its practice and what one says about the language defines or is defined by one's politics as being pro- or anti-Tamil culture. While the issue of language identity is always political and politicised, Tamil is a special case of a language that has caused divisions even among Tamilians for centuries, a language whose cultural practices have always left it open to conflict and political exploitation. The distinctly different literary beginnings of Tamil and its membership in the Dravidian family of languages (a classification that was itself a result of colonial 'oriental' scholarship/intervention), as opposed to the Indo-Aryan Sanskrit family, are seen as defining the primary identity of Tamilians. The language itself starkly marks the difference from the North, which is seen as a hegemonic force that has always tried to oppress and suppress the Tamil identity, to Sanskritise the Dravidians. Tamil Brahmans are seen as the principal agents of these continual attempts to deprive the Tamilians of their true heritage. Thus the moves to purify the Tamil language in the twentieth century consisted mainly of removing Brahmanic (Sanskritic) influences, be they words, sounds or certain letters of the Tamil script. This insistence on the separateness of Tamil from other languages, this practice of a politics based on a unique language and cultural identity, marks the history of Tamil since the late nineteenth century, and this politically tinged linguistic evolution constitutes a form of internal translation that merits our attention.

Tolkappiyam and translation

This awareness of difference has always, however, been a part of Tamil literary consciousness. In fact, the very first available grammar in Tamil, *Tolkappiyam* (300 B.C.E.–1 C.E.), refers to loan words from Sanskrit and posits rules for their usage. *Tolkappiyam*, the oldest extant Tamil text, is a treatise on grammar and Tamil prosody and literary conventions. It is divided into three parts: "Ezhuttatikaram", "Collatikaram" and "Porulatikaram"—i.e., rules that govern the usage of letters (and sounds), rules for words, and rules for the construction of meanings. "Collatikaram" mentions four categories of words—*iyarcol* (words in common usage), *tiricol* (literary, poetic usage), *ticaicol* (region-specific words), and *vadacol* (words borrowed from the north—i.e., from Sanskrit and perhaps the related

Prakrit and Pali). This grammar enunciates rules on how to use these northern words in Tamil—i.e., how to Tamilise them. Thus the very first extant text in Tamil differentiates itself from Sanskrit and talks of appropriating and domesticating words it is forced to borrow from the North Indian language.

It is this same text that gives us the divisions of *aham* (interior) and *puram* (exterior) poetry, that sets up the paradigm of ecological literary writing (where geographical regions are seen to give rise to certain emotions), and that speaks of eight *rasa*s (emotional experiences) and thirty-two *bhava*s (emotional expressions or states of mind that produce *rasa*). This is much like the well-known *Natya Shastra*, which is the main work of dramatic theory in Sanskrit drama and was written by the sage Bharata Muni sometime between 400 B.C.E. and 200 C.E. The question of which came first— *Natya Shastra* or *Tolkappiyam*—has been seen as crucial in the game of Tamil one-upmanship because of the debate that has followed politicisation of the distinctness of the two traditions. Many Tamil scholars have suffered material losses and even been erased from public memory because they argued that Tamil texts might have come later than Sanskrit texts and might have been influenced by or based on them. The Tamil academy wanted to emphasise pre-Brahmanic Tamil glory, to ascribe to Tamil a literary culture that went to the hoary past, before any North Indian influences at all.

As Meenakshi (1997: 459) points out, the textual evidence shows that *Tolkappiyam* was not in fact modeled on any Sanskrit texts, though it shows evidence of the author's "profound knowledge in Sanskrit and Prakrit". Meenakshi concludes that "a Sanskrit grammatical tradition—Paninian or pre-Paninian—and a Tamil tradition existed before Tolkappiyar" (Meenakshi 1997: 460). It is clear that Sanskrit and Tamil influenced each other greatly. This was, of course, partly due to the fact that many Sanskrit texts were composed co-terminously with Tamil texts by scholars in the Tamil country, as Sanskrit was the language of the learned all over the subcontinent for the last two millennia. It should be noted, however, that *Tolkappiyam* evidences a strong literary tradition in Tamil, unique and separate from that of Sanskrit. Yet its language is laced with words of Sanskrit or Pali origin.

The most interesting sutras in *Tolkappiyam* for a scholar of Translation Studies occur in the third chapter. Here, in sutras 96–99, *Tolkappiyam* defines primary and secondary texts. The text that is created by the original thinker is the first or primary text. Secondary texts follow the first text in one of four different ways—i.e., summarising, explaining, summarising and explaining, or translating. *Tolkappiyam* does not, however, give any examples of translated texts, and nor do we have any such texts from such an early period. The word used for 'translation' is *mozhipeyarttu*. This corresponds remarkably well to the later Western category of translation—*mozhi* means 'language' and *peyarttu* means 'to dislodge, to carry across'. *Peyarttu* is also used to refer to migration. Thus a word that is absent from other

What is the term for translation in tamil?

Indian languages is present in Tamil from a very early date. Even more strikingly, *mozhipeyarppu*, the noun form of the word, is given the same status long accorded translation by Western theory—i.e., that of a secondary activity and text.

This should not surprise us, even though the 'translations' of creative writing that we have in Tamil, until the impact of missionary and colonial intervention, are not very different from those in other Indian languages—i.e., they can only barely be called transcreations and are not translations. Thus the creative genius of Tamil is no different from that of other Indian languages. It too does not believe in translation. The reason is clear. As *Tolkappiyam* says, translation is a secondary activity. Translation only seeks to explain what can be accessed, albeit not easily at times, by someone with a high level of command of both languages. The assumption that *Tolkappiyam* makes, I believe, is that literary enthusiasts can access the Sanskrit text and might need only a little help. Hence translation plays the role of explaining meanings of certain words and constructions. Truly a secondary act. Thus Tamil has a proud history of Tamilising (*Tamizhakkam*) in place of literary translation. The process is not akin to that of cannibalism or even that of transmigration of souls (Devy 1999: 187); instead it is a process of infusing the spirit of the host culture into deserving texts from other languages. As Blackburn (2003: 29) points out, the multilingualism of ancient and medieval south India "was characterised by assimilation not translation". This is an unbroken tradition in Tamil until the arrival of the Europeans and their holy book.

Hybridisation and purification

There is another tradition of translation in Tamil that is of even more significance—i.e., the tradition of almost dialectical processes of hybridisation and purification of language. If *Tolkappiyam* gives rules about loan words from Sanskrit, what we witness over the next two thousand years is a history of accommodation and hostility. Varadarajan (1988: 16) points out that prior to the second century C.E. and during the Sangam period (200 B.C.E. to 300 C.E.) only 1% of the Tamil lexicon consisted of an intermingling of Sanskrit words. Poems of this period, however, use many Sanskrit loan words, and many of the poets have Aryan names. Even Tolkappiyar approves of the use of Sanskrit words in Tamil literary works. The impact of Sanskrit on the Tamil language and literary works became significant with the spread and dominance of Buddhism and Jainism (100–600 C.E.). In the later centuries of the first millennium the Tamil language witnessed the impact of increased Sanskritisation. According to Varadarajan (1988: 16), the percentage of Sanskrit words increased to 3–8% in the devotional songs of the Alwars and

Nayanars in the seventh and eighth centuries respectively. The proportion rises even higher during the period of the epics (900–1200 C.E.).

This increased Sanskritisation is not surprising, because Pallava times[1] had already witnessed the beginnings of a unique hybrid literary style known as *manipravalam*. This involved the use of an almost equal amount of Sanskrit and Tamil words, written in the grantha script[2] by Jain and Vaishnava (Hindu Brahmanical) scholars (Varadarajan 1988: 18). Furthermore, the Pallava kings were scholars and patrons of Sanskrit as well as Tamil. Apart from transcreations based on Sanskrit texts, this era saw the flowering of creative and critical writing in Sanskrit in the heart of the Tamil country. There was parallel scholarship in the two languages, as well as a core group of scholars who were well-versed in both languages. It is perhaps because of a desire to wed the two traditions and languages that the *manipravala* texts were written.

The *manipravalam* style did not last, however, and major poets in Tamil reinvigorated the native language. The defeat by the Muslim invader Mallik Kafur in the fourteenth century and subsequent forays and rule by Muslim chieftains resulted in the entry of Persian and Arabic words into Tamil, followed by Urdu words. Marathi had a similar impact when the Tamil country was under Maratha rule from the late seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth century. Peterson (1995: 9) has established how the Tanjore court of the Maratha rulers celebrated multilingualism in a way that seemed to detach language from its culture, with texts being written in a combination of Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Sanskrit and even Hindustani. Thus Tamil always found itself waging a battle of self-preservation, even while appropriating words and concepts from other languages.

The impact of Europeans on Tamil

The history of Tamil took a new turn with the advent of Europeans, following Vasco da Gama's discovery of the sea route to India in 1498. By the end of the 1530s, Portugal had built forts and churches along the southern coastline. The earliest converts were Tamil Paravas (one of the oldest Tamil castes), and thus Tamil became the first language to receive the 'benefit' of European contact, the Indian language to bear the full force of the colonialist enterprise.

From the Portuguese missionaries to the British colonialists, Europeans made a significant intervention in Tamil language and culture. In the early attempts to

1. Pallavas were a South Indian dynasty from the fourth century to the end of the ninth century.

2. Grantha is an ancient script that was prevalent in South India.

wean people away from their traditional clergy (the Sanskrit-knowing Brahmans), the missionaries learnt and spoke in the language of the people. The Jesuit Henrique Henriques (1520–1600), regarded as the first European scholar of Tamil, is credited with having introduced the printing press to India, thanks to which Tamil was the first Indian language printed in its own script (see Zvelebil 1990: xv–xvii). The first book printed in Tamil was *Doctrina Christam, Tampiran Vanakkam* (probably a translation of the catechism *Doctrina Christan* by St Francis Xavier), in 1577.[3] Henriques is credited with having produced five different books in Tamil between 1577 and 1586.[4] These texts established a different attitude to the language—not only were they translations, transparently introducing another cultural viewpoint, but they were also written in simple diction, using many colloquial expressions (Blackburn 2003: 38). This colonial intervention allowed/manipulated Tamilians to think of their language not only as a marker of their difference and uniqueness in India, but also as something that could be used to further underscore this difference and to carry out reforms in various spheres.

Subsequent missionaries took their mission to communicate with the Indians even more seriously. Nevertheless, printing in other languages took precedence over Tamil for nearly a century after Henriques' publications, and the next books were printed using fonts cast in Rome. This was to publish the works of Robert de Nobili (1577–1656), a Jesuit priest who went native to propagate his faith. De Nobili claimed that since he was a Tuscan patrician, he was a Brahman by caste. He translated himself completely, abstaining from meat, fish, eggs and alcohol and only eating food cooked by Brahmans. De Nobili attempted to reach out to the Tamilians in their own language in order to convert them. Since he had turned himself into a Brahman, however, his Tamil was the Sanskritised language of the Tamil Brahmans. So while his translations, which followed the (south) Indian tradition of assimilation of Christian texts into Tamil, had Indian equivalents for various terms such as *baptism* and *communion* for the first time, most of the terms de Nobili introduced had Sanskrit roots (James 2000: 102–103). Nevertheless, de Nobili was the first to change Tamil to express a Christian world-view, by simply

3. This was not, however, the first book in the Tamil language. That distinction goes to a book published in Lisbon in 1554. *Cartilha* was a bilingual book that contained a Portuguese catechism translated into Tamil by three Indians, the Tamil being printed in Roman script along with the Portuguese.

4. *Tampiran Vanakkam* (which was also published in a shorter version in Quilon), *Kiriicithiyaani vanakkam* (a translation of a popular catechism in Portuguese by Marcos Jorge, S.J. [1524–1571]), *Kompeciyoonaayaru* (*Confessionairo*), and the *Flos Sanctorum* in Tamil translation are attributed to Henriques, along with a Tamil grammar (*Sumario de arte malauar*) and a Tamil–Portuguese dictionary that is no longer extant.

writing his catechism in Tamil directly, instead of translating from Portuguese, thus coining new words and phrases.

De Nobili's illustrious European successor was Constanzo Guiseppe Beschi (1680–1747), an Italian Jesuit who also went spectacularly native. He is better known to many Tamilians as Viramamunivar, the author of the epic *Tempavani* (1724), which includes a number of Christian stories. As Varadarajan (1988: 235–236) points out, this work follows the conventions of the Tamil epic. Furthermore, Beschi Tamilises his stories so much that animals, birds and trees native to India find their place in Jerusalem (Varadarajan 1988: 228). He even translates or changes the names of most characters to make them easier for Tamil ears and tongues. Intertextual references to Tamil works are also to be found (Varadarajan 1988: 229). In the preface to his humorous work *Paramàrtta Kuruvi n Katai* (1744a; better known in English as *Guru Simpleton*) Beschi said that the language of the folk and folk tales is characteristic of Tamil literary style: "Even when they wish to achieve a more elegant and ornate style, they prefer to make use of concise phrases". Beschi claimed that the folk tales are in pure Tamil, that of ancient literature before the influence of Brahmanical Sanskrit. He thus separated the lay populace from the Sanskrit-knowing elite and identified their language as true Tamil. This was a crucial argument that would be picked up by other colonials and quickly accepted by the non-Brahman elite of the Tamil country, and this would decide both the history of the language and the politics of the land. Beschi's grammars and orthographic reforms have had a long-lasting influence, as did his prose style and prose fiction. The emergent new literary culture in Tamil owed much to Beschi, who was also among the first to acknowledge its difference from Sanskrit.

This point was also to be made by other Europeans. After Beschi (and the removal of the order of Jesuits from India), the Tamil scene shifted from the Catholics to the Protestants. This owed much to the ascendancy of the British in India. By the early nineteenth century Madras (today known as Chennai) had become a bustling town overseeing British interests in almost the entire Tamil country from which the East India Company collected taxes. The college at Fort St George (later Madras University) was established in 1812, and the President of the Board, F. W. Ellis, was convinced that the major South Indian languages constituted a different family of languages—i.e., the Dravidian. Ellis was influential in propagating the position that pure Tamil was that which contained little or no Sanskrit. The language of the folk was the language of antiquity and high literary culture, a language quite different in origins, development and cultural matrix from the North Indian languages of the Indo-Aryan family.

The person responsible for establishing this difference was the missionary Robert Caldwell (1814–1891). In his influential study of the Dravidian languages, Caldwell (1856/1875: 47) reiterated Beschi's position (and that of Ellis) that pure

Tamil was spoken by the castes little influenced by Sanskrit. As Blackburn (2003: 160) points out, however, Caldwell "went much further than his predecessors in his anti-Sanskrit, anti-Brahmin rhetoric", dismissing everything written by Brahmans and asserting that the untouchable castes were the original Dravidians. Thus by the middle of the nineteenth century colonial/missionary intervention had established the separateness of Tamil and the caste-based nature of the language. The idea of a pre-Aryan Dravidian culture became widely accepted by the end of the century, and the task of scholarship in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries seemed to be to unearth and revitalise the buried Dravidian past.

The politics of Tamil nationalism

The politics of Tamil nationalism meant that anything local was immediately non-Sanskritic and evidence of a pure indigenous racial culture. Nevertheless, the support for folk tales as valuable representatives of Dravidian culture was soon to disappear, as missionaries attacked them for immorality and the Tamilians were embarrassed by their primitive nature, especially when evidence of the sophistication of an ancient Tamil literary culture became increasingly available. Thus, according to Blackburn (2004: 124), the ultimate importance of folk tales lay in their orality, and this "valorization of speech" was because "language was the crucial factor in the formation of a Dravidian identity". It was the recovery and publication of classical Tamil literature throughout the nineteenth century that played a major role in this construction of Tamil nationalism.

The credit for the recovery and publication of ancient Tamil classics is usually given to another Brahman scholar, U. V. Swaminatha Iyer (1855–1942). Swaminatha Iyer grew up in the years when colonial intervention had established the uniqueness and significance of Tamil, and he disdained the study of Sanskrit and "yearned for Tamiltay's [mother Tamil's] auspicious grace" (Swaminatha Iyer 1982, first published 1940–1942: 156; translated by and quoted in Ramaswamy 1998: 209). Between 1880 and 1920 Swaminatha Iyer and C. W. Damodaram Pillai (1832–1901) discovered and published almost all poems of the Sangam age, establishing forever the classical nature of this contemporary language. The poems were almost immediately held up as evidence of a non-Brahmanic Tamil culture, evidence of a virgin language that had subsequently been despoiled by Brahmanic Aryan oppression. Thus the Tamil non-Brahmanical elite now battled for the acceptance of Tamil as a classical language and culture and for the acceptance of Tamilians as a separate race and of Tamil land as a separate country.

One of the resulting movements was the Tani Tamil (Pure Tamil) movement, which gained ascendancy in the first half of the twentieth century. This quickly

became an anti-Sanskrit, anti-Brahman movement. Other languages, such as English and Persian and Arabic, were far behind on the list for eliminating their influence from Tamil. Though generally supportive of the movement, the Dravidian politicians found themselves unable to embrace it wholeheartedly because the resulting language was elitist (almost obscure) in nature and they could not afford to be seen as distancing themselves from the Tamil of the masses. The Tani Tamil movement also had to contest the other Tamil movement, that of anti-colonial Indian Tamil. This movement likewise wanted to cleanse Tamil of foreign words, but it wished to valorise the spoken Tamil of the common people, so it saw little reason to weed out all Sanskrit words from Tamil.

On the same anti-Aryan, anti-Sanskrit axis, Tamil was also positioned against the North Indian language of Hindi, an Aryan language that the Dravidian parties portrayed as attempting throughout almost the entire twentieth century to assert its hegemony over Tamil and Tamilians through the machinations of the Indian National Congress and its Brahmanic leaders in Tamil Nadu. Successive Congress governments in Madras continued to promote Hindi in independent India. Throughout the 1950s and the early 1960s the Dravidian party of the times, Dravida Kazhakam (DK) and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhakam (DMK; born of a split in the DK) led and kept alive anti-Hindi protests, which were wedded to a separatist agenda. While DMK abandoned its overt separatist agenda in 1963 (when such parties were banned), it kept alive and heightened the anti-Hindi agitation, since the constitutional provision for English as the additional official language of the nation was to come to an end in 1965 and Hindi would then become the sole official language. When the DMK came to power in 1967, one of its first acts was to abolish the three-language formula in Tamil Nadu, taking Hindi out of the equation. The DMK government immediately set about making Tamil the most visible and heard language in the state, to be used in every sphere. Thus ensued a state-sponsored project to weed out Sanskrit words and sounds, cleanse Tamil of its impurities, and reinstate the glory of high Tamil language and culture.

Yet some Dalit (outcaste or 'untouchable') theoreticians question this heritage, claiming that Sangam literature was racist and that Dravidian culture has only worked to oppress the Dalit population (see Gautaman 1994 and Gautaman 1997, for instance). Thus some of the letters shed by Tamil forty years earlier because they were seen to have an Aryan origin keep making a politically strategic reappearance. In a parallel pincer move, some Dalit political parties and other caste-based parties are laying claims to the Tamil language and culture, reasserting the nature of Tamil as the language of the folk. To this end, they have started a new campaign to purify Tamil and to insist on the use of only Tamil words. The leaders of these parties have even succeeded in pushing the Dravidian parties to the defence of English.

Conclusion

The history of the Tamil language demonstrates the various needs (from dominance to resistance) that such culturally driven internal translations—i.e., changes in the language itself—might fulfill. Since Tamil was searching for a separate identity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it did not need translation from other languages to strengthen its position (though there have been such translations). This was, as we have seen, because of its long literary history—as the longest surviving Indian language, all the Tamil language had to do in terms of identity politics was to recover and celebrate its heritage, its uniqueness, and to assert its anteriority to other Indian languages and emphasise its 'lack' of indebtedness to them. Hybridisation and purification, such as occurred in the case of Tamil, are important issues in 'cultural translation'. This is particularly significant in terms of current concerns about the hegemonic influence of English in these times of globalisation. We have in Tamil a language that has co-habited with a more powerful literary culture, that of Sanskrit, and has withstood the incursions of English as well as the locally more powerful Hindi. Linguistic and cultural pride—a notion of identity based on language, an acceptance of realpolitik which dictates that you retreat strategically, take in the other, and then discard what you don't want and acculturate other aspects—seems to be the hallmark of the 'internal translations' in Tamil. This constantly mediated internal translation, which even includes changes to the script, seems to be a recipe for survival.

It is this understanding of translation—that it is pride in one's language that bestows the honour of entry to other texts into one's language and that such entry should be selective and granted with caution—which dictates the still-prevalent translation practice of *Tamizhakkam* (Tamilisation). In a recent Tamil translation of the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali*, P. Pandian states that he wanted not to translate but to Tamilise the text. He wanted to write in Tamil what Tagore would have written if he had been born in Tamil country. Pandian claims he has done so in the classic Tamil tradition of the twelfth-century epic poet Kamba, who wrote his own *Ramayana*, and that his *Gitanjali* is thus his own original composition (Pandian 2005: xv). This claim comes in an authorised text that contains Tagore's original Bengali lyrics in facsimile along with the English translations and Pandian's Tamil rendition. Thus linguistically as well as in its literature Tamil continues to take in other elements while Tamilising them, infusing them with its own spirit. The language scene in Tamil Nadu remains alive with possibilities for translation even though, or especially because, English threatens to overwhelm Tamil, as it does other languages around the world. If Tamil is to survive this latest challenge, Tamil scholars and writers will have to translate English texts and make them available in Tamil. They will also have to ensure that, as it did

in the case of Sanskrit or even the English of the colonial period, Tamil allows people to articulate their desire to be part of the broader scene, through the very localising and accommodative strategies employed by Tamilians over the centuries since the days of *Tolkappiyam*.

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