

Syntax and Perspective in Tamil and Sanskrit Classical Poetry

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When one reads the *akam* poems of the Sangam anthologies, a strategy shared by almost all the poems becomes apparent. This involves structuring the material in blocks, each of which is independent of the other blocks, and each of which presents a tableau or situation. Let me begin by analyzing two *Kuruntokai* poems.

The first, *Kuruntokai* 11, is uttered by a woman who wishes to join her distant lover:

I feel my bright bangles cut from conch grow loose,
I suffer alone, my eyes never closing as they weep --
I don't want to stay here any more, O my heart,
I want to go to his land, *even though it is a land*
where the language has grown different, beyond even
the good land of Kaṭṭi, king of many spears
where the northern people live who wear chaplets of kullai.
—Māmūlanār, *Kuruntokai* 11

kōṭu ir ilaṅku vaḷai ṅekīla nāl torum
pāṭila kaliḷum kaṅṅoṭu pulampi
iṅku ivaṅ uṟaitalum uykuvam āṅkē
eḷu iṅi vāḷi eṅ neṅcē muṅṅātu
kullaik kaṅṅi vaṭukar muṅṅaiyatu
paḷ vēl kaṭṭi nal nāṭṭu umpar
moli peyar tēttar āyīnum
vaḷi paṭal cūḷnticiṅ avaruṭai nāṭṭē

Here, I have marked the two contrasting parts of the poem, each of which forms a discrete unit. Within these units, the words adhere strictly to Tamil's left-branching rules (adjectives come before what they modify). The two units of the poem are broken by the woman's invocation to her heart, setting them apart and making them clearly discrete. As in many Tamil poems, the effect here is made by distancing: the first unit is concerned with the speaker's body, while the second unit gradually becomes farther and farther away, until it is clearly something the speaker can only remotely imagine. In Tamil (but not the translation), the progression is: 1. northerners who wear chaplets of *kullai*; 2. many-speared Kaṭṭi's good land; 3. land where the language has grown different. This order is virtually impossible to reproduce in English without making the translation sound ridiculous. These two units are quite independent. Any connection between them is made by the hearer, and the

connection is not limited to the obvious one of 1. her suffering and 2. her joining her lover. The poem is redolent with suggestions of the impossibility of her joining him, of how much she must love him to want to undertake such a journey, of fear of the unknown, and on and on. It opens up into a whole world.

On the way he went, they say, the springs are as small
as ant holes. On those forking paths
robbers with curved bows climb the rocks
that are hot as the stones in a forge and they grind
and sharpen their arrows.

*But this town with its noise cannot understand
how I suffer and it gossips as if I were
a stranger.*

—Ōtalāntaiyār, *Kuṟuntokai* 12

erumpi aḷaiyil kuṟum pala cuṇaiya
ulaik kal anna pārai ērik
koṭu vil eyiṇar pakali māykkum
kavalaittu eṇpa avar cenra ārē.
*atu marṟu avalam koḷḷātu
notumal kaḷarum iovaḷuṅkal ūrē.*

Here, a woman describes how terribly she worries about her traveling lover and contrasts her state with that of her town, which is gossiping about their affair. In the first unit, she describes what “they say” about the way on which he traveled. The Tamil hangs together, rather as a long Sanskrit compound would, and in a way that is impossible to reproduce in good English—there is an unbroken progression from large and global to the very small, from the tiny springs to the rocks like stones in a forge to the hunters to the arrows that they sharpen. This phallic and ominous object is used to characterize the confused paths he took. The second unit is a simple sentence, moving from her state to the indifference of the city. As in the previous poem, we see a contrast between two things whose connections are not made clear. While it is not difficult to make the obvious connection—that she is worried about the terrible place her lover is traveling while the town can only gossip about her—there are many other resonances that the poem awakens. One notes how credulous the speaker is, how she unerringly imagines the worst, how she is afraid to suggest the robbers might actually kill her lover, and how angry she is at the city.

In both of these poems, as in almost all of the love poems of Sangam literature, the use of space is crucial to the effect the poem makes: the hearer moves from near to the speaker to distances, he sees the situation globally, then from a close perspective, and often everything in between. Indeed, the perspective keeps shifting, and this movement in perspective is a critical component of the poem.

Let us move on to a much longer—and more complex—love poem (*Akanānūru* 9).

*Buds of iruppai open
like arrow tips stuffed
into swelling quivers,
heads small and sharp, bright
for their task of killing.
Shoots red as copper
plates and in them
the hollow stamens sweet
as butter scratch holes you can see
with their soft ends.
Petals grow loose,
spread in the wind like
rain and hail, on steep paths
red as coral, they spread
like fat on thick blood.
Near that wilderness,
a little town:
women with thin curling hair
raise fine pestles with
ornamental rings and beat
their mortars, and their rhythm
seems to echo the crying
of the owls on high, dark hills.
And I pass by, I leave them behind, hurrying,
hurrying and even when the sun
falls, it seems my home is
close, horses speed, and I go
never slowing their pace.*

Yet
even faster,
reaching even sooner,
as she stands
to one side of our fine,
high house, as she prays
every time the lizard calls
on the wall, in the evening
when cows go home, he comes
and curving his arms around her,
covers her eyes and touches her back
soft as the trunk of a female
elephant, caressed by
her bangled hand:

my woman, chaste and modest,
forehead bright, words
so sweet.

**My heart has already
 gone to her,
 craving her soft arms, my heart
 has already found its joy.**

—Kallāṭaṅār, *Akanāṅṅūru* 9

kol vinaip polina, kūrñ kurum puḷukiñ,
villōr tūñi vñkap peyta
appu nuñai ēyppa arumpiya iruppai,
ceppu aṭar aṅṅa ceñ kuḷai akam tōru,
ilutiñ aṅṅa tim puḷal tuyōy
ulutu kāñ tulaia āki, ār kaḷalpu,
āli vāñiñ kāloṭu pāri,
tuppiñ aṅṅa ceñ kōṭṭu iyaviñ,
neyttōr mīmīcai niñattiñ parikkum
attam nañṅiya am kuṭic cīrūr --
kotu nun oṭi makalir oḷkiya
toti mān ulakkait tūntu ural pāni,
netu māḷ varaiya kutiñaiyōtu irattum
kuñru patinum, “ūr cēyttu” eñātu,
tunai pari turakkum tuñcāc celaviñ
emmiñum viraintu val eyti, pal mān
ōñkiya nal il oru cirai nilaii,
māñkarp palli patutorum paravi,
kanru puku mālai ninrōl eyti,
kai kaviyāc cenru, kan putaiyāk kuruki,
pitik kai anna pinnakam tinti,
totik kai taivarat tōyntanru kollō --
nānotu mitainta karpin, vāl nutal,
am tim kilavik kurumakal
meñ tōḷ peṅa nacaic ceṅṅa eñ neñcē

The hero is returning home from battle to see his wife after a separation. As he travels on his chariot, he moves from a landscape that is reminiscent of war, with its phallic images, fat and blood, and then through a place of death with the owls calling and wild villages. The poem ends with an evocation of the domestic—his wife praying, the lizard calling, the soft embrace, the soft trunk of a female elephant. Yet the reader is puzzled, as it is not the hero who experiences the welcome of his wife. It is not until the last word of the poem (“heart”) that the puzzle is solved and the reader realizes that it is the hero’s heart that has already gone, and that the welcome he describes is something he looks forward to. The last word of the poem causes a reappraisal of what went

before, changing its meaning and implications. Everything in the poem becomes relative, and one sees the events from different perspectives as one moves through the various tableaux that the poet creates.¹

The structures that make this sort of movement possible, I would suggest, are implied by the syntactic structure of Tamil, specifically its character of embedding sentences in other sentences. It is important to remember that Tamil is a suffixing language, and that adjectives have no endings (unlike most older Indo-European languages). The result is that the function of words is determined by position: an adjective before a noun almost always must modify that noun. Verbs in Tamil, however, are remarkably flexible: they can be adverbs, adjectives, or various sorts of nouns. Indeed, it is possible to take whole Tamil sentences and turn them into nouns, adjectives, or adverbs by simply changing the verb form and keeping everything else the same. In the second poem above, for example, the word *māykkum*, “grind and sharpen,” is an adjectival participle modifying *kavalai* (“forking roads”). Literally, it means “the way he went, they say, has paths where...grind and sharpen.” Into the midst of this is placed an adverbial participle (converbial), “having climbed.” As a result of the structures it can make, Tamil is able to form long utterances that are often quite complex made out of loosely connected parts ending in verbs or nouns heavily modified by verbs. Each structure we have delineated in these poems tends to be one syntactic unit ending with a verb.

The units of these poems are not closely related by syntax—they tend to hang, and the relationship between them slowly takes shape in the hearer's mind. This results in a complex process of apprehension, one which depends on the various pieces of the poem being interpreted together. This is not unlike the way in which people apprehend reality, attempting to put various events and experiences together into something they can comprehend and act on. What is critically important in these poems is that there is no one proper perspective, no one solution that makes the poem work. Like real life, the poems leave the hearer in doubt as to what is really going on, where it will end, what it means. These are not closed poems, they are open, and the interpretation of them can go on indefinitely. This is a characteristic found through much of Tamil literature. Even very short pieces, such as the stanzas of the *Tirukkural*, are thought to open out into a sort of experiential unboundedness. In the *Tiruvalluvamālai*, Kapilar is supposed to have written, “O you of a fertile land / where hens sleep in the house / to the singing of women pounding the grain, / the breadth of Valluvan's *veṅpā*'s is like / a tiny drop of water smaller than a millet seed / and it reflects the extent of a great palmyra.” (*Veṅpā* is a Tamil meter, and the *Tirukkural* uses the shortest form of it; this is *Tiruvalluvamālai* 5). A. K. Ramanujan, the first ever to translate from an Indian language into poetic English, reflected the structure of the Tamil poems by placing the various parts in different visual orientation to one another. His

¹ This poem is analyzed well (along with several other Sangam poems) in Rajam, V. S. (1992). *A Reference Grammar of Classical Tamil Poetry : 150 B.C.-pre-fifth/sixth Century A.D.* Philadelphia, Pa., American Philosophical Society.

*Interior Landscape*² was among the most important Indological books published in the 20th century, as it was remarkably successful in bringing into English the extraordinary richness of the Tamil poems and in approximating their syntactic structure, so radically different from anything in English.³ The point I would like to make here is that the structure of Tamil, which demands that everything related be in a unit and that nothing unrelated can be in that unit, has predisposed the language to create an esthetic of ambivalence and experiential relativism.

This is quite different from Sanskrit, which inherits the Indo-European facility for relating things through inflection rather than position. An example is Kalidasa's famous poem in the *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*:

You touch her eyes and their corners quiver,
again and again, and, as if telling her a secret,
you buzz sweetly moving near her ear.
As she tries to shake you off with her hands,
you drink from her lower lip, the very essence
of loving -- we, O bee, are struck down
in our desire to know her, and you have gained your goal.
—Kālidāsa *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, 1.20.

(Parts separated, as in the Tamil verses above).

calāpāṅgām dṛṣṭim spṛśasi bahuśo vepathumatim
rahasyākhyāyīva svanasi mṛdu karṇāntikacarah
karau vyādhunvatyāḥ pibasi ratisarvasvam adharam
vayam tattvānveṣān madhukara! hatās tvam khalu kṛtī

(Words that go together marked -- in the Tamil, there are no separated words that are go together).

calāpāṅgām dṛṣṭim spṛśasi bahuśo vepathumatim
rahasyākhyāyīva svanasi mṛdu karṇāntikacarah
karau vyādhunvatyāḥ pibasi ratisarvasvam adharam
vayam tattvānveṣān madhukara! hatās tvam khalu kṛtī

This poem consists of four syntactic units, each of which has a finite verb. Yet its meaning units do not coincide with its syntax: all of the three first sentences are meant to be construed together and to be summed up in the final line, which “solves” the poem leaving little to the imagination. Of course, the last line does result in the suggestion that the speaker wishes he could become Śakuntalā’s lover and that each act of the bee could also be an act of a lover, but this is a straightforward solution having nothing of the open-endedness of the Tamil poems. Here, the reader who wishes to understand the poem needs to

² Ramanujan, A. K. (1967). *The Interior Landscape; Love Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

³ It should be mentioned that there have been highly successful translations into other European languages. Especially noteworthy is François Gros’s translation of the *Paripāṭal*, which came out at almost the same time as Ramanujan’s volume (Gros, F. (1968). *Le Paripāṭal, texte tamoul*. Pondichéry, Institut Français d’Indologie).

know and bring to mind every morphological form used in order to determine the tight relationship of the words, whose order may not reflect their relationships. This peculiarity is found in other Indo-European languages -- it is a device beloved of Virgil, for example.⁴ What this means in Sanskrit is that the poem creates its meaning as the tight syntactic relationship of the various words is realized by the hearer. It is, in a sense, solved, and only after this solution can it be experienced. For this reason, it is bounded. Sanskrit poems rarely if ever open out into the sort of relative experience so common in the early Tamil poems. They are elegant, jewellike, and, once solved, do not continually perplex the reader as to what they may mean (unless their morphology or syntax is unclear). This is why, universally, the Sanskrit *ālaṅkārikas* analyze Sanskrit poetry one stanza (always of four *pādas*) at a time. While the poetry obviously depends on how stanzas are grouped together (as shown by Indira Peterson in her recently published work on the *Kirātārjunīya*),⁵ those theoreticians who wrote about it felt that the major effect of the poetry was achieved one stanza at a time. Each stanza could be "solved": the relationship between the words understood and the import of the various figures used assimilated, and that was that.⁶

It is interesting to note that Sanskrit, while Indo-European in its morphology, has borrowed many syntactic features from Dravidian. These include the generally accepted syntactic markers (*iti, eva, api*) as well as the complex compounding system. Look, for example, at Bhartṛhari's memorable poem on *vairāgya*. The first half uses Indo-European syntax, but the second half, with its long compound, is not like Indo-European at all. Rather, it is Dravidian in its structure and in the imprecise relations of the words of the compound one to another. I would argue that Bhartṛhari uses this contrast for effect in the poem. In the first half, everything is ordered and perfectly defined, while when one comes to the long compound, uncertainty and ambiguity creep in:

They are lucky who, living in mountain caves, meditate on the highest light
and parrots sit fearlessly in their laps and drink their tears of bliss,
but for us life passes by as we enjoy the delights of playing
in pleasure gardens and ponds and palaces made of wishes.

Meaning units:

dhanyānām girikandareṣu vasatām jyotiḥ paraṁ dhyāyatām
ānandāśrukaṇān pibanti śakunā niḥśāṅkam ankeśayāḥ
asmākaṁ tu manorathoparacitaprāsādavāpīta-
kriḍākānanakelikautukajuṣām āyuh paraṁ kṣiyate.

⁴ As in the famous line *danaos timeo et dona ferentes*, "I fear Greeks even bearing gifts," where *ferentes*, "bearing," modifies *danaos*, "Greeks."

⁵ Peterson, I. V. (2003). *Design and Rhetoric in a Sanskrit Court Epic : the Kirātārjunīya of Bhāravi*. Albany, State University of New York Press.

⁶ Sanskrit poets sometimes use the device of *yamaka*, where several verses are construed together, as at the beginning of the *Raghuvamśa*, but even there the commentators and *ālaṅkārikas* do not really go beyond a few relatively uniform stanzas.

Syntactical connections:

dhanyānām girikandareṣu *vasatām* jyotiḥ paraṃ *dhyāyatām*
ānandāśrukaṇān pibanti śakunā niḥśaṅkam arṅkeśayāh
asmākaṃ tu manorathoparacitaprāsādavāpītaṭa-
 kriḍākānanakelikautukajuṣām *āyuh* paraṃ kṣīyate.
 —Bhartṛhari, *Virāgyasatakam*, 18.

Here, in the first half, everything is tightly connected—each word is bounded and completely connected to its modifiers. But in the second, the long compound (which could easily be rendered word-for-word in a natural Dravidian sentence) does not specify the relationship of the words one to another. As a result, it gains something of the openness of the Tamil poems: just what the poet means is somewhat uncertain and unbounded. Does he mean that the palaces are real, but ephemeral, or that we pass our lives in a fantasy world?

It is important to understand this difference between Sanskrit and Dravidian, as it plays a major role in Indian literature. I remember Narayana Rao telling of Telugu works that seem to have the same relativism as one sees in Tamil. That Telugu and other Dravidian languages should have this character is scarcely surprising, given the fact that they have exactly the same syntactic structures as Tamil (however many Sanskrit words they may borrow). In Tamil itself, the relativism of the early Sangam literature continued and culminated in the greatest of Indian poems, Kampan's *Rāmāyaṇam*. It is interesting to contrast Kampan's poem with other versions, especially those of Vālmīki and Tulsī. In the two northern versions, though separated by perhaps 2000 years, the treatment of the characters tends to be black and white—they are either good or evil. But in Kampan, the attitude towards the characters is always shifting as the circumstances and the story change. Rāma himself is scarcely a paragon (though he is always divine), while many see Rāvaṇa as the work's great hero. One comes from the work with the feeling that existence is capricious, divinity unpredictable and inscrutable, and that nothing can be taken for granted or, ultimately, understood.

In the introduction to the translation of the *Purānāṅṅūru* by Hank Heifetz and myself, I wrote, "In its straightforward description of the lowest castes, of their poverty and struggle to survive, in its incessant and rather manic glorification of kings, in its delineation of the role of the king and of power, and finally in its search for ways to make sense of the suffering that it describes with such eloquence, the *Purānāṅṅūru* stands out from other great texts of premodern India with an almost modern sense of the frailty and capriciousness of human existence."⁷ I would add to this that something of this sense of frailty and unpredictability is communicated by the way in which many poems adopt complex perspectives, not allowing one to come to any final conclusion or to "solve" the meaning or import. This is especially true of the great ethical poems in that work. Take, for example, poem 193, by Ōrēruḷavar:

⁷ See Hart, G. L. and H. Heifetz (1999). *The Four Hundred Songs of War and Wisdom : an Anthology of Poems from Classical Tamil : the Purānāṅṅūru*. New York, Columbia University Press.

Surely as if someone were hunting you across the breadth
of a white salt-flat stretching out like a flayed skin
thrown down to dry, one could run like a deer
and flee, but life with a family binds up your feet!

The ideas here are extremely complex and carry many different levels and kinds of connotation. Are we to suppose that running away is as hopeless as a deer escaping the hunters? That living with a family is as terrible as having one's flayed hide drying in the sun? That any kind of real happiness is hopeless? Or is the author suggesting that only renunciation can help us escape the terrible suffering of ordinary life, and that, while it is as difficult as a deer trying to escape its hunters, it is nevertheless possible. We might also remark on the strange—and for the early Tamils extremely unusual—suggestion that family life is characterized by barrenness, since nothing can grow on a salt flat.

It is, I would suggest, the nature of the Tamil language, and the fluid way of perceiving the world that it enhances, that gives to old Tamil literature its most remarkable feature—the ability to describe and stimulate a complexity of vision and experience that is constantly shifting. In this, it contrasts markedly with Sanskrit, which tends to use one perspective at a time. According to *rasa* theory, a writer should strive for a unified, coherent mood unblemished by feelings or events that do not fit. *Śṛṅgāra*, the erotic mood, should not be tainted by *jugupsā*, the mood of disgust or revulsion, for example. Tamil literature knows no such constraint. One can scarcely read more than a few pages in Kampan without coming upon a violent change in perspective and mood. And even in the Sangam poems, there is a constant changing and movement that creates a sense of not being anchored, of constantly shifting between different perspectives and even realities. While it is true that Sanskrit and Tamil both belong to the same tradition, tapping the same sources, the same conventions, and even the same imagery, the two are nevertheless very different in their idea of what art is and how it should be expressed. Dravidian sensibility was able to assert itself in the Sanskrit tradition through devices made possible by syntactical borrowing, and this gave the better Sanskrit poets means to extend their poetic language, including some of the devices and effects employed with such skill in Tamil. Yet Tamil remained apart, cultivating a sensibility of shifting and fluid reality in a way that, in the end, remained alien to the north.