

Post-Modern Trends in Tamil

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It is natural for language to adapt to changing times unless social conditions like isolation insulate it and political forces like the Purism Movement inhibit it. Languages could be anachronistic in varying degrees depending on the linguistic attitude of their speakers, the nature of their social control, the political context of their operation and the technological resources available to them. With regard to the language adaptation of a particular kind and time called modernization, it can be said that Tamil is not anachronistic. Tamil is both modernized and modernizing. It is a modern language not just in the temporal sense that it is functioning in the modern period, but in the social sense that it is capable of enabling its speakers to be functional in modern society by meeting the many demands made on them. It is a matter of empirical evaluation to be able to say how effective a tool Tamil is for its speakers to function in modern society. The evaluation must be made on the basis of the use of Tamil in the various domains of life. It is a fact that it is not used in many domains like modern science, law and medicine, though supporting materials like glossaries and translations have been prepared in it. This paper does not discuss the inadequacy of the modernization of Tamil in special domains like the above, but it describes the nature of modernized Tamil as used by the common people in their everyday life and as accepted in contemporary literature and dictionaries. Literature represents creative freedom and the dictionary the normative frame for using Tamil.

To evaluate modernization as the process of adaptation to become fit for functioning in modern society, it is necessary to recognize a basic characteristic of modern Tamil society. Contemporary Tamil society is not homogenous and modern characteristics do not define all of it. Modernity coexists with the characteristics of the previous stage(s) of society and so do the linguistic features of Tamil. Nevertheless, the modern characteristics of society and the language are flagged and taken to be prototypical of the contemporary society and language. Evaluation of them is done on the basis of the prototype. Three fundamental characteristics of modernity are adoption of new political, economic, social and cultural institutions, adaptation to new values and ideologies, which create and operate those institutions, and absorption of new technology, which is initiated and sustained by those institutions. Language crucially mediates the societal adoption of and adaptation to modernity, and reflects the process of modernization by itself changing, primarily in its lexicon, semantics (Annamalai 2001) and forms and styles of discourse. The modernization of Tamil is incomplete not in the sense it has not reached all of Tamil society, but in the sense that it has not fully adapted itself to modern institutions, ideologies and technologies operating in contemporary Tamil society (Annamalai 1995). The reasons are not linguistic, but political and cultural and this paper will not discuss them.

Modernity is characterized by the values and ideologies associated with the period of Enlightenment in Europe, which include the idea of progress propelled by science and technology, the idea of reason as the guide to human behavior, the idea of equalizing unequal human societies by spreading science and universal cultural values, and the idea that humans are the masters of their destiny and the earth they live on. Colonialism rationalized itself by calibrating these ideas on to the belief that science, rationality, universal cultural values and mastery of the earth were bequeathed to the European. The events in the last two centuries culminating in two world wars have led to questioning these ideologies of modernity. They showed that science and technology could be destructive; that the behavior of humans and their leaders could be destructively irrational; that universal cultural values are really the values of the dominant culture, which may not be intrinsically valuable and may have acquired their dominance and universality by destroying other cultural values by fire power; and that the human mastery of nature has led to its destruction and consequently to human self-destruction. The ideology of modernity turns out to be the negation of human progress and the optimism associated with it. Post-modernism is deconstruction of the modernist ideology.

Post-modernism celebrates the idea that science is not merely pursuit of truth and is pursuit of power as well, the idea that human actions are frequently motivated by faith in unproved beliefs and by unreasonable prejudices, the idea that the universality of cultural values is non-existent and that cultural values are contingent on the life experience of their holders, and the idea that the humans are partners in nurturing nature. The absolutism of modernism is replaced by relativism in post-modernism, certainty ensured by the logic of science and human superiority by uncertainty, that is induced by the politics of science and human folly. Being normative about others is replaced by being non-judgmental, uniformity by diversity, unidirectional progress by multidirectional development, centrifugal authority by centripetal rights, and equality in outcome by equality in having choice. It is not the case that such ideas were not present earlier in human history. They are predominant in the present period, and are articulated intellectually. Similarly, it is not that no other society has got them independently, but they constitute the predominant ideology of the present day European society, which influenced many other societies.

Two questions need to be answered before describing the post-modern trends in Tamil language and literature. One is whether it is possible to have post-modernism when modernism has not reached completion in actuality in Tamil society. The other is whether there are events in the experience of the Tamil society that warrant rejection of modernism and adoption of post-modernism. The answer to the first question is simple. As pre-modern characteristics do not disappear completely with the onset of modernity and continue to coexist partially, post-modern characteristics appear when modernity is still on. The second question is difficult to answer. The common view about modernity in Tamil society is that it came through contact with European society, directly through colonial rule or by extensions of it. While leaving open the question of internally motivated change towards modernity

and of rediscovering the ideas of modernity from pre-modern society, the role of a cultural catalyst from an external stimulus in initiating the trends cannot be denied. The question then is whether post-modernism in Tamil is a result of internal development, of catalyst function of post colonial contact with the Western society, or of transplanted from the Western society. I will return to this question after describing some trends in Tamil language and literature that can be labeled post-modern.

Tamil is a diglossic language with two varieties, High and Low, distinguished formally and functionally. This is not the distinction of Standard and Non-standard, as each variety has its standard and non-standard (or marked) forms and use. This is not the distinction between Writing and Speaking because the medium does not have isomorphic or exclusive relation with the two varieties. As with any other difference in linguistic form and function, this distinction is also socially sanctioned and maintained by social convention. The difference is that the diglossic distinction is not found in the languages of all complex societies. A necessary condition for it to arise in Tamil was its confrontation with modernity when the Tamil Society had a feudal social structure and a cultural heritage. The feudal elite, to consolidate their superintendence of the cultural heritage through the language, which is literary in the case of Tamil (religious in the case of Arabic), made the language of literature the language of modern institutions like education, printing and public speech, all of which reach and captivate the common people. The literary language became the public language of modernity distancing from itself the spoken Language. The resulting diglossia is then a product of the encounter of the feudal elite with modernity when they are still in control of the language. The traditional distinction between literary (*centamil*) and spoken (*koṭuntamil*) converts into the diglossic distinction of H and L. Modern literature, which has the dual property of being literary and public, resolved any historical contradiction between the two by using H. Modern creative writing coded in H, in other words, could linguistically be literary in not deviating from poetic history and public in being recast in prose, which is the form of speech.

The duality of modern literature mentioned above could not be maintained for long with H and the feudal solution was turned on its head by making literary the language of speech. That is, the spoken language, which is the language of the public, came to be used in modern literature. But the switch was not total. The narration and conversation in fiction were treated differently. The conversation was switched to L while the narration continued to be in H. This differential treatment makes it linguistically possible to separate the author's voice from the character's voice. It also goes well with the school of realism in literature in representing the world where people speak in L. It helps authors to keep a distance from their characters. This distance makes it convenient for the authors to voice their message, moral, social, political or whatever, to the readers. The voice may be loud or subtle depending on the literary sophistication of the author. The distance from the characters makes it possible linguistically for the author to be the intermediary between the

characters and the readers. And to narrate the story with it being simultaneously inside of the fiction structurally and outside of it linguistically.

The diglossic story-telling is in tune with the ideas of modernity of the standard and the authority. It helps the author to adhere to the (language) standard and to (author) authority in using H for the narration as well as to objective realism in using L for the conversation. Socially, the use of L gives allowance to the new social make up of the readership created by open access to education in the modern period. Diglossic use of language in fiction becomes a new literary convention-prosody of the prose.

This convention is not followed by some contemporary writers, who use the spoken language in the narration of the story also. A recent example is the collection of short stories of natural realism by Pugazh (2002). When the story telling is not diglossic, the author speaks the language of the characters in narration reducing the distance between them. The author obliterates linguistically the difference between the real world of the characters and the imaginary world of the author. Post-modernism does not recognize well-defined boundaries between things and clear-cut categories of things into black and white, good and bad, norm and deviance. Using the spoken Tamil in narration and in conversation echoes this idea. The two categories of the Tamil language, H and L, coalesce dissolving the functional boundary between them. One is not superior to the other in value in the fiction. The formally learnt category of Tamil, H, is on par with the naturally acquired category, L. The convention that maintains that the former is the norm and the latter is deviant becomes defunct. The role of the school to reinforce the norm is undermined in creative fiction.

The above is about the use of language in literature that echoes a post-modern idea. From the literary point of view, the use of spoken Tamil in narration does not erase the functional differentiation of narration as the site of the author's voice from the functional role of conversation as the site of the characters' voice. The syntax of the spoken Tamil used in narration is not that of the conversation. It uses complex strings of subordinate clauses in a sentence as opposed to simple sentences in conversation. To capture graphically in a single frame the appearance of the village temple, Pugazh (2002: 46) strings together, for example, in one sentence three infinitive clauses, within one of which is an adverbial clause. The syntax of narration has less deletions unlike in conversation where the deleted elements are recoverable from the shared knowledge of the interlocutors about the subject talked about. As the narration addresses unknown readers, it is explicit in packaging information. When the diglossic boundary is erased between narration and conversation by the use of spoken Tamil in its spelling for the former, they are differentiated linguistically in syntax. This signals that it continues to be the site for the voice of the author.

This subtle linguistic differentiation in the use of spoken Tamil is different from the failure of many authors in Tamil, who write even the conversations mingled with the syntax, vocabulary and rhythm of H. This betrays their lack of linguistic sensitivity, and the practice of converting H in their mind to L on paper rather than transcribing L from the minds of the characters. Pugazh is not guilty of this except for occasional lapses to H vocabulary (*makka!ukku* 'for the

people' (p.19), *onriyam* 'union of villages' (p.33), *kurra unarvu* 'guilt feeling' (p.66), *varumai* 'poverty' (p.97). This points to the difficulties of authors educated in H in school to write naturally in L for print.

Pugazh (p. 56, 86, 144, for example) differentiates received information from his direct observation by adding *-ām* to the sentence and the extrapolative auxiliary *-iru* to the verb. Such double narration helps to mark the presence of the author in the narration different from the others imagined in the real world, who are partners in his observation. It does not, however, prevent the author from speaking the language of the characters, nor to speak to the readers. This and the above narrative differences in language and style leave the narration as the site for the author's voice even when the diglossic difference is nullified. They make the presence of the author in the story possible when using only one variety of the language. The author's voice becomes background noise and an interruption when the author is wanting in literary skill, as is true with many authors in Tamil. Skilled authors voice subtly their ideology or world view through their stories and their narration of the story is the site for that voice.

Pugazh, however, does not voice any ideology or world view separate from the characters of his stories. He does not separate himself from the characters and his use of L for the narration helps this coalescence. He could have used the narration as the site for his voice in spite of the diglossic erasure because the linguistic features like the ones mentioned above differentiates narration from the conversation of the characters, but he does not. There are as many voices as characters in the story and multiple views of the world. It is a world of polyphony and there is no conductor. More importantly, the values and world views of the characters not orchestrated by the author could be in dissonance with those of the readers, who are typically from the educated class, who believe in norms and hold as degraded any deviation from the norms, if they are moral and as regressed, if they are ideological. The reader could be a literary critic (*India Today*, October 23, 2002).

Pugazh, as the author of the stories, does not articulate or imply any norms because there are none. Choices of life, moral and material, of the people are not anchored in clarity, but are enveloped in ambiguity. Therefore, the question of judging and portraying someone's values or world view as good or bad does not arise. This is a post-modernistic view of the world gleaned from the characters of the stories.

Modernization of the Tamil language is, among other things, creation of words and meanings to match with European languages, particularly English. Equivalents of technical words in English in various disciplines are created in Tamil by expert committees. Words are created by the media and writers for modern ideas, concepts and institutions mostly by translation or transcreation from English, and less by transplantation from it. The last is less because borrowing conflicts in Tamil with the ideology of purity of the Tamil cultural elite. This ideology points out that there are other processes going on in Tamil along with modernization. *Dictionary of Contemporary Tamil* (Cre-A:, 1992) represents modern Tamil and it includes words and meanings used by modern Tamil society as found in print materials. The written language in its narrative

form is taken to be the norm by the dictionary and a word in speech, which is a function of L, is admitted into the dictionary only if it finds acceptance in writing, which is a function of H.

The written Tamil, particularly of fiction, has changed since the compilation of written materials for this dictionary in admitting into the narrative prose words from the margins of Tamil -- regional and social dialects. The norm of the written language is becoming flexible. The words from the dialects enlarge the contemporary experience by bringing to the common written Tamil the experience and environment that are not urban and industrial, which are the corner stone of modernity. The words that code the experience of the life of farmers, fishermen, artisans, craftsmen and folk artists and the way their words mediate the world are different from the experience and mediation of industrial workers, white collar bureaucrats, modern artists, professionals and scientists. Similarly different are the linguistic expressions of the ecology of these people with regard to their relation to flora and fauna. The words that signify the material and cognitive culture of the lower castes are different from those of the upper castes. The words of the first categories of the people above, considered peripheral to language modernization, now find a place in contemporary written Tamil, which serves as the accepted vehicle of modernity. These words bring diversity of worldviews to the normative language shaped by the modernistic worldview and change the monocentric language norm. This is a post-modern trend. The revision of *Dictionary of Contemporary Tamil* by Cre-A: will reflect this trend.

The post-modern trends in literature and language reinforce each other. Going back to the question of experiential authenticity of the trends, it must be pointed out that contemporary writers do imitate post-modern western literature and experiment with the literary fashions of the West (newly labeled as magical realism, non-linear writing etc.). Such transplanted post-modernism is not rooted in the soil of India. The human suffering rather than human progress evidenced by phenomena like Nazi brutalities, Communist dictatorships, atom bombs dropped by Liberals (ideas of modernity did not prevent these) was not directly experienced by the Tamils. Their suffering was from colonialism, which was a different product of the modernist agenda. Any misgivings of Tamils about modernity should find expression in decolonization as a post colonial ideology. This raises the question of commonness between post colonialism and post-modernism. While post colonialism is concerned with deconstruction of the colonial construct of the Indian (or the Orient) as the Other, it does not negate the ideas, institutions and instruments of modernity associated with the colonialists. Rather, it tries to find them in Tamil's (or India's) past. It takes the construction of a glorious past and its mirroring in the present, to be post-colonial deconstruction. This is done by the beneficiaries of modernity and they cannot be expected to reject modernity and embrace the ideas of post-modernism. The subalterns, who are marginal to the process of modernization, are likely to be congenial to the post-modern view of the world, which promotes equality, not through opportunities to achieve the standard or enter the mainstream, but by letting diversity prosper. The post-modern view

of contemporary stories like the one instanced above comes from the margins of modernity, not its core, as it happened in the West. It is local and authentic. It may antedate modernity and may not be temporally post-modern, as it is ideologically.

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