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What Do Tamil Teachers Actually Teach When They Teach “Tamil”?

Abstract

Due to some linguistic features of Tamil, the teachers of this language have to be certain which specific variety of Tamil they are going to teach during their classes. Thus, the very subject of any Tamil language course needs to be precisely defined, and the crucial point of Tamil teaching methodology seems to be not the issue of “how to teach”, but rather “what should be taught”. The objective of this paper is to show the choices Tamil teachers have to make in order to decide on which form of the language they are going to teach. Therefore, the paper indicates the different varieties of Tamil and discusses the decisions (with their consequences) Tamil teachers have to make. The need to teach both the Spoken as well as the Literary variety of Tamil is in particular emphasised.

Although indigenous Tamil scholarship in the field of studying the Tamil language is two thousand years old, and the beginnings of Western interest in this subject may be traced back to the 16th century, till now not much attention has been given to the didactics and teaching methods of this language. Regrettably, this paper will not tackle this problem either, but will concentrate on the related question of precisely what the subject of instruction should consist.

For those who are not acquainted with Tamil, the question put in the title might sound a little absurd and preposterous, as the answer seems to be simple and the only possible one: Tamil teachers teach Tamil. However, Tamil teachers and students of this language would not be satisfied with such a statement, as for them the following question immediately arises: “But what kind of Tamil are we talking about?” Being so, the main purpose of this paper is: to show what Tamil actually is and what – in our opinion – should be taught as “Tamil” during Tamil classes; to indicate the problems every Tamil teacher has to face in choosing which kind of Tamil to teach; and finally, to initiate further discussion on different methods proper for the variety/varieties chosen for the instruction.

First, we should begin with some clarifications and assumptions. Let us then define who our “Tamil teachers” and – consequently – “Tamil students” are. Tamil obviously

can be taught as a mother tongue to Tamil speakers, as well as a second or foreign language to non-Tamil speakers. Furthermore, in the first case it might be taught either to children or to illiterate adults. The methods and the very subject of teaching must then be different, adapted to the students' needs and the level of their acquisition of Tamil (cf. Karuṇākaraṇ 1990: 22). Let us consider here only the situation where Tamil is taught to non-Tamil speakers and by teachers who are also not native speakers.

Secondly, there immediately arises the question: "What is Tamil?" It is not as easy to give an answer as might be expected. According to the *Tamil Lexicon*, Tamil is nothing other than: 'sweetness, melodiousness; refined quality' (1982: 1756). This peculiar "sweetness", being the language itself, has found its many connoisseurs and genuine devotees, especially among neo-Saivists and Dravidian nationalists of the 19th-20th century, regarding it to be a Divine Being. In fact, the Tamils of to-day still often seem to be almost obsessed with their language and while talking about it, the term *tamilpparru* ('Tamil devotion', 'devotion to Tamil') is the one most typically used by them (Ramaswamy 1998: 6). It means that Tamil teachers are dealing with a very delicate matter, and the teaching of Tamil understood as such a "divinity", believed by many to be none other than the Mother Goddess (*Tamilttāy*; 'Mother Tamil') herself and having her own devotees (as well as her own temple in Karaikkudi), requires from them special attention and care. It is also a well known fact that among the Tamils the proud idea of their language viewed as superior to others prevails. Treating the popular explanations of the superiority of Tamil as mere "folk-beliefs", we may note that Tamil is superior because it is: 1) green (*paintamil*) or virgin (*kannit tamil*), that is, having a conservative structure, not much changed through the ages; 2) fertile (*vanṭamil*), referring thus to the vastness and richness of its lexicon; 3) perfect or cultivated (*centamil*), i.e. having a long tradition of grammatical studies; 4) antiquated (*tonmoli*), i.e. having greater antiquity than other Dravidian languages; 5) sweet (*tintamil*), as the very name of this language means 'sweetness' (Shanmugam 1980: 332-341). So, we have to keep in mind that Tamil is endowed not only with the already mentioned divinity, but also with such extraordinary attributes as classicality, purity, antiquity, motherhood and so on (Ramaswamy 1998: 78).

The definition of Tamil as a "national language of the Tamils" is also of little help in understanding what Tamil actually is, since there is no easy way to define who is and who is not a member of the Tamil nation. The criteria of belonging to the Tamil nation are not well determined. The language criterion, e.g. the use of Tamil as a mother tongue, is not a decisive one, since some people are not willing to recognise as Tamilians Tamil-speaking Brahmins, who claim themselves to be Tamils, whereas at the same time Tamil-speaking Muslims from Sri Lanka strongly object to the attempts to include them into the broader Tamilhood, thus enjoying the status of a separate national minority (Hellman-Rajanayagam 1995: 116-145). The same can be said about some of the tribal peoples of Southern India, whose languages are considered to be either dialects of Tamil or just separate ones. Sometimes such opposing opinions refer to one and the same group, as in the case of the Erukkalās, who are viewed as either a separate ethnic community or just another Tamil caste (see Srinivasa Varma 1976: 232; Srinivasa Varma 1978: xiii).

Therefore, for our purpose it seems most reasonable to avoid hereafter a detailed nation-based definition of Tamil¹ and accept a more general one, taking “Tamil” to be the language once spoken in ancient Tamiḷakam, ‘the House of Tamil’, and nowadays used in the modern state of Tamiḷnāṭu, ‘the Country of Tamil’, being the southernmost part of the Indian Peninsula, from whence it spread to other parts of the world (present Sri Lanka, Singapore, Malaysia, Myanmar, South Africa, Southern and Northern Americas, Australia, Persian Gulf and Caribbean countries, Europe).

That Tamil has never been perceived as a monolithic entity, but rather as a heterogeneous structure, can be easily inferred from the concept of *muttamiḷ*, or ‘three-fold Tamil’. According to ancient theoreticians, Tamil is split into three forms: 1) *iyarṛamiḷ* (*iyal-tamiḷ*) – natural Tamil; 2) *icaittamiḷ* (*icai-t-tamiḷ*) – musical Tamil; 3) *nāṭakattamiḷ* (*nāṭaka(m)-t-tamiḷ*) – dramatic Tamil. As explained in the *Tamil Lexicon* (1982: 3252), these three are just the three kinds of literature in Tamil. It might seem that the term *muttamiḷ* only characterises literary works, thus providing a very simple classification of the functional styles of literary genres (Purnalingam Pillai 1985: 2) or their linguistic differentiation, but does not concern the different varieties of the language itself. However, it is not so. *Muttamiḷ* should rather be understood as three different “possible channels how the language may be ‘realized’, expressed” (Zvelebil 1997: xx), through the means of natural conversation, song and drama, each one having its own modes and rules. Therefore, the Tamil teacher first of all has to choose which of the three Tamils should be selected for the teaching purpose. It is quite an easy choice, for the teaching must be done initially within the realm of so-called natural Tamil, as without acquiring basic grammatical and lexical items students will not be able to enjoy the three-dimensional function of the language they are studying. Thus, although it has been much lamented upon by C. Rajasingam, who says: “Due to the foreign impact which has been devastating, the three-fold aspect of Tamil has yielded way to the most wretched forms of prose and journalistic jargon even in Tamil Nadu” (1995: 65), we have to, remembering who our teachers and students are, put aside – for the time being – both *icaittamiḷ* and *nāṭakattamiḷ*, and focus our further considerations only on the “natural” dimension of Tamil.²

Speaking about Tamil, R.M. Sundaram points out: “It is the only Indian language, which, being equally as ancient as Sanskrit is, still continues to be a living literary language. Therefore it deserves our attention (...) being the only Indian language, which, at the same time, is classical as well as modern.” (Sundaram 1974: 58)

¹ As D. Hellman-Rajanayagam concludes her paper, saying: “The Tamil makkaḷ always know who they are” (1995: 145), it is better to leave that matter to them. Cf. Karuppaṇṇan 2002: 103.

² That these two aspects (musical and dramatic) are important for the Tamils even today can be seen from the fact that, soon after taking up the post of Visiting Professor of Tamil at the University of Warsaw, our present native speaker organised Tamil Poets’ Day, thus making his students (including the very beginners) recite and sing Tamil poetry as a part of their Tamil language course. Studying Tamil without songs and recitations seems not to be possible.

Being so, this situation demands from Tamil teachers that they make another important decision whether to teach Classical or Modern Tamil, or both. The criterion of historical development is very important, but again, sometimes it might create problems and unexpected confusion. Thanks to historical factors we can quite easily distinguish between Old, Medieval and Modern Tamil.³ During the historical process of natural development Tamil has undergone many changes in its phonetics, grammar (morphology) and lexicon. A diachronic approach to language study is nothing new. It is expected that the Tamil teacher will have to choose some historical form of the language to be taught. The choice of Modern Tamil as the first form of the language to be introduced to the students seems to be the most reasonable one. In our opinion, Old and Medieval texts should be studied gradually and only when students are familiar with the rules of Modern Tamil. Unfortunately, in practice this is often not so, as some Tamil teachers, mostly native-speakers, but not only them, begin the Tamil language course by first introducing passages from the *Tirukkural* (ca. 400-500 A.D.) or the *Tiruvācakam* (9th century). Most probably, influenced by the above-mentioned “folk-beliefs”, they do not distinguish between historical forms of Tamil, thus making an inadvertent confusion in the minds of their students, especially if the latter are trying to learn how to speak.

However, the problem with a diachronic understanding of Tamil is more complicated, and a simple differentiation of the historical forms of the language might sometimes be misleading, since: “What is important (...) is the fact that we can trace *the uninterrupted evolution of the standard literary Tamil language* from its first codification some 2000 years ago (...) till this very day.” (Zvelebil 1997: 52) Our Western linear understanding of historical processes may lead us to a wrong assumption that between Old, Medieval and Modern forms of Tamil there might exist some clear-cut borders or straight lines of division. But it is not always so. Of course, some forms are no longer in use, but the general linguistic processes are mostly unchanged, many lexical items are still used, some with a slight change of meaning. For Tamil teachers it is not an easy task to select the forms to be taught.⁴ Obviously, old and classical forms which are still in use should not be neglected during classes of Modern Tamil, but they should be introduced and explained only after modern forms have been shown, although some scholars opt for simultaneity in this regard (cf. Balakrishnan 2002: 18). It is easy for a linguist to “trace the evolution” of some grammatical forms, but for students such a task may be too far beyond their capacities, especially at the very beginning of their studies.

Nevertheless, even if Tamil teachers decide to teach Modern Tamil, it is still not so clear what they should actually teach, because, as a matter of fact, “Tamil then is an abstraction from all these varieties used in different contexts by the Tamils of different

³ According to S. Agesthalingom, Old Tamil means the language prevalent from early times to 600 A.D., Middle Tamil was in use up to 1600 A.D., and Modern Tamil is the language of the last four centuries (1995, par. 0.2-0.3). K. Zvelebil is of the opinion that Old Tamil lasted till ca. 550 A.D., whereas Modern Tamil started ca. 1750 (1997: 53).

⁴ E.g. it is not so easy to decide when the 2nd person pronoun *nīr* should be introduced, or the distinction between forms like *irukkiṇṇaṇar* vs. *irukkiṇṇarkaḷ* ([they] are) explained.

orientations" (Annamalai 2000: 1). Such a statement immediately provokes the important question of how to teach such an abstraction. But, as mentioned above, our main task is not to discuss how, but rather what to teach. Therefore, let us now try to have a little closer look at the "abstraction" that Modern Tamil seems to be.

The diglossic nature of Tamil, which is one of the most salient characteristics of this language, is a well known phenomenon, prevalent in all stages of its historical development (cf. Britto 1986: 108-122; Zvelebil 1964: 552, 573; Panneerselvam 1968: 40). Diglossia is a type of linguistic variation that "involves a split standard of usage by a community of speakers, where the extremes of this split are each associated with a definable set of contexts" (Shapiro, Schiffman 1981: 164). Thus, Tamil exhibits two distinct styles: Spoken Tamil used by people in informal contexts for everyday conversation and Literary Tamil used in formal situations mostly for public speech, but first of all functioning as the vehicle of literary tradition. The significant differences between the Literary and Spoken Tamil may be found in the field of phonology, morphology, syntax and lexicon. The formality or informality of the speech situation is a main factor (and not the speaker himself), determining which variety of language should be used (cf. Ramaswami 1997: 17-25). As the specialisation of function for Spoken and Literary Tamil is more or less clearly defined, Tamil teachers should not neglect either of the two language varieties. Unfortunately, in classroom practice it is often not so, and in most cases the instruction begins (and continues) only with Literary Tamil, leaving the Spoken variety completely aside. The reasons for this practice may have their grounds in the assumed higher prestige of Literary Tamil, its undoubtedly rich and ancient literary history and much more standardised grammar. Favouring the Literary style over the Spoken during a Tamil language course has also been a result of relatively more easily access to it through available printed materials. Nowadays, however, due to the development of audio-visual mass media (internet, radio, cinema, TV) and a growing number of Tamil-speaking immigrants such an explanation is no longer acceptable, and the need to teach Spoken Tamil is now expressed even by some native-speakers (Balakrishnan 2002: 17-18). Sadly to say, such a resistant attitude towards teaching Spoken Tamil among Tamil teachers is still found in classrooms. But not only teachers should be blamed for such a state of affairs, since Tamil people themselves do not help them much in this regard. Amazingly enough, native speakers of Tamil, including language teachers, tend to resist teaching Spoken Tamil, which may seem to us a rather ridiculous attitude. Can anyone imagine English classes where the teacher refuses to teach speaking, resting only on the skills of reading and writing? But it really does happen in the case of Tamil classes. This unexpected, but very true attitude, has been very aptly observed by G. Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi: "There is one cultural fact of which little can be learned by investigating written Tamil documents. This trait distinguishes the Tamils not only from all other peoples known to me the world over; rather than being pan-Indian it also seems to be specifically Tamil. I am referring to the Tamils' paradoxical attitudes towards their own language. Although they exalt their mother tongue as the most perfect, the most ancient, the sweetest etc.

they stubbornly refuse to talk it to foreigners – and not only to them.” (1983: 13) Of course, this creates a very serious problem for students, to whom nobody wants to talk in the language they are studying so painstakingly. The same author continues: “The world over people are pleased to see a foreigner make an effort to learn their language. The Tamils are no exception to this rule. They express their appreciation of this fact in English, however, and continue unperturbedly to speak in English to the foreign student of their language. Especially in Madras, questions asked in Tamil consistently receive replies in English, and insistence on being spoken to in Tamil may result in silencing the interlocutor altogether.” (1983: 14) One of the possible explanations of this behaviour may be the fact that Spoken Tamil is not taught in Tamil schools. Another explanation may possibly be related to the above-mentioned, widely assumed divinity of Tamil, since some might find it improper to place a Hindu Goddess on the tongues of non-believers, who are not pure enough to speak it. Needless to say, such a situation in a very efficient way prevents many students from deepening their knowledge of Tamil.

However, teaching only Literary Tamil might not be such an important problem, if only the diglossic rules were firm and rigid. However, since the beginning of the 20th century we can observe a strong and constantly increasing tendency to intermingle Literary Tamil with Spoken forms. This is mainly due to the impact of modern Tamil prose, born at the end of the 19th century and since then rapidly developing, and which nowadays is the main mode of literary expression in Tamil. Being realistic from its very beginning, Tamil prose needed the Spoken language to be introduced in the dialogue parts of literary composition. At first, Spoken Tamil appeared in written form only in some parts of the heroes’ speech, but from the 1950s it has become an integral and inevitable part of prose (and dramatic) writings (cf. Steever 1987: 730). This language drift is of such an importance and extent that an “understanding of many modern Tamil writers without the knowledge of Spoken Tamil is unimaginable” (Andronov 1987: 4). Thus, it is a necessary requirement for Tamil teachers, and not only their good will, to teach Spoken Tamil as well, since a knowledge of the Literary variety is obviously inadequate not only to talk to other people (Muttuccanmukan 1973: 1), but even to read modern Tamil texts. The existing changes in functional distribution of the two varieties of Tamil have made possible the appearance of many examples of the intra-linguistic processes of code-switching and code-mixing. It should be added that not only does the simple act of intermingling Spoken with Literary Tamil take place in the modern language situation, but the mutual influence between these two varieties is also a significant feature (Deiva Sundaram 1981: 36-43). Hence, all these factors should not be ignored by Tamil teachers, who need to be aware of the changing patterns of the language they are teaching, and cope with them efficiently. It is very important to remember that Tamil as a diglossic language demands from the teachers that they pay attention not only to historically conditioned grammatical or lexical changes (cf. Caktivēl 2001: 319-333), but also to the possible shift in the distribution of its two varieties.

Therefore, a Tamil language course, if expected to be effective, cannot be based only on Literary Tamil. The everyday life and language practice of the Tamils makes it essential

for students to pay proper attention to Spoken Tamil in order to be able to speak, read modern literature, magazines, listen to the radio and follow the latest Kollywood film productions. Although it has been already argued that the Literary and Spoken varieties of the Tamil language need to be equally taught during the course, still we are no closer to saying what actually should be the subject of such instruction. Making a decision also to teach Spoken Tamil is not an easy task for the teacher as – unfortunately – Spoken Tamil does not constitute any single reality and the so-called problem of its standardisation remains open, since – as R. Balakrishnan says – “spoken forms are dynamic; hence we cannot have any definite pattern of this variety” (2002: 17). And teaching solely Spoken Tamil also seems not to be possible, as “the written form is a referent to the differences” and “when the spoken Tamil is the object of the teacher, the written counterparts of the spoken word(s) must be the basic course material” (Balakrishnan 2002: 17, 19). Strategies used in some manuals prepared for teaching Tamil as a second or foreign language, such as introducing first a) Literary forms b) Spoken forms or c) introducing both of them at the same time (Gnanasundaram 2002: 52-54), show that the question of a proper teaching methodology is unsolved so far, and teachers are left alone to their own choices.

Spoken Tamil is internally much more differentiated than Literary Tamil. Usually scholars divide it into many social and regional dialects. Although much critically discussed, the caste variable seems to be of the utmost importance (Gumperz 1969: 598), with the basic distinction put between the dialects of Brahmin, non-Brahmin and Dalit castes (Southworth 1997: 186). Not only caste, but other social variables (e.g. religion, education, economic status, age, sex) are also responsible for the existing linguistic variation (Karunakaran, Sivashanmugam 1981: 58-62). Another, e.g. a geographical variable for distinguishing different Tamil dialects is almost absent in the case of the Brahmin dialect, situating it in opposition to all others, simply called just non-Brahmin dialects. Five main dialects can be recognised in the speech of non-Brahmins: northern, eastern (central), western, southern and Ceylonese, each of them having its own features and peculiarities, which sometimes makes them not easily understandable for people coming from different parts of the Tamil-speaking area (cf. Ghadigachalam 1980: 293; Sanmugadas 1974: 238). The dialectical situation is of course much more complicated, as there are many sub-dialects within the above mentioned main dialects, and there are dialects from outside Tamil Nadu and also those spoken by some tribal groups (cf. Pūpati 1998: 156-192). This poses a general difficulty for Tamil teachers, since the selection of any dialect will result in serious consequences. Let us consider the case of social dialects. Non-native speaking Tamil teachers naturally do not belong to any social Tamil group nor do their students, whereas the language use in any speech situation demands from the speaker some kind of social self-declaration. Any foreigner, when speaking Tamil, should be conscious of the social position of his interlocutor and extremely careful with the selection of words and grammatical forms. E.g., the efforts of a foreign student to use the Brahmin dialect forms while talking to non-Brahmins may be simply neither appreciated by them nor by the Brahmins. (This is again one more important reason preventing Tamil teachers from teaching its Spoken variety.) Therefore, during the Tamil language course emphasis

should not be laid on any particular dialect, but teachers should be able to show their students the richness of many dialectical forms, making them accustomed to the words and forms they might encounter while talking to Tamils. Otherwise, the course based only on one dialect will not lead them to the ability to read modern texts either. The studies on the language employed by outstanding modern Tamil writers show that the language of their short stories and novels is filled with linguistic features of many different dialects. Hence, a simple conclusion that without knowing the basic characteristic forms of many different Tamil dialects the writings of authors such as the greatly respected D. Jayakanthan cannot be read or understood.

What is then the solution for Tamil teachers also wishing to teach Spoken Tamil? And, actually, what should they teach? Again, the answer is just as simple as it is complicated. Most people would just say that in such a situation the only possible way is to teach the so-called Standard Spoken Tamil, but here the real problem arises, as it is not so easy to determine which forms can be regarded as standard, and which cannot. Moreover, scholars differ significantly in this matter. Some of them are of the opinion that Standard Spoken Tamil is connected with caste and geography (considering then the speech of non-Brahmin Vellalas from the central parts of Tamil Nadu to be the Standard one), while others, quite the opposite, give evidence that what is called Standard Spoken Tamil is free of any caste or regional dialectal influences. Furthermore, there is even evidence that so-called Standard Spoken Tamil is in fact closer to Literary Tamil than to any dialect of the Spoken variety (Gnanasundaram 1980: 68).

Unfortunately, there are very few reference books on Spoken Tamil, and even their authors are not quite certain what the proper subject of their work is. In the first of his excellent grammars, H. Schiffman says that: "The spoken dialect of Tamil on which this grammar is based is that used in the radio plays as they were broadcast from All India Radio, Trichy in early 1966. It is the closest thing to a 'standard' spoken Tamil that exists (...)." (1979: iii) The phrase "the closest thing" is here noteworthy. If the language described in his book is not a Standard Spoken Tamil, the existence of which the author is so sure, and if it is not one of many various Tamil dialects, then what exactly is it? In his next grammar of Spoken Tamil, the same author says: "This grammar assumes that there exists a variety of spoken Tamil that is 'standard' alongside the long-since standardized LT variety (LT). This is somewhat problematic assumption." (1999: 1) The hypothesis of the existence of Standard Spoken Tamil or of its non-existence is an interesting linguistic concept indeed, for teachers, however, it is one of the most crucial and difficult points in their work. It is the teacher who has to decide whether to agree with such an assumption (not a fact) or not. Agreeing with H. Schiffman, it can be said that there exists a Standard Spoken Tamil which, paradoxically, is not standard at all, as the process of its standardisation is neither finished nor controlled by any scholarly body. The standardisation of Spoken Tamil is not yet a definite process, and this form of the language allows for many different solutions as equally "standard". What is more interesting is the fact that previously, due to the supposed impact of the processes of Sanskritisation, the dialect of the Brahmins was considered to be the Standard one. Later

on, along with the beginning and development of Dravidian ideology in the 20th century, the dialect of non-Brahmins came to be treated as the Standard one. It seems that the current political situation in Tamil Nadu has an enormous influence on linguistic theory. The position of Tamil teachers is hence really difficult, as the choice of the language they decide to teach may be viewed also as a political matter.

Being so, even if Tamil teachers could somehow overcome the problem of the standardisation, they have to face the no less important issue of the re-standardisation of the “standard” corpus (Schiffman 1998: 362-363), since, as has just been mentioned, standard forms are never truly standard and new usages tend to replace them as time goes on.

One more major task has to be faced by every Tamil teacher, who also has to teach students how to read and understand modern Tamil texts, both literary and non-literary, in which the presence of Spoken words is dramatically and constantly increasing. Unfortunately, nowadays it is not enough to know Literary Tamil and Spoken Tamil (in their many dimensions) alone. Due to the specific characteristics of the Tamil script it is very difficult to use it for the purpose of representing the Spoken variety in the written form. Since Spoken usages occur more and more frequently in writing, as a consequence a new variety of Tamil has evolved, e.g. Hybrid Modern Tamil, being something between Spoken and Literary. Hybrid forms found in modern writings have come about as a result of the changing functional patterns of Tamil diglossia. Whenever any author wants to put down a Spoken Tamil word, or borrowings from e.g. Hindi or English, usually it must be transformed into a form slightly different from the original one. Thus, in modern texts we come across words and forms that do not belong to the Literary variety, but also which cannot be heard in natural speech. This is one of the most difficult problems the Tamil teacher has to face. Explaining to one’s students that although they have diligently studied Literary Tamil and have practiced different forms of Spoken Tamil they will still not be able to understand a written modern text cannot be an easy task for any teaching person. Spoken Tamil put into a written form is a real challenge even for native speakers, and, as R.E Asher notices: “it is difficult to give an accurate representation of the colloquial in terms of the Tamil script. A number of writers have attempted it (...), but most still give up the task as hopeless.” (1970: 192, n. 1) Since there are no common rules that can be easily followed, “authors are left to their own devices to overcome the difficulty of representing spoken forms in their texts” (Gnanasundaram 1971: 276). Modern Tamil hybridity is a fact and there are many reasons for its existence, not only the difficulties created by the script itself. Some sociolinguistic factors preventing authors from pure phonetic representation of Spoken Tamil in prose writings have been well delineated and explained by H. Schiffman and S. Arokianathan (1986: 372-374), whose conclusion, important for students and teachers: “The problem is that the modern writers’ representation of spoken Tamil appears to be inconsistent, unstandardized, and in fact underutilizes possibilities inherent in the writing system” (1986: 375), should be kept in mind. In such a case where there are no specific rules to be observed and every writer has to make his own solutions, Tamil teachers and their students are in a very inconvenient position.

As has already been shown, the Tamil language is not constituted of one simple identity. It is rather a set of different varieties, which are complementary to one another and the knowledge of each of them is essential for the understanding of Tamil people's minds and hearts. Sometimes the existence of such varieties is just an assumption, sometimes the whole language is perceived as an abstraction. At the same time we have grammatical rules instituted some 2000 years ago, other rules are in the process of change, and sometimes no rules are observed at all. But still no-one can say that Tamil does not exist as a single language. The peculiarity and unusual form of Tamil, being equally Classical and Modern, makes it a very interesting subject to study as well as an extremely difficult language to teach. Hopefully, the richness and splendour of Tamil literature and the kindness of the Tamils will definitely reward all the difficulties and pains that students and their teachers may encounter during their study course, and the experience of the real “sweetness” of Tamil will encourage them all to make still more efforts to reach their goal.

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