

On Polysemy in Tamil and other Indian Languages

Panchanan Mohanty
Centre for ALTS
University of Hyderabad
Hyderabad 500046, India
panchananmohanty@gmail.com

S.Arulmozi
Dept. of DCL
Dravidian University
Kuppam 517425, India
arulmozi@gmail.com

Abstract

Scholars (e.g. Burrow 1968:300) have expressed surprise regarding the very small number of borrowed words from Sanskrit in Tamil as opposed to the other three major literary Dravidian languages, i.e. Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam. But there is no detailed discussion as to why it has happened in Tamil when other Dravidian languages possess a lot of Sanskrit borrowings. We want to argue here that the small number of consonant letters in Tamil alphabet is responsible for it. And its natural outcome is that other Dravidian languages have borrowed from Sanskrit whenever necessary whereas Tamil has managed its situation by developing polysemy. In other words, Tamil is more polysemous compared to its sister languages. In fact, we want to propose that if a language has a smaller alphabet than others, it has to be more polysemous than the latter. In this paper, we will demonstrate it with examples from Tamil vis-a-vis their cognates in Telugu.

1 Introduction

Lexical ambiguity is one of the most difficult problems in language processing studies, and not surprisingly, is at the core of lexical semantics research. It is true that most words in a language have more than one meaning, but the ways in which words carry multiple meanings can vary (Pustejovsky & Boguraev 1995).

Therefore, it is not surprising that most words inherited from proto-Dravidian by the extant Dravidian languages are polysemous. Burrow (1968:300) has expressed surprise regarding the presence of a few Sanskrit borrowings in Tamil as opposed to their abundance in the other three major literary Dravidian languages, i.e. Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam. With reference to this, Mohanty (2008:17-18) has argued that "...the contact between Tamil and Sanskrit was predominantly literary and that the structure of Tamil was such that it could not have

borrowed freely from Sanskrit. Therefore, writing Sanskrit words with less number of letters, with the restriction of not using /r/ and /l/ word-initially, and without consonant clusters, was certainly an unmanageable task for the literate Tamilians at that time. All these naturally lead us to believe that Tamil has less synchronic variation and more polysemy." Thus, Tamil is believed to be more polysemous than the other three major Dravidian languages, viz. Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam. In order to test this hypothesis, we would like to compare the meanings of some randomly selected Tamil words with the corresponding cognates from Telugu, which has a more elaborate alphabet.

Most words derived from the proto-Dravidian that are available in Tamil and Telugu are polysemous. But Tamil is more polysemous compared to Telugu and other major Dravidian languages. The reason we propose is that if a language has a smaller alphabet (such as Tamil) than others, it has to be more polysemous than the latter.

1.1 The Tamil language

Tamil is a South Dravidian language of the Dravidian family of languages. Tamil alphabet is descended from the Southern Brahmi script and has 12 vowels, 18 consonants and one *aytam* in addition to five Grantha letters (mainly used to write consonants borrowed from Sanskrit).

1.2 The Telugu language

Among the other major Dravidian languages, Telugu belongs to the South Central Dravidian subgroup, the other two Kannada and Malayalam falling under the South Dravidian subgroup. Telugu is a highly Sanskritised

language, but it has a unique feature that all its words end with a vowel sound.

The Telugu alphabet is also a descendent of the Southern Brahmi script. Telugu has 16 vowels and 36 consonants, which are more in number than those of Tamil.

2 Polysemy

Polysemy plays a major role in the historical development of word meanings because lexemes continually shift their meanings and develop new meaning variants (Lobner, 2002). In Tamil, the word *poTu* has over a period of time developed numerous meanings (29 senses to 54 senses between 1998 to 2008)¹. But in the case of Telugu, it is not the same because of the influence of Sanskrit. That is, Tamil uses the same word to represent different senses whereas Telugu has the option of falling back on Sanskrit to provide different words for different senses. One can get a clear picture about this from the examples given in 2.1 below.

Among the 3000 and odd verbs in Tamil, about 1185 exhibit more than one sense, 525 with 2 senses, 243 with 3 senses, 290 words with 4-6 senses, 55 words with 7-10 senses; 25 words have 10-54 senses; and so on. Out of the 2500 odd Telugu verbs, only 1427 have more than 1 distinctly different sense. This proves the point that we proposed earlier with regard to the less number of letters in an alphabet giving rise to polysemy.

In what follows, we present the data taken from the Tamil and Telugu dictionaries for demonstrating the senses in both the languages. We also provide the etyma for the words selected from the revised edition of the Dravidian Etymological Dictionary (DEDR).

2.1 Tamil and their cognates in Telugu

I. DEDR

Tamil: *accu*, n: mould, type.

Telugu: *accu*, n: stamp, impression, print, mould

¹ CreA. 1998, 2008. taRkaalat tamil akarati. Dictionary of Modern Tamil. CreA, Chennai.

Tamil: அச்சு, *accu*, n

1. type in printing
2. printing
3. printed form; impression
4. in print; under print
5. mould
6. exact likeness
7. a kitchen gadget

Telugu: అచ్చు, *accu*, n

1. a stamp, a type, a printing press
3. a mould
4. the handle of hand mill,
5. an image or picture

In the above example, both Tamil and Telugu retain the proto form *accu*.

II. DEDR

Tamil: *aTakkam*, n: submission, patience, repose

Telugu: *aDakuva*, n: humility, modesty, submissiveness

Tamil: அடக்கம், *aTakkam*, n

1. humility; modesty; unobtrusive behavior
2. inconspicuousness
3. (of size and use) compactness; handiness
4. being inclusive
5. burial
6. cost of production; cost price

Telugu: అడకువ, *aDakuva*

1. submission, obedience, politeness.
2. humility

In this case, *aDakuva* is the Telugu form for the Tamil *aTakkam*. But *aDakuva* has become obsolete and the following words are used in the present day Telugu: *namrata*, *vinayamu*, *vidheyata*, *anakuva*, *nigarvam* for submission, obedience, humility and *maryAda* and *sanmAnamu* for politeness.

III. DEDR

Tamil: *atir*, v: to shake, quake, tremble (as by an earthquake, the fall of a tree, the rolling of chariots), be startled, alarmed, resound (as thunder), reverberate, sound (as a drum), roar (as beasts)

Telugu: *adaru*, v: to tremble, shake, quake, shiver

Tamil: அதிர், atir, v

1. vibrate; shake
2. (of drums) be sounded
3. be shaken (by the sudden impact of an event, situation)

Telugu: అదరు/అదురు, adaru/aduru

1. To tremble, shake, quake, shiver

IV. DEDR

Tamil: ATTam, n: motion, vibration, swinging, play, game, one's turn in a game

Telugu: ATa, n: play, game, dancing, acting on the stage, jest, gambling

Tamil: ஆட்டம், ATTam, n

1. jerking movement
2. dance
3. game; play
4. (in games) one's turn
5. (in a movie theatre) show
6. unrestrained behavior (generally not approved by others)

Telugu: ఆట, ATa

1. play, sport, a game
2. a dance, acting or stage performance
3. jest, joke, gambling

V. DEDR

Tamil: ATu, v: to move; wave, swing, shake, dance, act a part or play, play, sport, cohabit, fight, go, wander about, say, do, enjoy

Telugu: Adu, v: play, sport, act on the stage, dance, mover, shake, totter, vibrate, throb

Tamil: ஆடு, ATu, v

1. move in a swaying motion; move to and fro
2. (of body) shiver; tremble
3. vibrate
4. shake
5. (of a swing or one in a swing) go forward and backward; swing
6. perform (a dance, drama)
7. dance or move as if dancing
8. play (a game)
9. dance to the tune of
10. behave without restraint; have an intemperate life-style

Telugu: ఆడు, ADu v

1. to play, dance work, act, do move, ply
2. to shake, totter, wag
3. to beat, as the pulse
4. to speak, say

VI. DEDR

Tamil: Avi, n: breath, sigh soul, steam, vapour, smoke

Telugu: Avi, n: steam, vapour, heat

Tamil: ஆவி, Avi, n

1. (hot) vapour (from boiled water or hot drinks); mist (from ice); vapour (from petrol, etc. when exposed to air)
2. breath (as a sign of life)
3. spirit of the dead (believed to be wandering or existing somewhere); ghost

Telugu: ఆవి, Avi

1. steam, vapour

For the 2 and 3 senses, Telugu uses the word *Upiri* instead of *Avi/Aviri*.

VII. DEDR

Tamil: iTam, n: place, room, spot, opportunity

Telugu: eDa, n: place, spot

Tamil: இடம், iTam, n

1. spot (on a part of a person's body or a thing); part or area (of a region, town, etc.)
2. context or situation (in a story, play, etc.)
3. space (occupied by people or objects); room
4. seat (in a vehicle, etc.)
5. admission (in a college, etc. to study a course)
6. post; situation vacant (in an office, etc.)
7. seat (contested by a candidate in an election)
8. room (for speculation, happening, etc)
9. grade; rank; place (due to admissibility)
10. place; status
11. (particular or specified) situation
12. (in grammar) person
13. word used as a locative sign; 'with'

Telugu: ఎడ, eDa

1. place, distance

Telugu uses *choTTu*, *sthAnam*, *sthAyi*, *sthalam* to represent the senses expressed by *iTam* in Tamil.

VIII. DEDR

Tamil: *iTu*, v: to place, deposit, put in, keep, throw, cast away, discharge (as arrows) give, pour (as rain), put on (as a bangle), compare, bury, lay (as an egg)

Telugu: *iDu*, v: to place, put, lay, give, offer

Tamil: இடு, iTu, v

1. put (food, flour, into a vessel, etc.); place
2. lay (egg)
3. put on (sacred ash, on the forehead); smear
4. put (garland on s.o.) garland; put on (pieces of jewellery)
5. put (a line, dot, etc. on a surface); make (border on one end of the saree, etc.)
6. set up; erect (a fence, etc.)
7. make; prepare (papad)
8. make (plans)
9. give (s.o. a name); name
10. issue (order, etc.)
11. pronounce (curse)

Telugu: ఇడు, iDu

1. to give, offer, place, put, lay, plant

Even though Telugu has *iDu* in usage, words such as *vEyu* and *peTTu* are predominantly used to represent the senses exhibited by Tamil.

IX. DEDR

Tamil: *izhu*, v: to draw, pull, drag along the ground, attract (as a magnet), wheedle, draw out, stretch out, draw into (as a whirlpool), engulf, absorb; have convulsions, gasp for breath

Telugu: *Iducu*, *Idcu*, v: to pull, haul, drag, draw, attract

Tamil: இழு, izhu, v

1. pull (s.o. or sth. Causing to follow or drawing towards oneself); draw
2. (of limbs) have spasmodic jerks; get convulsed

3. pull (sth. to a desired place or position); draw

4. drag out (a person); take (a person compelling him to come)

5. drag (s.o. into sth); involve

6. leave (what one has started saying) unfinished; drag on

7. protract

8. gasp (for breath)

9. take in; take a drag

10. attract; draw close

11. draw (water)

12. draw (a line)

13. make (into a wire or fibre)

Telugu: తడు /తాడు చు IDcu/IDucu

1. to pull, haul, drag

Idcu in Telugu is mostly replaced by *lAgu* to represent the senses expressed in Tamil.

X. DEDR

Tamil *iRangku*, v: to descend, alight, fall (as rain), disembark, settle into place, halt, abase (as poison, small-pox, etc.) bow respectfully, fall from a high state

Telugu: *eragu*, v: to descend, bow or make obeisance, prostrate oneself.

Tamil: இறங்கு, iRangku, v

1. come down; get down; climb down
2. filter through in drops; trickle; drip
3. get off (a vehicle); get down
4. (of price) come down
5. (of fever, temperature) come down; subside
6. (of voice) become low; become faint
7. begin to get busy with (an activity); get down to
8. get into (the water of a river, etc.)
9. (of a nail, wheel of a cart) go into
10. arrive (at a destination or place)
11. (of food) go down
12. (of venom) be removed; be counteracted
13. (in cards) play (at one's turn)
14. (in cricket) go in (to bat)
15. be reduced; be deflated

Telugu: ఎరగు, eragu, v

1. to descend
2. to salute, to make a bow, to bow down to, to prostrate oneself

Telugu mostly uses *digu* for the senses expressed in Tamil.

XI. DEDR

Tamil *OTu*, v: to run, flee, sail, operate (as the mind), happen, be defeated

Telugu: *ODu*, v: to run, be defeated, fail, be afraid, flow, trickle

Tamil: ஒடு, OTu, v

1. run
2. run; ply
3. (of watches, clock) go; run
4. (of breath) move in and out (of the lungs)
5. (of water, blood, etc.) flow
6. (of root, vein in the body) run
7. (of grey hair) show up in streaks
8. (of film) run; (of work) proceed; progress
9. (of good) get sold
10. (of time) pass (quickly)
11. function (normally)

Telugu: ఓడు, ODu

1. to fail, lose, to be defeated or worsted
2. to flow or be lost, as blood
3. to shrink, hesitate, fall back
4. to be frightened
5. to rush, as a flood

Even though, *ODu* is in usage, it is rarely used. Instead, Telugu uses *parigettu*, *ADu*, etc. for the senses expressed in Tamil

XII. DEDR

Tamil *OTu*, n: shell (of egg, tortoise, crab), tile, potsherd, earthen vessel, skull

Telugu: *ODu billa*, n: a roofing tile

Tamil: ஒடு, OTu, n

1. tile (for roofing)
2. broken piece of earthenware; potsherd
3. (of a tortoise, etc.) shell; hard outer cover (of certain fruits, e.g. almonds)

Telugu: ఓడు, ODu

1. roofing tile, a pantile

XIII. DEDR

Tamil *kaTTu*, v: to tie, fasten, build, wear, put on, bind by spells, marry, shut up, store, hug, compare with, be equal

Telugu: *kaTTu*, v: to tie, bind, wear (clothes), build, bewitch, obstruct.

Tamil: கட்டு, kaTTu, v

1. construct (a house, bridge, etc)/(of birds) build (a nest)
2. inlay (stones in ornaments)/have a denture fixed
3. compose (a song)
4. build (ship, coach, etc)
5. heap up earth at the base (of a plant) as support
6. (of a book) make (page)
7. fasten (s.o. with sth.); tie (sth.) up; tie (a packet, etc. with a string); pack (sth.)
8. bandage (the injured part of the body)
9. wear (a saree, dhoti, etc.); tie (a piece of cloth around the head, waist, etc.)
10. wear (wrist watch, talisman, etc.)
11. blindfold
12. tie a know (as when getting married)
13. yoke (oxen to a cart, plough, etc.)
14. string up (flowers); make (a garland)
15. fold (hands across the chest or around the knees)
16. marry
17. dam (up water)/stagnate
18. (of phlegm, blood) accumulate; clot
19. (of price, rent, charges) be reasonable
20. pay (fees, interest, etc.)
21. bet (in a horse, race)
22. play (a part in a stage play, film)
23. brand (s.o.); label
24. counteract venom (as an antidote)
25. (of stools) become hard/harden (the stools)

Telugu: కట్టు, kaTTu, v

1. to tie, bind
2. to wear, as clothes
3. to connect, affix, attach
4. to store up, to lay by
5. to build, erect
6. to fascinate, charm, bewitch
7. to fabricate, compose, or put a story together
8. to impute a sin or offence
9. to find fault with, to lay blame on
10. to gird up the loins or be prepared
11. to water a garden
12. to dress a wound
13. to get ready a carriage
14. to pay money
15. to restrain the appetite

XIV. DEDR

Tamil *vai,v*: to put, place, seat, lay by, store up, possess, keep, create, set up

Telugu: *vEyu,v*: to place, put, put on (as a dress)

Tamil: வை ,vai, v

1. put or place (sth. in or on sth.)
2. place
3. put (flowers) on; place (sth. decoratively)
4. place (sth.on view)
5. plant
6. put (full stop, comma, seal); mark; stamp
7. set (fire)/light (a lamp)
8. give (a blow)
9. take (a step)
10. provide (sth. as food)
11. place (a bomb)
12. provide with
13. bring one's hand to forehead (as in salute)
14. make; prepare (food)
15. make (offering)
16. erect (a statue); establish (an institution)
17. have or run (a shop)
18. have; employ (s.o.)
19. set up (a home after one's marriage)
20. grow (beard, moustache)
21. prescribe (rules, regulations); follow; have
22. have (evidence, details)
23. keep
24. keep (in memory)
25. conduct; hold (an event)
26. arrange
27. play (radio, record)
28. give (as pledge, security)
29. set (sth. apart)
30. keep (in an account)
31. apportion; portion (sth.) out
32. keep; maintain
33. have (affection, love for s.o); place (one's trust in s.o.)
34. establish; maintain (friendship, contact)
35. prescribe (a text for study)
36. look after; take care of
37. put forth; present
38. cast a spell (on)
39. put on flesh

Telugu:వేయ ,vEyu, v

1. to throw, cast, or fling
2. to discharge a missile or fire arms
3. to let drop
4. to place, put or put on, as a dress

5. to put a lid on
6. to make the carriage ready
7. to saddle a horse
8. to ask a question
9. to build a hut
10. to light torches
11. to give fodder
12. to give a cry
13. to shut up
14. to to draw out
15. to pluck up or out
16. to push away
17. to draw out
18. to write off
19. to give away

In addition to *vEyu*, Telugu uses *peTTu* to represent the senses expressed in Tamil.

From the above data, it is clear that Tamil, which has less letters in its alphabet, exhibits more polysemy examples than Telugu that has more letters in its alphabet and hence uses different words including borrowings for representing various senses.

3 Conclusion

To conclude, based on our argument that less number of letters in the alphabet of a language will discourage borrowing from other languages if the contact between them is primarily literary, we have demonstrated that Tamil is more polysemous than Telugu. It strengthens our hypothesis that words in a language that has a smaller alphabet will be more polysemous than that which has an elaborate alphabet.

References

- Apresjan, J. D. 1973. *Regular Polysemy*. Mouton, The Hague.
- Burrow, T. and Emeneau, M. B. 1984. *Dravidian Etymological Dictionary*. Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi. (revised edition)
- Brown C. P. 1903. *A Telugu English Dictionary*. Language. Christian Knowledge Society's Press, Madras.
- <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/brown/>
- Burrow, T. 1968. *Collected Papers on Dravidian Linguistics*. Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar.
- CreaA. 1998/2008. *taRkaalat tamizh akarati*. CreA, Chennai.

- Cruse, D.A. 1986. *Lexical Semantics*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Gwynn, J.P.L. 1991. *A Telugu-English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
<http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/gwynn/>
- Krishnamurti, Bh. 1961. *Telugu Verbal Bases*. University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Lobner, S. 2002. *Understanding Semantics*. Arnold Publishers, London.
- Miller, G.A. 1995. 'WordNet: A Lexical Database for English', *Communications of the ACM*. Vol.38, No.11.
- Mohanty, P. 2008 Dravidian Substratum and Indo-Aryan Languages. *International Journal of Dravidian Linguistics*. 37:1, 1-20.
- Pustejovsky, J. 1991. 'The Generative Lexicon', *Computational Linguistics* 17:4, 409-41.
- Pustejovsky, J. and Boguraev, B. 1995. Lexical Semantics in Context, *Journal of Semantics*. 12:1-14.
- Ravin, Y and Leacock, L. 2000. 'Polysemy: An Overview', Y.Ravin and C. Leacock. eds. *Polysemy: Theoretical and Computational Issues*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Reddy, G. N. 1990. *Dictionary of Synonyms in Telugu*. Pratibha Publications, Hyderabad.