

# Tamil Language in Context: A Comprehensive Approach to Learning Tamil

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## List of Abbreviations

abl.	ablative case marker (இலிருந்து, இடமிருந்து)
acc.	accusative case (object marker ஐ)
adj.	adjective (adjectival) (ஆன)
adv.	adverb(ial) (ஆக)
AJP	adjectival participle (அ)
AVP	adverbial participle (உ, இ, ய்)
bene.	Benefactive, -உக்காக case suffix, 'for'
compl.	விடு, completive aspect, also unexpectedness
cond.	Conditional (-ஆல்)
conj.	Conjunction (-உம்)
cont.	Continuous aspect (-கொண்டிரு-)
dat.	Dative case (க்கு - 'to', 'for')
emph.	Emphasis/emphatic (e.g. தான், -ஏ, கூட )
excl.	Exclusive (cf., 1st person plural)
fem.	Feminine (e.g., 3rd person feminine, அவள்)
fut.	Future tense (-வ்-, -ப்ப்-)
gen.	Genitive case (-இன், -அது, -உடைய)
imp.	Imperative (-உங்கள், -ஆதீர்கள்)
impol.	Impolite/informal/familiar (-ஆதே)
incl.	Inclusive (cf. 1st person plural) (-ஓம்)
inf.	Infinitive (cf., to vb.)
instr.	Instrumental case ('by', 'because of') (-ஆல்)
lit.	Literally
loc.	Locative case (-இல்)
masc.	Masculine (e.g., 3rd person masc. அவர்)
mod.	Modal verb (லாம், முடியும், வேண்டும், அட்டும் etc.)
neg.	Negative/negation (இல்லை)
neut.	Neuter (e.g., இது இருக்கு 'it be-pres-neut')

obl.	Oblique (e.g., oblique form of நான் > என் )
ppl.	Participle
perf.	Perfective aspect, இரு as auxiliary verb after AVP
pl.	Plural (-கள்)
PNG	Person-number-gender (agreement marker on the verb)
pol.	Polite (honorific), also formal
poss.	Possessive
pres.	Present tense (-கிற்- -க்கிற்-)
pst.	Past tense (-த்-, -ந்த்-, -இன்-, -த்த்-)
refl.	Reflexive aspect, கொள் as auxiliary verb after AVP
sp.	Spoken (Tamil)
sing.	Singular
vb.	Verb
wr.	Written (Tamil)

## **Tips: How to Study Tamil?**

- Get yourself familiar with the syllabic nature of Tamil alphabet and pronunciation. Pay special attention to understand the difference between short vs. long vowels, single vs. clustered consonants, flapped vs. retroflex consonants and velar vs. palatal nasals, as they make up a significant number of minimal words in Tamil. Understanding thoroughly how different consonants are produced in various places of articulation namely labial, dental, alveolar, pre-palatal, palatal, velar etc., as well as the manners of articulation namely flap, retroflex, continuant, fricative, lateral etc., will help saying Tamil words, phrases and sentences accurately.
- Practice writing and saying as many type of Tamil word forms as you can by adding various types of suffixes and by applying appropriate sandhi rules. This will help internalizing word formation rules, so a natural speech can be achieved with no trouble.
- Pay extra attention to comprehend the difference between informal spoken Tamil and formal written Tamil, and avoid mixing them in each of these two distinct circumstances. In this respect, closely comparing the spoken and written forms wherever possible will help immensely to learn about the difference between, supposedly, the two genres of Tamil language namely spoken and written Tamil. Most of the word forms and suffixes are illustrated throughout this book in their spoken and written forms concurrently. Make sure to understand the difference unambiguously and employ them accordingly. Although the written forms that are given in this book represent a standard variety, identifying a standard for spoken Tamil forms has always been a challenging task. In this sense, what is given to represent spoken forms in this book can no way be assumed as the standard variety, especially for the reasons of many variations that exist due to fast speech, dialect forms, orthographical difficulties, and so on. However, as far as possible, selecting a common form of spoken Tamil that one can hear in T.V., radio etc., is attempted here avoiding any regional and social variations. The spoken variety and the speakers chosen to make up the dialogues in the videos are in most part non-stigmatized. So, imitating the speech from the videos and audio files provided in the DVD may help improve your spoken skill.
- Use the DVD when studying the dialogues as studying a language as it is spoken is an essential part of learning it. More videos, supplemental materials and other updates to this work will be made available at the website whenever they are available: <http://www.thetamilanguage.com>.
- Start every chapter by spending 10 minutes on the vocabulary list. Try to memorize words and their meaning before starting each lesson, so you will be able to recognize them in the text without looking at the translation or vocabulary list. Some of the words may occur repeatedly in more than one lesson under vocabulary list. This is done on purpose for the reasons of reinforcement and

easy consultation. After you are done reading the dialogues, read the grammar section and attempt to comprehend how each of the new grammatical items introduced in each lesson fits into the overall structure of the language. Be sure to understand the difference between English and Tamil in the way some of the grammatical structures are used. This will help avoiding the influence of English while trying to speak Tamil. Sentences with dative subject, instrumental subject, verb forms with aspectual auxiliaries, modal auxiliaries, agglutinative nature of verb and noun forms etc., are some of the salient features that deserve extra attention while studying the Tamil language.

- The lessons are presented in a graded fashion. This means that new grammatical forms and speech contexts are introduced in an order of logical progression. Every lesson is intended not only to illustrate one or more of new grammatical items and speech contexts, they are also used to reinforce the forms and words that are introduced in the preceding chapters. Some of the major grammatical structures covered in this book include the following in the order they are introduced. Noun-Noun construction, imperative, present tense, numbers, future tense, impersonal/dative subject construction, past tense, modal forms, quotative marker, adverbial participle marker, aspectual auxiliaries, adjective participle, verbal noun constructions, temporal clauses and clitics. Each of these grammatical items are illustrated appropriately along with necessary cultural nuances in dialogues and readings.
- Do grammar exercises without the help of vocabulary list or using other resources, unless absolutely necessary.
- This book is challenging, but rewarding - you will be surprised to see how much of Tamil language and culture you have learned in eighteen lessons.

Good luck and have fun learning Tamil!



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## Foreword

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Language is one of the social and intellectual sources of the humanity. Even though the mankind is traced to one geographical source, the existing hundreds of languages in the world cannot be derived from a single source. But the groups of languages seem to be genetically related and the concept of language family was developed in the 19th century; and on that basis, nearly 25 families of languages have been identified in the world. The people belonging to the genetically related languages, i.e. belonging to a family of language are considered to have lived at one place in the pre-historic period; but later due to the migration of people to different places and long period of separation, the original single language should have become different dialects and then, in due course, they should have become different languages due to the long period of separation and due to socio-political and cultural forces. Even a common man could identify the genetically related languages of his or her mother tongue and the non-related languages.

Due to historic, cultural and political reasons, the people of different languages of different families with the different cultural and literary achievements had to live together and this situation continues even now. This has necessitated the people to learn other languages.

The learning of other languages might have taken place even from the pre-historic period in Tamil: The evidences are i) The Tamil writing system is now considered to be an adaptation of Asoka Brahmi script. That means some of the Tamils at that time had learned Prakrit language and then adapted the script to suit the phonological system of Tamil. ii) in Tolka:ppiyam, the earliest extant Tamil grammar written roughly in the beginning of the Christian era, there are direct and indirect evidences for the study of second language in Tamilnadu: a) In the text, Tolka:ppiyar, the author of Tolka:ppiyam refers to Sanskrit directly and indirectly in a few contexts: he mentions that his methodology of description of the articulation of speech sound is different from Vedas of Brahmins (antaṇar marai, S. 102) and the pre-marital love is equivalent to Gandarva type of marriage which was one among the eight types of marriages in the land of Brahmins (S. 1038). b) Translation has been noted one of ways of writing the secondary books ( vali nu:l, S.1597) by Tolkappiyar.

There are a few sutras which seem to imply the contrastive feature of Tamil and Sanskrit. For instance, The vowels are first classified into short and long on the basis of ma:tra, the unit of measurement to describe the duration of speech sounds, i.e. short vowels having one matra (S. 3) and long vowels, two matras (4), and then there is a sutra saying that there is no letter having three matras (S. 5). The sutra is considered to be a contrastive statement keeping Sanskrit pluta, in mind, which has three matras. That

means, the scholars of his time should have learnt some other languages and mastered them. But there is no evidence how the second languages are learnt and taught.

Vi:raco:liyam, a Tamil grammar written by the Buddhist scholar, Puttamitirana:r in the 11th century is now considered to be a 'transfer grammar' (puṭaima:rru ilakkaNam) of Tamil and Sanskrit written mainly to enable Buddhists scholars to learn Tamil. For instance, he first describes theoretically the sandhi changes in Tamil (S. 9) and then, in Sanskrit (S. 10) and actual sandhi changes in Sanskrit in two sutras (11 &12) and then only actual sandhi changes in Tamil 16 sutras. Similarly in the chapter on cases, he first describes the case suffixes in Tamil in first three sutras (Ss. 29-31). It is interesting to note that the plural suffixes are taken as the first case marker (S.30). Even though the case suffixes are common in Tamil to the nouns of all the gender-number, it is said that there are 64 cases in Tamil and listing them as, 8 gender-number category (masculine singular, feminine singular, neuter singular, epicene plural, neuter plural, honorific mas. sg., hon. fem. sg., hon. ne.sg.) and 8 case suffixes.(S. 31). The next sutra describes that there are 63 suffixes in Sanskrit, i.e. three genders (mas. fem. and neuter), seven cases and three numbers (sg., dual and pl.). So, one can note that some kind of explicit contrastive study was being made to teach the second language.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the Europeans, especially the Christian Missionaries, came to Tamilnadu to propagate Christianity and learnt Tamil first by moving with the people; and some of them wrote Tamil grammars in European languages like Latin, Portuguese and English to help their fellow clergy who would serve in Tamilnadu to learn Tamil. It is to be noted that these grammars written by the foreigners have made some original observations on the structure of Tamil like the differentiations of strong and weak verbs in the conjugation and the personal pronouns as a separate sub-class in the nouns.

In the second half of the 20th century, many foreign universities introduced the courses of teaching Indian languages mainly for those were interested in the research on India. Simultaneously, the Universities in India have introduced intensive language courses for a limited period. Annamalai University is one such centers for teaching Tamil and it has also published some books for the benefit of the students.

Since more Indians migrated to and settled in U.S.A. during the past fifty years, there arises a new situation, i.e. their children of the migrated Indians could not speak their mother tongue fluently and find it difficult to talk to their relatives living in India. They do not know the written form of their native language. So the teaching of Indian languages in foreign Universities, especially in America has to serve not only the American students but also to the second generation of the native language speakers.

As a result, now, instead of writing contrastive grammars, the target language is introduced directly in the form of conversation and the grammar is introduced secondarily to understand the system so that the learners could create more sentences for themselves. Consequently, many books have been published to teach a language as

the second language using the conversational method. As the conversations are based on the real life situations, it will be very helpful for the learner to use the language immediately.

In this context, I am happy to read **TAMIL LANGUAGE IN CONTEXT (A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO LEARNING TAMIL)** written by Dr. Vasu Renganathan who was a student of Annamalai University and who has developed the book, out of his varied experience of teaching in various Universities in the U.S.A. for a pretty long period of two decades.

It is heartening to note that the book can be used with many computer aids such as audio, video and web resources. Moreover the culture of the Tamils are introduced through these lessons. Tamil, as a diglossic language, has a difference between spoken and written forms. So there is an introduction of 26 pages which explain first the short history of language and literature and then the Tamil alphabet from the linguistic point of view - the phonetic values of Tamil letters, nature of Tamil syllables to learn the spoken and written forms together.

There are 18 lessons describing 18 speech contexts which will be helpful to the learner to use them immediately. The format of each lesson has been generalized and noted in the contents. The conversation is given in the written forms with transliteration on the left side and the spoken form with rough phonetic transcriptions on the right side, and then English translation. In the grammatical section, there are sufficient explanation of grammar from the sentence point of view and those sentences are given in written and spoken forms. The type of exercises provided include a) translation between English and Tamil, b) filling-in the missing words with appropriate Tamil words and forms, c) selecting the correct answers/questions in response to given questions or statements, d) reading and translating passages relevant Tamil culture and grammar, e) short Tamil poems are included after every reading with suitable glossaries, so the students will have a chance to challenge themselves to make up the meaning by themselves. Finally a list of vocabulary has been provided in written form, spoken form and with their English meaning.

The conversations in the first section of every lesson runs only one page but the other items, more than ten pages. That means, the student has to pay more attention to understand the structure of Tamil language and also the cultural aspects. The dialogues are very humorous and witty. Some of them are very sarcastic, a stereotypical way of Tamils engaging themselves in various speech situations.

Overall, this book is entirely a new attempt and a comprehensive work from the linguistic as well as cultural point of view. I am positive that each and every part of the book would be very interesting that the students would enjoy it as a lovely lesson. And I am sure that this book, **TAMIL LANGUAGE IN CONTEXT (A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO LEARNING TAMIL)** would render an optimum benefit to the students who learn Tamil as a foreign language.