

Heritage Voices: Tamil

About the Authors: Charanya Krishnan and Jannani Durai

Charanya Krishnan

I am Charanya Krishnan with a Masters Degree in Business Administration and roughly 5 years of experience in Public Relations and Media Marketing with *The Times of India*. I am currently on a career break for 2 years in an attempt to spend all of my time with my 1 year old daughter, Riya Krishnan, who is actually an Indian-American.



This article was written at a critical point in my life, when I had made a home (in the U.S.) outside my home (in Tamil Nadu, India). This, along with travelling to newer places, has given me a new perspective and helped me realize that wherever I go, Tamil will always be a part of my being, and I will always at heart be a Tamilian. Thinking about my association with this language

brought to mind a barrage of childhood memories, which I would hold very dear. From waking up each day to the sonorous chants of Vedic and Tamil hymns to having my hot tumbler of Filter coffee, watching my mother draw fresh kolams (patterns) in front of my house, our weekly oil baths, and applying Turmeric paste for general well being, is all so fully Tamil to me.

Tamil is not just a language for me, it is my culture. It is who I am and my way of life. I have found myself in numerous situations where quoting an age-old Tamil proverb has helped me explain my stance much more vibrantly than in English. I have also been particularly blessed with my paternal grandfather and maternal grandmother living with us, who have never failed to drive in me some values which I cherish with pride as a Tamilian today. I remember my grandfather taking me as a very little child to see the Temple elephant with a bell around its neck and I would say, "Ding, Ding, Ding Yaanai" (Elephant). The moment of truth was when my daughter said the same thing a few days back. My parents are very proud Tamilians as well. The language and culture will not just stay with me, but will be cherished by my daughter also as she is a global citizen today.

Jennani Durai

My name is Jennani Durai, and I am a Linguistics major in my final year of study at the University of Virginia. I am from Singapore, where roughly 7 per cent of the population is Tamil-speaking.



Jennani and friend

My grandparents emigrated to Singapore and Malaysia before my parents were born, so they both grew up speaking English and Tamil. I spoke Tamil before I spoke English, but that quickly reversed as I entered kindergarten and needed to be able to communicate with the other children. I remember being so eager to learn English because everyone in kindergarten already spoke it, but I only spoke Tamil! So I would make up words that sounded like English and “practice.”

Soon, English became the language I was most comfortable with, and that has continued until this day. Every student in Singapore is required to study both English (which is the medium of instruction) and their mother tongue (which, for me, was Tamil). We spoke both Tamil and English at home, but because English was what I spoke all day, I stopped wanting to speak in Tamil at home. I studied Tamil in school for ten years and had a love-hate relationship with my heritage language as I was forced to study it in school. After coming to the U.S. for college, however, I have grown to appreciate my heritage language and come to understand my identity as a heritage language speaker of Tamil. I began to appreciate my bilingual abilities and the unique features of my language. Researching and writing this article helped open my eyes to Tamil’s distinctive nature and special place in linguistics.

About the Tamil Language



Tamil is a member of the Dravidian family of languages and is spoken primarily in the state of Tamil Nadu in India and in Sri Lanka. It is also spoken by sections of the population in Malaysia, Singapore, Dubai, Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad and South Africa, with growing numbers of speakers in the United States, Canada and Australia, among other countries (Gordon, 2005). With over 66 million native speakers worldwide, by some estimates Tamil is the 17th most spoken language in the world (Thangavelu, 2006; Gordon, 2005).

Tamil is one of the oldest languages in the world, with a history of over 3000 years and literary work dating to over 2000 years ago. It is thought to be as old as Latin and older than Arabic (Hart, 2000). On September 17, 2004, Tamil became the first Indian language to be recognized as a classical language by the government of India.

Phonology

The phonology of the Tamil language has several distinctive features. For example,

- the three nasal phonemes – dental (ந்), alveolar (ன), and palatal or retroflex (ண)
- the germination of consonants
- the length of vowels which have the ability to change the meaning of words as follows:
 - the word /manəm/ means "heart" if an alveolar nasal is employed, but "smell" if the palatal or retroflex nasal is employed instead
 - the word /paṭam / means "picture" but the word /paṭṭam / means "degree" or "a flying tethered object".
 - the word /pal/ (with a short vowel sound) means "tooth", while, /pa:l/ (with a long vowel sound), means "milk."

Tamil also possesses a unique letter/sound. This letter is the retroflex approximant, ழ, and is often taught to children as an extension of the laterals. This retroflex approximant is actually the last sound in the name of the language, த்ழ.

In the same way, the word /ni:ləm/ would mean "blue" if a dental lateral was used, but "long" if a palatal or retroflex lateral was used instead. In addition, vowel length is also important in Tamil. Almost every vowel has a short and a long form. A short vowel sound in the word /pal/ means "tooth", while a long vowel sound, /pa:l/, means "milk".

Tamil also possesses a letter that is believed to be not found in any other language. This letter is the retroflex approximant, ழ, and is often taught

to children as an extension of the laterals. This retroflex approximant is actually the last sound in the name of the language.

Writing System

The five parts of Tamil grammar are generally classified as ezuthu (which means letter), sol (which means word), porul (which refers to meaning), yaappu (which means form and poetic structure), and finally, aNi (which is method and poetic decoration).

Tamil script consists of 12 vowels, 18 consonants, and one special character called the aytam in the Tamil script. The vowels and consonants combine to form 216 compound characters, bringing the total number of characters in the script to 247.

These are the characters that make up the Tamil alphabet:

அ	ஆ	இ	ஈ	உ	ஊ
a	ā	i	ī	u	ū
எ	ஏ	ஐ	ஓ	ஔ	ஔள
e	ē	ai	o	ō	au
க	ங	ச	ஞ	ட	ண
ka	ṅa	ca	ñā	ṭa	ṇa
த	ந	ப	ம	ய	ர
ta	na	pa	ma	ya	ra
ல	வ	ழ	ள	ற	ன
la	va	ṣa	ḷa	ṟa	ṇa
ஐ	ஸ	ஷ	ஹ	க்ஷ	ஸ்ரீ
ja	ṣa	śa	ha	kśa	sri

Tamil is written using a script called the *vaṭṭeḷuttu* or as the *Pallava script* which is part of the Brahmic family. Tamil letters carry the inherent vowel sound of /a/, and this sound is changed by adding extra strokes or characters around the original letter. The absence of any vowel sound attached to the consonant is indicated by adding a dot over the letter (Lo, n.d.).

The last row depicts six extra letters borrowed from Sanskrit for the purpose of writing loanwords from Sanskrit and English. These are now also accepted as part of the script.

Diglossia

As with many languages considered now to be “classical,” Tamil is diglossic. The two forms of Tamil are commonly labeled “classic,” *centamil*, and “colloquial,” *koduntamil*, (Shiffman, 1997). The classic form of Tamil is the high-prestige variety, and is used in all writing and most types of public speech. The colloquial form of Tamil is used in everyday conversation. Most dialectal variation in the language occurs in the colloquial form, as it varies with region and with caste. Many heritage language learners have difficulty with the diglossic nature of Tamil, as it requires one to learn Tamil one way and speak it a different way.

Conclusion

Tamil is one of the world’s oldest languages and has many unique qualities as partly evidenced in this spotlight. Much of the heritage of the language has been enhanced and well preserved by individuals, organizations, the Indian government, and academics.

The Tamilians speak Tamil in many different dialects but share the same passion of being proud of their mother tongue. As Dr. Ramachandran (2006) writes, “no language is as mysterious as its original, as rich in history, as ancient in form and as copious in literature as Tamil is.”

To see more examples of Tamil script and to get an idea of how the vowels and consonants are combined, visit www.ancientscripts.com/tamil.html.

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