



Tolkappiyam Phonology

Kamaraj S

Junior Resource Person, Linguistic Data Consortium for Indian Languages, Mysore, Karnataka, India

Abstract

The Tolkappiyam (*தொல்காப்பியம்*) is the most ancient extant work of Tamil literature and the foundational treatise on Tamil grammar and poetics. Unlike many other classical grammars that focus solely on linguistics, the Tolkappiyam is unique because it also provides a "grammar for life," codifying the social, cultural, and emotional landscapes of ancient Tamil society.

Keywords: Tolkappiyam, Eluttiyal, Nannul, classification, compositional relationship

Introduction

This abstract provides a sophisticated linguistic analysis of the Ezhuttadikaram (Book of Orthography) in the Tolkappiyam, specifically focusing on how the structure differs from later grammars like the Nannul. The core of the argument revolves around whether the classification of letters and words is based on their phonetic properties (how they sound) or their functional properties (how they behave in the language).

Later grammarians divided the Eluttatikaram (Book of Orthography) into three major sections: Eluttiyal (Phonology), Pataviyal (Morphology), and Punariyal (Sandhi/Combination). Veeramamunivar, in his work Thonnul Vilakkam, categorized them into Thotram (Origin), Vaguppu (Classification), and Vikaram (Transformation), which can be correlated to Pirappiyal, Eluttiyal, and Punariyal. However, Tholkappiyar structured not only the Eluttatikaram but also Sollatikaram and Porulatikaram into nine chapters each. Therefore, how to concisely categorize Eluttatikaram requires investigation.

The last six chapters of Eluttatikaram can be termed as Punariyal, and the third chapter, Pirappiyal, can be considered a separate major category. In that case, it would be somewhat appropriate to consider the first two chapters as Eluttiyal. However, one must realize that there is a slight difference between the Eluttiyal of later grammarians like Pavananti Munivar (author of Nannul) and that of Tholkappiyar. This is because Tholkappiyar's Eluttiyal does not include Pirappiyal, whereas Nannul's Eluttiyal encompasses it.

The structural placement of Pirappiyal (Articulatory Phonetics) can be viewed as a component of linguistic research theory. Veeramamunivar giving priority to Pirappiyal is akin to the method adopted by those researching a new, unfamiliar language—where one collects hundreds of words from the target language and categorizes the sounds found within them. Thus, phonetic knowledge is fundamental there. However, Tholkappiyar's method involves analyzing an already known language (the mother tongue), identifying the contrastive sounds (phonemes), and only then understanding their allophones and phonetic characteristics. In this method, phonetics is given the second priority.

There is no disagreement regarding the concepts of Eluttiyal discussed in Tholkappiyar's Nunmarapu and Molimarapu. However, differences in opinion exist regarding the

suitability of the chapter titles and the method of generalizing the information presented within them.

The connection between the term "Nunmarapu" and the information shared therein is still not clearly understood. Regarding the content of Nunmarapu, the commentator Ilampuranar explains that it "describes the grammar of individual letters" (focusing on the letter in isolation rather than its position within a word). Nachinarkiniyar provides a detailed list, stating that it explains the names, order, quantity, duration, clusters, groups, and co-occurrence (Mayakkam) of letters.

According to Ilampuranar's view, the inclusion of Meimayakkam (consonant clusters) in Nunmarapu would not be appropriate. This has been discussed previously (Shanmugam, 1977) ^[4]. If we set aside Meimayakkam, Nunmarapu indeed deals with the grammar of individual letters. Nonetheless, exactly which aspects of their grammar are being explained needs clarification. Letters can be classified in various ways; it is also crucial to understand the reasoning behind such classifications.

The distinction between vowel (Uyireluttu) and consonant (Meiyeluttu) is one classification. Tholkappiyar also subdivided these into smaller categories. Based on Tholkappiyar's perspective, it has been previously explained (Shanmugam, 1975) ^[3] that sounds can be divided into two major groups: Eluttu (Letters/Phonemes) and Al-eluttu (Non-prototypical sounds). "Eluttu" can be further divided into Eluttenappatupa (Primary sounds) and Elutturanna (Secondary sounds), while "Al-eluttu" includes Aikarakkurukkam (shortened 'ai') and Makarakkurukkam (shortened 'm').

The explanation of the sub-classification of "Eluttu" is provided in the first two sutras of Nunmarapu. Therefore, it can be argued that Nunmarapu discusses the Functional Classification of letters. Other sutras can also be explained based on this concept. For instance, considering the diphthongs 'Ai' (*ஐ*) and 'Au' (*ஔ*) as long vowels (Netteluttu) is a functional explanation; by treating 'Ai' as a single phoneme, complexities arising during Sandhi (word combination) can be avoided (Shanmugam, 1972) ^[2]. Similarly, while the classification of consonants into Vallinam (Hard) and Mellinam (Soft) is based on phonetics, the Idaiyinam (Medium) category is based on function, as there is less phonetic similarity among its members. Thus, we can conclude that Nunmarapu addresses the functional classification of letters.

Regarding Molimarapu, Ilampuranar notes that it teaches the grammar of letters as they stand within a language (within words). He further explains that it describes the tradition of how letters constitute words. Modern generative phonologists refer to this as Morpheme Structure Rules. Words can be explained at various levels, such as the grammatical level, based on morphological and syntactic properties (for a full explanation, see Meenakshisundaran, 1965: 39-78) ^[1]. To explain words at the orthographic level, Tholkappiyar classifies them based on the number of letters: Oreluttu orumoli (Single-letter word), Ireluttu orumoli (Two-letter word), and Irantirantisuikkum Thodarmoli (Words with more than two letters) — (Thol. Eluttu. 45).

Commentators have raised several issues regarding the reason for this classification. Nachinarkiniyar questions why Tholkappiyar divided them into three categories instead of just two (Single-letter and Multi-letter words). However, instead of providing a structural linguistic answer, he explains it through semantics. Nachinarkiniyar's argument is that the division was based on the Tamil usage of "few" (Sila) and "many" (Pala). This distinction is found in other languages as well; for example, the difference between "some" and "many" in English, or *kuch* and *anek* in Hindi. Therefore, we must investigate if there is any other reason—specifically a grammatical one—for this classification.

Another perspective lies in how this classification is phrased: Are words composed of letters, or do words contain letters? When the author of Nannul says, "A letter, standing alone or in sequence, if it gives meaning, is a Padam (word)" (128), it implies a "compositional relationship." Linguists like Hockett (1961) refer to this as the "composed of" relation. However, looking at Tholkappiyar's phrasing, it can be concluded that he views it as a "representational relationship." This is referred to as the "represented by" relation (Hockett, 1951). Generally, linguists argue that words are not merely formed by the mechanical addition of letters; hence, the "compositional" relationship is considered less accurate.

Next, in Molimarapu, he has discussed the sequence and distribution of letters in detail. After explaining the structure of words based on the number of letters, his explanation of which letters appear at the beginning, end, and middle of a word is also in accordance with the rules of word-structure (phonotactics).

Conclusion

The investigation into the structure of the Ezhuttadikaram reveals that Tholkappiyar's approach is fundamentally functional and representational, distinguishing it from the more compositional and phonetic focus of later grammarians like Pavananti Munivar (author of Nannul) and Veeramamunivar.

References

1. Meenakshisundaran TP. A History of Tamil Language. Poona: Deccan College, 1965.
2. Shanmugam SV Tamil Eluttu Ilakkana Kotpatu (Theories of Tamil Orthography). Annamalainagar: Annamalai University, 1972.
3. Shanmugam SV Tholkappiya Eluttatikara Karaycci (A Study of Tholkappiyam Ezhuttadikaram). Annamalainagar: Annamalai University, 1975.
4. Shanmugam SV *Eluttu Ilakkana Kotpatu* (Grammatical Theories of Letters), 1977.

5. Tholkappiyar. Tholkappiyam: Ezhuttadikaram. (With commentaries by Ilampuranar and Nachinarkiniyar).