

The palatal *ñ* in Tamil

AN attempt is made here to analyse the various changes the palatal sound *ñ* has undergone from the earliest times to the present. Several other sounds in Tamil, this sound occurs in words initially, intervocally and finally. The analysis presented here forms a study of it in all the three positions in which it occurs.

Initial.

Tolkāppiyam, the earliest grammar of the Tamil language, mentions that the nasal *ñ* can occur initially in words only when it is combined with the vowels *ā*, *e* and *o*.¹ When we examine the Sangam Texts, which form the earliest available literary works in Tamil, we come across the following examples to illustrate the statement of *Tolkāppiyam* :—

<i>ñā</i> .—	<i>ñālam</i>	“ world ”	(<i>Kali</i> . 124)
	<i>ñāṭṭu</i>	“ battle-field ”	(<i>Kural</i> . 1088)
	<i>ñāyil</i>	“ bastion ”	(<i>Paṭṭiṇa</i> . 288)
	<i>ñāyiru</i>	“ sun ”	(<i>Paṭṭiru</i> . 88)
	<i>ñāyru</i>	“ day ”	(<i>Kali</i> . 37)
	<i>ñāḷal</i>	“ cassea sophera ”	(<i>Paṭṭiru</i> . 51)
	<i>ñāṅkar</i>	“ there ”	(<i>Kali</i> . 50)
	<i>ñāṅ</i>	“ bow-string ”	(<i>Puṇam</i> . 14)
	<i>ñāḷu</i>	“ to hang down ”	(<i>Puṇam</i> . 82)
<i>ñe</i> .—	<i>ñekili</i>	“ fire-brand ”	(<i>Akam</i> . 108)
	<i>ñeṅṅu</i>	“ crab ”	(<i>Akam</i> . 176)
	<i>ñeḷi</i>	“ to rub ”	(<i>Puṇam</i> . 247)
	<i>ñeḷal</i>	“ road ”	(<i>Puṇam</i> . 15)
	<i>ñemai</i>	“ a kind of tree ”	(<i>Akam</i> . 395)
	<i>ñemutṅku</i>	“ to be pressed ”	(<i>Akam</i> . 58)
	<i>ñemukku</i>	“ to press hard ”	(<i>Akam</i> . 60)
	<i>ñemir</i>	“ to spread ”	(<i>Neṭunal</i> . 90)
<i>ño</i> .—	<i>ñekil</i>	“ to become loose ”	(<i>Kali</i> . 73)
	<i>ñoḷku</i>	“ to become weak ”	(<i>Akam</i> . 31)

Also in the Sangam Texts words are found wherein *ñ* comes initially in combination with the vowels *a* and *i*.

<i>ñā</i> .—	<i>ñamar</i>	“ to spread ”	(<i>Puṇam</i> . 90)
	<i>ñamali</i>	“ dog ”	(<i>Paṭṭiṇa</i> . 140)
	<i>ñaval</i>	“ to sound ”	(<i>Paṭṭiru</i> . 30)
<i>ñi</i> .—	<i>ñiṇam</i>	“ flesh ”	(<i>Puṇam</i> . 177)
	<i>ñimiyu</i>	“ bee ”	(<i>Puṇam</i> . 93)

1. Tol. E]. cūṭ. 64.

ly in the language described by *Tolkāppiyam* there were only words with the syllables *ñā*—, *ñe*—and *ño*—. The commentators of *Tolkāppiyam* think that words beginning with the syllables other than those in *Tolkāppiyam* were later additions to the language.² If this is so, *Tolkāppiyam* must be taken to be earlier in date than the extant Sangam

Tolkāppiyam states that sometimes the syllable *yā*—changes in poetry when it occurs initially in verbs if it is immediately preceded by the vowel *a*.³ The commentators give the following examples to illustrate

maṅ yāṭṭa “ besmeared with mud ”
lit. “ joined to the earth ” > *maṅ ñāṭṭa*
poṅ yāṭṭa “ decorated with gold ” lit. “ joined to gold ”
> *poṅ ñāṭṭa*.

It is stated that this change occurs only in verbs. For instance a phrase like *ñāmai* “ damming up with earth ” will not become *maṅ ñāmai* since *ñāmai* is a noun.

This is perhaps due to the fact that immediately before the time of *Tolkāppiyam* the initial syllable *ñā*—of a considerable number of verbs might have changed to *yā*—. But in the time of *Tolkāppiyam* when this syllable was immediately preceded by a nasal, it resumed its original nasal form. This change of *ñā*—into *yā*— which originally occurred in verbs seems to have been extended later on to nouns also.

In a work called *Perunkatai*, which is supposed to belong to the 7th century A.D., the form *ñāḷ* is found for the word *yāḷ* “ lute,” in one place. In the Sangam Texts occasionally the word *ñāy* is used in the sense of “ my brother ”; there is also another word *yāy* used in the sense of “ my brother ”. In these two examples the form *yāy* might have come from *ñāy* through the change of *ñ*— into *y*—.

Further, the word *ñāṅkar* is frequently used in *Tolkāppiyam* in the sense of “ before.” This word may be split up as *ñāṅku* + *ar*. *ñāṅku* may have been originally a noun of place, and *ar* an expletive affixed to it.⁶ The form *ñāṅku* might have changed to *y*—, and the form *yāṅku* might have

under Tol. Col. cūṭ 452.

2. Tol. E]. cūṭ. 146.

3. *Perunkatai* (3.6.17).

4. *Perunkatai* Stz 40. Cāminātaiyar's edition.

5. Compare with this *cīraku* : *cīrak-ar*, *kompu* : *komp-ar*, *mum* : *mum-ar*.

resulted? With the change of form there seems to have been a change in meaning also, and unlike *nāṅku*, *yāṅku* began to denote "where" or "whence". Again, by the elision of the initial *y*—, a new form *āṅku* meaning "whence" has resulted. *āṅku* is mostly found in poetry; but the more common form is *aṅku*, which again may be a development from *āṅku* formed by the shortening of the initial vowel *ā*—.

Also, the syllable *yā*— occurring initially seems to have had a tendency to change into *e*—. This appears to be an early tendency found in Dravidian languages. For, the form *yāṅku* "where" in Tamil has a parallel form *hege* in Kannada meaning "where." This change appears to have taken place in Tamil during the period of *Tolkāppiyam* though to a less remarkable extent. This can be deduced from the presence of the impersonal interrogative form *evan*⁸ recorded in the work. This word did not have one particular meaning attached to it as in the case of the interrogatives in *e*— formed later in the language. It could be used in several senses, such as "what?" "how?" "what manner?" etc. The initial *e* of this word probably came from the impersonal interrogative base *yā*— mentioned in *Tolkāppiyam*. It is needless to mention that the interrogative, much used in *Tolkāppiyam* and the Sangam literature, was formed from the same base *yā*—⁹. Therefore, due to this change of *yā*— into *e*—, the later interrogative of place *eṅku* "where" must have developed from this form *yāṅku*.¹⁰

Again, a discussion of the different changes which the personal pronoun *yām* (first person) has undergone will throw interesting light on the development of the syllable *nā*— occurring initially. The first person singular described in *Tolkāppiyam* is *yān*. It has already been shown that the initial syllable *nā*— of certain words in the *pre-Tolkāppiyam* period changed to *yā*— during the time of *Tolkāppiyam*. Let us examine whether the syllable *yā*— of the pronoun *yān* could have come from a syllable of another sound. If we apply the foregoing rule to this word *yān* we will get the form **nān* as the form of this word during the *pre-Tolkāppiyam* period. A form like this could have been possible in Tamil is attested by the presence of the very same form in Malayalam even today. Secondly the form *nān* (with initial dental *n*) which is prevalent in mediaeval and modern Tamil

is derived from this form than from *yān*.¹¹ On the other hand, it is likely that the forms *nān* and *nāṅ* originated from the form *yān*. The development of *Tolkāppiyam* as regards the initial *yā*— should be considered in detail. Also, it will be found in the course of this analysis that the initial *y* regularly becomes *y* not only in the language used in the Sangam period but also in the language of later times. Therefore it may not be necessary to assume that the form of the personal pronoun used in the *pre-Tolkāppiyam* period might have been **nān*; and it was probably from this form that *nān* and *nāṅ* developed.

It will be shown later that in the language used in the Sangam literature the initial *n*— occurring initially had already become dental *n*— in a good number of words. On closer examination this change appears to have begun during the period of *Tolkāppiyam* itself, because *Tolkāppiyam* refers to a form of the plural of the personal pronoun along with the form *yām*.¹² It is likely that just as the form *yān* came from *nān*, so also the plural form *yām* might have come from a form **nām* which might have existed in *pre-Tolkāppiyam* period. That a form like this existed is proved by the existence in modern Tamil of the form *nāṅṅal* "we." This form is perhaps a development from *nām* with the addition of a suffix *al*.¹³ Also, just as the singular form *yān* developed from *nān*, the plural form *nām* might have come from the form

nām is mentioned in *Tolkāppiyam* along with the parallel form *yām*. But the singular form *nān* belonging to it is not found there; nor is it found used in the Sangam literature. This may be due to the fact that *nān* might have been supposed to be less literary to be used in literature, and therefore it might have remained only in the colloquial language. This appears to have remained in that condition till it was used in Tamil during the 7th Century A.D.¹⁴

In this connection it is useful to know that the following Dravidian languages have forms beginning with the dental *n*— for the personal pronoun which are identical with the form *nān* in Tamil:—

Telugu	<i>nēn-u, nē</i>
Kannada	<i>nān-u, nā</i>
Coorg	<i>nan'</i>

¹¹ G.D.L. p. 141.

¹² Tol. Col. cūt. 164.

¹³ Perhaps identical with *kaḷ* which is found in the Tamil form *nāṅṅal* "we."

¹⁴ See Appar: Tirumurai 13.1.

⁷ Sk. word *nāpakam* > *yāpakam* in certain parts of the Tamil country (S. 100).

⁸ This word should not be confused with a similar word *evan* meaning "which man?" lit. "which-he?"

⁹ Tol. El. cūt. 428.

¹⁰ Nac. discusses the word *eṅku* under *puṇanatai* Tol. Col. cūt. 309.

The following have forms beginning with the dental *n*— for the personal pronoun, plural, which are identical with the form *nām* in Tamil :—

Malayālam	<i>nām, nōm, nanama, numma</i>
Kannada	<i>nāv-u</i>
Tulu	<i>nama</i>
Coorg	<i>nanga</i>
Kōta	<i>nāme</i>
Rajmahāl	<i>nam</i>
Urāon	<i>nām</i>

Further, it has been shown before that the syllable *yā*— coming in the initial position changes itself into *e*—. If this is correct, then it must be assumed that the form *en* and its plural *em* used as oblique forms of the personal pronouns developed from the form *yān* and *yām* respectively. At first these forms in *e*— might have been used as personal pronouns in the same way as the forms *yān* and *yām* were used. But in course of time, as there were two sets of forms for the same purpose they reserved one set for one use and the other for another. Thus, they began to use *yān* and *yām*, in the nominative cases, whereas the set in *e*— was used in the oblique cases.¹⁵

The personal pronominal forms in *e*— are still used in some of the Dravidian languages in the nominative.

	Singular.	Plural.
Telugu	<i>ēn-u, ē</i>	<i>ēm-u</i>
Coorg	<i>enga</i>
Tuda	<i>ēm</i>
Kota	<i>ēme</i>
Rajmahāl	<i>en</i>	<i>em</i>
Urāon	<i>en</i>	<i>em</i>

15. Further, it has been already shown that the initial *y*— of the syllable *yā*— sometimes disappears. The same principle seems to have been at work in connection with this personal pronoun in some of the Dravidian languages.

The following languages have preserved the *y*— and hence have the form *yān* for the personal pronoun singular :—

Kannada	<i>yān</i>
Tulu	<i>yān'</i>

Out of the other Dravidian languages only Tulu has the plural form *yēnkulu* corresponding to the Tamil form *yām*, in which the initial *y*— is preserved.

But in some other languages the initial *y*— of *yān* and *yām* is dropped.

	Singular.	Plural.
Kannada	<i>ān</i>	<i>ām, āv-u</i>
Ku	<i>ān-u</i>	<i>ām-u, āj-u</i>
Tuda	<i>ān</i>	<i>ām</i>
Kōta	<i>āne</i>	<i>āme</i>

The first personal pronouns in *Brahui* are *ī* and *nan*. The singular form *ī* is derived from the *e*— form; the plural form *nan* is probably similar to the Tamil form *nām*.

In the foregoing analysis the development of the initial syllable *ñā*— may be represented as follows :

$$(1) \quad yā- \begin{matrix} \swarrow & \tilde{ā}- & \searrow \\ & & e- \end{matrix}$$

ñā—>

$$(2) \quad nā-$$

The following are also examples in the Sangam texts in which *ñ*— becomes *n*—.

<i>nāṭṭu</i>	"battle-field"	(<i>Kural</i> . 1088) :	<i>nāṭṭu</i>	(<i>Patirru</i> . 45)
<i>naral</i>	"to sound"	(<i>Patirru</i> . 30) :	<i>naral</i>	(<i>Puram</i> . 120)
<i>nān</i>	"bow-string"	(<i>Mullai</i> . 63) :	<i>nān</i>	(<i>Kali</i> . 15)
<i>nal</i>	"to rub"	(<i>Puram</i> . 247) :	<i>neli</i>	(<i>Puram</i> . 168)
<i>nemir</i>	"to spread"	(<i>Netunal</i> . 90) :	<i>nimir</i>	(<i>Tol. Poru</i> . 547)
<i>nehil</i>	"to become loose"	(<i>Kali</i> . 73) :	<i>nehil</i>	(<i>Akam</i> . 26)

In Telugu, Kannada and the Tamil language of the medaeval and modern periods *ñ*— becomes the dental *n*—, but remains palatal in Malayālam.

- nām* "world" (*Kali*. 124) : Ma. *ñālam*.
- nāyal* "bastion" (*Patirru*. 71) : Ma. *ñāyal* : Med. Ta. *nāyal* (*Cintā*. 1444).
- nāyiru* "sun" (*Patirru*. 88) : Ma. *ñāyiru* : Ka. *nēsaru* : Med. Ta. *nāyiru* (*Ka. Rām. Kaṭi* 4).
- nānu* "day" (*Kali*. 37) : Ma. *ñānnu* : Med. Ta. *nānru* (*Nālā. tiviyar* 1.17).
- nāḷal* "cassea sophera" (*Patirru*. 51) : Ma. *ñāḷal* : Med. Ta. *nāḷal* (*Tēv*. 1016.9).
- nēṇ* "bow-string" (*Mullai*. 63) : Ma. *ñāṇ* : Ka. *neṇ* : Med. Ta. *nāṇ* "nuptial knot" (*Ka. Rām. Nakar*. 49).
- "to hang down," "descend" (*Puram* 82) : Ma. *ñālu* : Med. Ta. *nālu* (*Cintā*. 2513).
- nīṇ* "flesh" (*Puram*. 177) : Ka. *nīṇ* : Med. Ta. *nīṇam* (*Maṇi*. 28.33).
- nimir* "to spread" (*Neṭu*. 90) : Ka. *nimir* : Med. Ta. *nimir* (*Tēv*. 1160.5).
- nāṇḍu* "crab" (*Akam*. 176) : Ma. *ñāṇḍu, naṇḍu* : Med. Ta. *nāṇ u* (*Cūṭā*).

ñekil "to become loose": Med. Ta. *nekiḷ* "to blossom" (*Cūḷā*. There are examples in which the initial *ñ*—has disappeared.

ñāmuñku "to be pressed" (*Akam.* 58): Ma. *ñāmuññu*: Ka. *amuññu*: Med. Ta. *amuñku*.

ñemukku "to press hard" (*Akam.* 60): Ma. *amukku*: Med. Mo. *amukku*.

ñāy "your mother" (*Kurunt.* 40): Med. Ta. *āy* "mother" 35.10).

ñemir "to spread" (*Neṭu.* 90): Te. *amaru*: Ka. *amar*: Me. *amar* "to remain" (*Kanta. Kaṭavu.* 12).

Intervocalic.

In the following example *-ñ-* coming between two vowels remains without any change:—

uññai "balloon vine" (*Tol. Poruḷ.* 64).

The *-ñ-* in this example was probably a long consonant, which was reduced into a single consonant in the time of *Tolkāppiyam*. The older form of this word with the long consonant is preserved in Malayālam as *uliññai*.

In the following example intervocalic *-ñ-* changes into *-y-*:—

añnar "mental disorder," or "laziness" (*Poruna.* 99): *ayar-vu* (*Puram.* 182).

In the following examples *ñ* comes as the initial sound of a suffix *ñar*.¹⁶ When this suffix comes after a word ending in a vowel, the *ñ* changes into *y*.

ilai-ñar "young lads" (*Mullaiṭ.* 36): *ilai-yar* (*Tol. Poru.* 193)
viñai-ñar "work-men" (*Poruna.* 100): *viñai-yañ* (*Kuraḷ.* 329):
kiñai-ñar "drummer" (*Puram.* 377): *kiñai-yañ* (*Pu. Vc. Mā.* 32.52).
kañai-ñar "low-caste man": *kañai-yañ* "gate-keeper" (*Peruñk.* 32.52).

There are also examples in which *-ñ-* becomes *-v-* under the same conditions:
ari-ñar "men of knowledge" (*Kuriñcip.* 18): *ari-vañ* "astrologer" (*Kali.* 39).

kiñai-ñar "drummer" (*Puram.* 377): *kiñai-vañ* (*Puram.* 379).

Out of these examples the word *ari-vañ* might have been formed by the addition of the pronominal suffix—*añ* to the noun *arivu*, in which the final—*u* of *arivu* disappears when the vowel *a*— of *añ* follows it. If this is correct, the form *ari-vañ* must have come into existence later than the

16. The suffixes *ñar* and *ñar* may be split up into *ñ + añ* and *ñ + ar* where *añ* and *ar* are pronominal terminations.

piyam, as *Tolkāppiyam* states that words do not end in the syllable the second word *kiñai-vañ* might have been formed on analogy with *ari-vañ*. It might be noted here that in both of these instances *v* may be taken as the hiatus consonant, as *-v-* does not appear as hiatus after front vowels.

There are also instances in which the *ñ* of the suffix *ñar/ñar* occurring in the conditions stated before changes into the dental *n*.¹⁸

ari-ñar "men of knowledge" (*Kuriñcip.* 18): *ari-nañ* (*Poruna.* 58).
kañai-ñar "low-caste man": *kañai-nar* "turners" lit. "he who turns"? (*Maturai.* 511).

It may be remarked here that these forms are formed by the addition of the suffix *ñar/ñar* to the verbal bases *ari* and *kañai*.

In the following example *-ñ-* changes into the alveolar *-n-*.

kañal-um (fr. v.b. *kañal-* "to be densely packed"). (*Puram.* 147):
kañal-um (fr. v.b. *kañal-* "to be hot") (*Nāl.* 291).

Intervocalic Consonant.

The long consonant of *ñ* occurs intervocalically.

There is no change of *-ññ-* in the following words:—

ai-ññai "delirium" (*Cil.* 3.13. comm.)

ai-ññai "peacock" (*Malai.* 235).

There are also examples in which *-ññ-* changes into *-nn-* in the following examples:—

ai-ññai "mother" (*Akam.* 15): *annai* (*Kali.* 51).

ai-ññai "fire-brand teak" (*Puram.* 197): *munnai*.

ai-ññai "a consort of Kṛṣṇa" (*Mañi.* 19.65): *pinñai* (*Cil.* 17. p.444).

According to *Tolkāppiyam*—*ñ* occurs finally only in one word. The author gives the following word as example:—

uriñ "to rub."

This is a verbal base. It is found in the Sangam literature as *uriñ-cu* in the addition of a suffix—*cu*.

uriñ-ciya "that which rubbed" (*Tirumuru.* 33).

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17. *ai-ññai*. El. 74.

18. Perhaps words like the following are neuter plural of similar forms. If it is so, they are formed by the addition of the suffix *na* (*n-a*) where *a* is the neuter plural termination. Could *n* be from an ancient *ñ*?

ai-ññai }
ai-ññai } Tol. Col. cūt. 252.
ai-ññai }