

Some Phonological Features of the Jaffna Dialect of Tamil

THE Jaffna district which forms the peninsula in north Ceylon is inhabited mainly by Tamils who form 93.7 of the total population. The total population of the Tamils of this area is 417,794 according to the Census Report of 1953. The Tamils have with their energy and resourcefulness made a strong mark on their little homeland which is not endowed with natural resources in such abundance as are most other parts of the island.

The Jaffna district is very close to South India being separated by a narrow stretch of sea called the Palk Strait. Because of this proximity, Jaffna was one of the earliest to have Tamil settlers from India: but in spite of the continual contact with India by sea, the Jaffna Tamils have over the centuries become a distinct people developing a dialect which differs in several respects from the South Indian dialects of Tamil. This article describes some of the phonological features of the Tamil language as spoken in the Jaffna district.

Let us first take the vowels into consideration.

I *Vowels :*

a > i

appaṭi > appiṭi

ippaṭi > ippiṭi

uppaṭi > uppiṭi

Meaning.

“in that manner”

“in this manner”

“in this manner”

This may be explained by vowel harmony or assimilation of vowels. When ‘a’ the central vowel is followed or preceded by palatal vowels, it also becomes a palatal vowel, i.e. front high unrounded vowel ‘i’.

a > u

iruntatu > iruntutu

tantatu > tantutu

vantatu > vantutu

“it was”

“it was given”

“it came”

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In *akriṇai* singular verbs *-atu* > *utu* on the analogy of *varukutu*, *ceyikutu* etc., where *-tu* comes after the root along with the formative *-ku*. This is a case of assimilation of 'a' to 'u' in the next syllable.

a > e	[j]	caṇmam > ceṇmam	"birth"
	[g]	karvam > kervam	"haughtiness"
	[d]	taṇṭam > teṇṭam	"fine"
	[b]	balam > pelam ~ pelan	"strength"

'a' following a Sanskrit voiced plosive in the initial syllable becomes 'e' in Tamil.

aṇpam > eppan "a little"

This is an instance where the Tamilised form of the Sanskrit word '*alpa*' undergoes a complete phonetic change.

a [palatal ~ ai This is according to the literary language and grammar

aṭaku > aṭai	"pawn"
vāṭakai > vāṭai	"rent, hire"
naṭittu > naiccu	"having destroyed, crushed"

Therefore ai > a in other instances as well. This has become the general rule which is expressed by the concept of *aikāraṅkurukkam* (short ai). But in the final syllable ai is retained.

aṇpatu > aṇpatu	'fifty'
aṇṇūru > aṇṇūru	'five hundred'
aṇpaci > aṇpaci	'the seventh Tamil month' 'October-November'
kuṇai > kuṇai	'deficiency'
alaṅkaṇai > alaṅkaṇai	'continued trouble'
nilamai > nilamai	'state, as of affairs, of one's mind.'
uṇamai > uṇamai	'jewels, property'
iṇaiṅcal > iṇaiṅcal	'obstruction, trouble'

i > a [ṭa

In the following instances, 'i' becomes influenced by the vowel 'a' after ṭ. One of the cluster of two voiced labio-dental fricatives is lost.

	avviṭattilē > avaṭattilē	'in that place'
	ivviṭattilē > ivatattilē	'in this place'
	evviṭattilē > evaṭattilē	'in which place'
i > u	arivāḷ > aruvāḷ	'bill-hook, sickle'
	pittu > puṭṭu	'a kind of confectionary'
	tirappu > turappu	'key'
	miḷakāy > muḷakāy	'chilly'

This again is a case of vowel assimilation. When 'i' is followed by back or central vowel in the next syllable, it becomes the high back rounded vowel 'u' or the front high unrounded vowel 'i' becomes the back high rounded vowel 'u' in the root syllable.

i > e	ini > eni	'hereafter'
	iḷavu > eḷavu ~ iḷavu	'death, trouble'
	ninaittu > neṇaccu	'having thought'

Initially, the palatal front high unrounded vowel 'i' becomes the front mid unrounded vowel 'e'.

iyal > ēl	iyalum > ēlum	'possible'
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This is a change in relation to the word iyal and not a general one.

ṇ] i [r > i n]	taṇṇir > taṇṇi	'cold water'
	venṇir > venṇi	'hot water'
	ḷṇanir > iḷṇani	'tender coconut milk'

The long palatal vowel 'i' between the retroflex nasal ṇ and the dental nasal n and the alveolar flap r is shortened and r is lost.

i > iy	iyaṃ > iyyaṃ	'white lead'
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The long palatal vowel 'i' becomes the cluster of the palatal short vowel 'i' and palatal semi vowel 'y'.

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u > i

The back rounded vowel u between p and r, ṭ, ṛ becomes 'i' in the following instances.

	purāḷi > pirāḷi	'mischief'
	purāṭṭu > pirāṭṭu	'prevarication'
	puṭaivai > piṭavai	'saree'
	purāmpu > piṛāmpu	'that which is separate or exclusive'
e > a	koṭṭappetteṭṭi > koṭṭappaṭṭi	'a small basket of palmyrah leaves or fibres'
	cavappetteṭṭi > cavappaṭṭi	'a coffin'
	neruppetteṭṭi > neruppaṭṭi	'a box of matches'

When the front mid unrounded vowel 'e' is preceded by the back vowel or the central vowel, it becomes the central vowel 'a'. So, we shall say that the advancement of the tongue is backwards due to the preceding back or central vowels.

-ey > ai eṇṇey > eṇṇai 'oil'

Dr. Caldwell points out that 'ai' is pronounced as 'ey' and as a result of hyperurbanisation, eṇṇey was probably written and pronounced as eṇṇai. There are scholars who will derive eṇṇai from eḷ+nai.

c] ē [v > ā cēval > cāval 'cock'

The long front mid unrounded vowel 'ē' between an affricate 'c' and a voiced labio-dental 'v' becomes the long central vowel 'ā'.

II Consonants:

-k- > c iṅkē > iṅcē 'here, in this place'

The voiceless velar stop is palatalised into 'c' on account of the front high unrounded vowel. The velar nasal ŋ becomes then the homorganic palatal nasal ñ.

-k- > y kataikaḷ > kataiyaḷ 'stories, speeches'

 piḷḷaikaḷ > piḷḷaiyaḷ 'children'

 kākitam > kāyitam 'epistle written on paper, paper'

This is a case of the loss of the medial plosive because of the preceding 'ai' or 'ā' and y comes as a glide.

-k-> v	aṭaku > aṭaivu paṭaku > paṭavu	'pawu' 'small boat'
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Here also the medial plosive is lost and 'v' comes as a glide.

-kiṛatu > kutu	In akriṇai singular finite verbs -kiṛatu > kutu.
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See atu > utu.

	irukkiriṭu > irukkutu varukiriṭu > varukutu naṭakkiriṭu > naṭakkutu	'it is' 'it is coming' 'it is happening, walking'
-ki-> ϕ	pōkiri > pōra colkiri > colra	'going' 'saying'
-ku-> ϕ	aṭaṅkukiri > aṭaṅkiri vāṅkukiri > vāṅkiri viṭaṅkukiri > viṭaṅkiri	'subordinating' 'buying' 'being understandable'

The formative -ku- is lost in the colloquial dialect when taking the tense sign /-kiṛu/ etc., or it may be a case of kiṛ > iṛ > ṛ. It may be taken then as an instance of a loss of the medial plosive.

ñ-> n	ñāyam > nāyam ñāyirrukkilaṃmai > nāyittukkiṭaṃmai	'justice, reason' 'Sunday, the first day of the week'
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Initially, the palatal nasal after a long central vowel becomes a dental nasal.

-ṭk-> ḷkk	kēṭkiri > kēḷkkiri	'that which hears'
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ḷ+k > ṭk is an old grammatical rule. From the fifteenth century onwards, ḷ+k > ḷkk in the South Indian dialects and it must have influenced the Ceylon Tamils as well. The ḷ is retained and the following plosive doubles as it does after iṭaiyiṇam sounds.

-ṇ-> ḷ	aṇāppu > aḷāppu	'to deceive, cheat'
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The intervocal retroflex η loses its nasality and becomes lateral retroflex η .

- η k-> η k	ka η ka η ai > ka η ka η ai	'sense of decorum'
	ka η kā η i > ka η kā η i	'overseer, supervisor of coolies in plantation'

This is a case of an assimilation of the nasal to the following plosive.

- η p-> mp	e η patu > empatu	'eighty'
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When the cluster of a nasal and stop occurs, the nasal assimilates with the following stop and thus becomes the homorganic nasal.

i] t > c	peritu > pericu	'that which is great, big'
u] t > c	putitu > puticu	'that which is new or uncommon'
	mu η utu > mu η ucu	'all, whole'
ai [tt > cc	ma η aittu > ma η accu	'having concealed'
	va η ittu > vaccu	'having kept'

The dental plosive 't' is palatalised into 'c' when following a front vowel 'i' or 'ai' or rarely a back rounded vowel 'u'. This change is also typical of the South Indian dialects of Tamil.

-tt-> t	oru η ttar > orutar	'a person, male or female'
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Intervocally, one of the geminated plosives is lost.

tē > tē]	tēvai > tē]vai	'compelling need or necessity'
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This is an instance of an intrusion of the lateral retroflex η after a long front mid unrounded vowel 'ē'.

i]		
ai] nt > η c	a η intu > a η i η ncu	'having known'
y]	mu η intu > mu η i η ncu	'having finished'
	kula η intu > kula η ncu	'having become dishevelled'
	ala η intu > ala η ncu	'having wandered'
	pi η yntu > pi η ncu	'having torn'
	ā η yntu > ā η ncu	'having plucked'

When the cluster of dental homorganic nasal and stop is preceded by palatal semi vowel 'y' or diphthong 'ai' or front high unrounded vowel 'i', it is palatalised. The cluster of dental nasal and stop becomes respectively the palatal nasal and stop. After palatalisation, the 'y' disappears, the diphthong 'ai' is shortened to 'a'.

-p-> v	irupatu > iruvatu	'twenty'
	aṛupatu > aṛuvatu	'sixty'
	eḷupatu > eḷuvatu	'seventy'
	tapāl > tavāl	'letter'
	kōpam > kōvam	'anger'

The intervocal voiceless stop will become either a voiced stop or a voiceless fricative. In this case, intervocal voiceless bilabial stop has become voiced labio-dental fricative.

pirayō > purō	pirayōcaṇam > purōcaṇam	'usefulness, profit'
puku-> pū ~ pūr	pukuntu > pūntu ~ pūrntu	'having entered as into a hole or narrow place'

The stop which comes intervocally disappears leaving a cluster of vowels and the first vowel is lengthened. Sometimes, there is an intrusion of the alveolar flap r.

pukai-> po	pukaiyilai > poyilai	'tobacco'
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Here too, intervocally the velar stop disappears and u > o.

peyar-> pē	peyarntu > pēntu	'afterwards'
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The palatal semi vowel which comes intervocally disappears and as a result the vowel in the cluster of vowels is lengthened. The alveolar flap disappears after the long vowel. We can put it in a formula as follows :—

y] tt > cc	vāyttu > vāccu	$V_1 + s.v.V_2 > \bar{V}_1$ 'having favourably occurred'
	piyttu > piccu	'having torn'
	moyttu > moccu	'having crowded as flies, bees, ants'

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The geminated dental plosives after the palatal semi vowel are palatalised into 'c' and after palatalisation 'y' disappears.

-yt-> ñc	ceytu > ceñcu	'having done'
	peytu > peñcu	'having discharged as urine'

The palatal semi vowel 'y' itself becomes the palatal nasal and also assimilates the following dental stop into a palatal stop thus resulting in a homorganic cluster of ñc.

-r-> l	kōṭari > kōṭāli	'an axe'
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Intervocally, the alveolar flap r becomes the lateral flap l.

-r-> ɾ	piccaikkāraṅ > piccaikkāraṅ	'a beggar'
	paṅakkāraṅ > paṅakkāraṅ	'a wealthy person'
	contakkāraṅ > contakkāraṅ	'owner, a relative'

The Sanskrit /-kāra/ which has become a masculine termination for certain nouns in Tamil is pronounced as /-kāra/.

karaṅṅi > karaṅṅi	'spoons'
tiruṅṅi > tiruṅṅi	'satisfaction'
piriyam > piriyam	'fondness, thing desired'
curuṅṅu > curuṅṅu	'cigar'

These are other instances where the alveolar flap r and the alveolar trill ɾ have coalesced in the Jaffna dialect.

-r-> ϕ	pārttu > pātu	'having seen'
	vaḷarttu > vaḷattu	'having brought up as a child; animal, plant'
	īrkku > ikkil	'the rib of a palmyrah, coconut, etc.'
	uṅarntu > uṅantu	'having felt'
	nimirntu > nimintu	'having become erect'

In the colloquial dialect, the alveolar flap *r* is lost after geminated plosives or homorganic nasal and plosive.

-v-> m	vilittal > muḷittal	'opening the eyes, waking from sleep'
	vēyital > mēyital	'roofing'

The initial voiced labio-dental 'v' when followed by front vowels becomes bilabial nasal 'm'. So, we shall say that the advancement of the tongue is towards the lips due to the following front vowels.

-ḷ-> ḷ	tamiḷ > tamiḷ	'tamil language'
	vāḷaiippaḷam > vāḷaiippaḷam	'plantain fruit'
	vaḷakkam > vaḷakkam	'practice, custom'
	kōḷi > kōḷi	'gallinaceous fowl'

This is a characteristic feature of the Ceylon dialect and some of the southernmost districts of Tamil land.

-ḷnt-> ṅṅ	kaviḷntu > kaviṅṅtu	'having turned upside down, capsized'
	tāḷntu > tāṅṅtu	'having immersed'
	aviḷntu > aviṅṅtu	'having untied'
-ḷtt-> ṅṅ	kaviḷttu > kaviṅṅtu	'having caused to turn upside down, cap- sized'
	tāḷttu > tāṅṅtu	'having caused to be immersed'
	aviḷttu > aviṅṅtu	'having caused to be untied'

The lateral *ḷ* which is pronounced as retroflex lateral, assimilates the following cluster of dental, nasal and dental stop or the cluster of two dental stops and they become retroflex sounds. After retroflexation, the lateral *ḷ* disappears and thus the cluster of three consonants is reduced to the cluster of two consonants. The first three are past verbal participial forms of verbs in the *taṅviṇai* or intransitive while the remaining three belong to the *piṅviṇai* or transitive class.

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- <u>l</u> tu > ϕ	ippol <u>l</u> tu > ippa	'now, at present'
	appol <u>l</u> tu > appa	'then, at that time'
	eppol <u>l</u> tu > eppa	'when, at which time'

Ippolltu > ippōtu > ippō > ippa in course of time and similarly with the other two utterances.

l > ϕ	aval > ava	'she'
	vantā > vantā	'she came'
	con <u>ṇ</u> aval > con <u>ṇ</u> ava	'she said'
	irukk <u>i</u> rā > irukk <u>i</u> rā	'she is'

The bound morpheme -l denotes the feminine singular and it is dropped when speaking respectfully of females. But it is retained when referring to subordinates and others junior in age.

-r <u>p</u> - > pp	nā <u>r</u> patu > nāppatu	'forty'
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When the cluster of two different consonants occur, the first consonant of the cluster is assimilated with the second.

-r <u>r</u> - > t <u>t</u>	ka <u>l</u> ar <u>r</u> i > ka <u>l</u> a <u>t</u> ṭi	'having dismantled'
	cu <u>l</u> ar <u>r</u> i > cu <u>l</u> a <u>t</u> ṭi	'having swung round'
	ala <u>r</u> i > ala <u>t</u> ṭi	'having talked unceasingly'

Intervocally, the geminated alveolar trill becomes the geminated retroflex stop. According to some scholars, this is not really a sound change. Tolkappiyar, the ancient Tamil grammarian speaks of r being articulated as a retroflex stop. Hence we may say the old pronunciation is retained in the Jaffna dialect.

III Hyperurbanisation

c] e]l > i The general rule is that in the colloquial dialect i > e as in iṇi > eṇi.
celavu > cilavu 'expense'

t] o [$\begin{matrix} t \\ i \end{matrix} > u$ u > o is the usual feature in the colloquial dialect.
totaṅki > tutaṅki 'having begun'
tolai > tulai 'distance, to become extinct'

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-pp-> rp The original rule of colloquial change or assimilation is rp > pp
as in nārpatu > nāppatu 'forty'
aippaci > arpaci 'the seventh Tamil
month, October-November'

-l-> r The alveolar flap changing into the lateral flap l medially is the
characteristic feature of the spoken dialect.
kaḷala > kaḷara 'to become loose as a
fastening nail, etc.'

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