Book Review

Applied Linguistic Readings of Tolkappiyam

V. Murugan

Language enthusiasts, linguists in particular, share a common interest in identifying the pioneering figure or seminal work in applied linguistics, a field focused on the practical application of linguistic theories in areas such as language teaching, translation, and communication across diverse social and professional contexts.

Divergent opinions exist regarding the originator of applied linguistics. Some scholars in India attribute this distinction to Panini (c. 500 BC), a Sanskrit philologist and grammarian, considering him foundational due to the comprehensive nature of his grammar, encompassing phonetics, morphology, word formation, and more. Conversely, an alternative perspective suggests that the earliest surviving grammar of a European language can be traced back to Dionysius Thrax, whose concise description of Greek in the book "Téchnçgrammatikçè," dated around 100 BC, delved into phonetics and morphology, including the exploration of parts-of-speech. Some argue that the Tamil treatise on grammar and poetics, Tolkappiam, could be a pioneer in applied linguistics.

Tolkappiyam comprises aphoristic verses organized into three books: Eluttatikaram (focusing on "letter" or "phoneme"), Sollatikaram (centered around "sound" and "word"), and Porulatikaram (dealing with "subject matter," encompassing prosody, rhetoric, and poetics). This ancient grammar text for Tamil meticulously delineates nearly all aspects of the language's grammatical structure. The contemporary Tamil grammar presently followed finds its roots in the thirteenth-century work, Nannul. This later text revisits and elucidates the grammatical principles outlined in Tolkappiyam, incorporating certain modifications in the process.

In "Applied Linguistic Readings of Tolkappiyam" by V. Murugan, an expert in lexicography, translation, and comparative literature, the author explores Tolkappiyam's role as a pioneer in applied linguistics. Murugan, who has translated Tamil literary works like Tolkappiyam and Tirukkural into English, aims to elucidate Tolkappiyam's significant contributions to language teaching and learning (L1 and L2) as well as literature.

Although the exact composition date of Tolkappiyam remains unknown, it is generally believed to have been written around the 3rd century BCE. According to Nachinarkkiniar, a 14th-century commentator on Tolkappiyam, the work predates the classification of the Vedas. Nadarajah Devapoopathy, an academic and scholar in Tamil literature, suggests that Tolkappiyam was likely composed between the 2nd and 1st century BCE, with extant manuscript versions fixed by approximately the 5th century CE. Murugan, quoting Xavier S. Thaninayagam, who conducted a comparative study of nature in classical Tamil poetry with that in Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, and English literatures, asserts that the composition of Tolkappiyam "cannot be fixed later than the third century before Christ."

Murugugan identifies two primary motivations that inspired him to write the book. On the positive side, he notes that Tolkappiyam holds an "invaluable wealth of linguistic information" encompassing phonology, morphology, syntax, and other branches of applied linguistics. He

emphasizes its significance for lexicography and translation, asserting that Tolkappiyam stands as the earliest complete work of linguistics in ancient classical traditions, surpassing comparable works in other primary classical languages worldwide.

On the negative side, Murgugan points out that, despite possessing characteristics of applied linguistics and harboring "futuristic concepts," Tolkappiyam is often overlooked in international academic programs that prioritize Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit works. Moreover, he addresses unsubstantiated claims by certain scholars, such as PS Subramanya Sastri, who assert that Tolkappiyar fashioned a Tamil grammar on the models of Sanskrit authors like Yaska and Panini.

In response to these challenges, the author believes it is crucial to raise awareness among linguists about Tolkappiyam's status as a global applied linguistic classic deserving recognition. Murgugan presents his study in three chapters, with the first, titled "Tolkappiyam: A Postmodern Perspective," delving into Tolkappiyam as a linguistic science, a world classic, its structure, organization, content, and futuristic implications. Here is an example of how Tolkappiyam gives importance to human generic class:

Words go into two classes:

Uyartinai and akrinai

The former designates human generic class,

And the latter non-human generic class (484)

Citing numerous examples from Tolkappiyam, Murugan states that this classic should be "an indispensable and multidisciplinary reference text in the company of all-time books of the world".

The second chapter, "Tolkappiyar's Applied Linguistic Insights," meticulously explores the discipline of applied linguistics, portraying Tolkappiyam as an integral part of this field. Drawing on AK Ramanujam's characterization of Tolkappiyar as a linguistic "linguistics' ultimate guru"Murugan contends that Tolkappiyam goes beyond a mere set of language rules, presenting it as a study of language in use, a vehicle of expression and communication, and linguistics in action and interaction. This chapter covers translation theory and practice, including Tolkappiyar's concepts of translation, lexicology, lexicography, language teaching, literature study, stylistics, and discourse analysis.

Talking about translation and ambiguity, Murugan explains in detail how Tolkappiyar distinguishes three types of ambiguity: phonetic ambiguity, structural ambiguity and lexical ambiguity and provides several examples from Tolkappiyam. While explaining how structural ambiguity, he says that Tolkappiyam which predates Noam Chomsky' surface and deep structure in transformational grammar (Surface structures are the versions of sentences that are seen or heard, while deep structures contain the basic units of meaning of a sentence) by more than two millennium, has resolved this ambiguity in two ways: by varying the case of morphemes and by fixing it in context. Example: The phrase *pulikolyanai*, at the deep structure level, can be represented by passive transformation as:

puliyaikkonrayanai (=the elephant that killed the tiger)

puliyalkollapattayanai (=the elephant that was killed by the tiger)

The third chapter, "Conclusion," reinforces the overarching applied linguistic perspective of Tolkappiyam. Murugan argues that Tolkappiyar's detailed descriptions of the language of his time have defined the parameters of the proto-Dravidian tongue for over twenty centuries. This has endowed it with a unique character, functioning as both a classical and a living modern language.

How is *Tolkaappiyam* different from *Techne Grammatike* and *Astadhyayi*? The author states that "…while Dionysius Thrax's *Techne Grammatike*is a miniature codification of the Greek

language and Panini's *Astadhyayi* is an attempt at standardizing a Vedic language into a classical language, *Tolkappiyam* is a comprehensive linguistic composition studying a language that was then in a highly matured and developed state". This implies that *Tolkappiyam* is a study of language in use (applied linguistics).

The 47-page appendix provides a comprehensive list of metalinguistic, technical, literary, and cultural terms found in *Tolkappiyam*, along with their corresponding English equivalents. This list proves invaluable for both native and non-native Tamil speakers, as well as linguistic scholars.

The book stands out due to the author's expertise in Tolkappiyam, as he provides numerous examples from the classic to convince readers of its status as a global classic and a trailblazer in applied linguistics. This exceptional work deserves recognition in the realms of literature and languages, prompting linguists worldwide to engage in discussions about its significance. It is imperative to convey to the global audience that Tolkappiyam serves as evidence supporting the antiquity of Tamil, establishing it as older than Sanskrit and the oldest among all Indian languages.

Albert P'Rayan is an ELT resource person and education columnist. He can be contacted at rayanal@yahoo.co.uk

REVISION OF ELTAI MEMBERSHIP PLANS

The National Executive Committee of ELTAI has revised the membership plans and fees after extensive discussions, considering the increasing expenditures required to sustain our association and its initiatives. The table below details the updated membership categories, plans, and fees, which will take effect from **01 January 2025 onwards**.

Membership Categories		Membership Plans		
		Annual (1 Year)	Short-term (3 years)	Long-term (10 years)
Individual Teacher Membership (for 1 teacher)	Open to all individuals who are pre-service, in-service, or retired teachers of English language and literature at schools, colleges, or universities.	₹ 800 (Only for first-time members)	₹ 2400 ₹ 1800 (25% Off)	₹ 8000 ₹ 4800 (40% Off)
Dual Teacher Membership (for 2 teachers)	Open to married teaching couples residing at the same address who wish to join ELTAI under a joint plan. Each member enjoys individual benefits, while a single copy of the journal is provided to reduce costs.	---	₹ 4800 ₹ 3300 (31% Off)	₹ 16000 ₹ 8800 (45% Off)
Individual Student Membership (for 1 student)	Open to undergraduate and postgraduate students, as well as full-time Ph.D. research scholars in English language, literature, and related disciplines.	---	₹ 2400 ₹ 1350 (40% Off)	---
Institutional Membership (for 1 institution)	Open to educational institutions, including schools, colleges, and universities.	---	₹ 2400	₹ 8000 ₹ 6000 (25% Off)
Corporate Supporter Membership (for 1 organisation)	Open to companies, particularly those in publishing, educational technology, and professional development, as well as other organisations seeking to support ELTAI's mission while enhancing their visibility within the teaching community.	---	---	₹ 8000

NOTE: Any member who renews their lapsed membership between 01 January and 31 March 2025 will receive an additional 10% discount on the revised membership plans.

Detailed information on membership benefits for each category is available on our website. Visit the website to obtain or renew your membership and make payments online at **https://eltai.in/**