

The English Dictionary of the Tamil Verb:
What can it tell us about the structure of Tamil?

Harold F. Schiffman
University of Pennsylvania

The *English Dictionary of the Tamil Verb* was undertaken because of a number of needs that were not being met by existing or previously-extant English-Tamil dictionaries. The main goal of this dictionary is to get an English-knowing user to a Tamil *verb*, irrespective of whether he or she begins with an English verb or some other item, such as an adjective; this is because what may be a verb in Tamil may in fact not be a verb in English, and vice versa. The web and DVD versions of this dictionary are searchable, so that if a particular English verb the user wants a Tamil equivalent for is not one of the main entries, inputting the search item should take the user to the English synonym file, which will give the user the Tamil verb. For example, we do not have a main entry for 'pounce' but this item does appear as a synonym for 'jump, leap', and some other verbs, so searching for 'pounce' will get the user to a Tamil verb. The search engine provided for the web version on the DVD also allows the user to search for Tamil verbs with advanced search methods such as ends in, begins with, part of, contains etc., and this is where some interesting new insights about the structure of the Tamil lexicon can be found, and which I want to concentrate on in this paper.

Syntactic Complexity of the Verb Phrase Because the Tamil verb is morphologically complex, and the verb phrase therefore syntactically *very* complex, we decided to focus only on the Tamil verb. Tamil nouns are, in contrast, morphologically fairly simple and the noun phrase is remarkably uncomplicated--Tamil nouns have no gender distinctions (except where there is biological gender), no agreement, and no marking of adjectives as to number or gender. The Tamilnadu government has spent much time and energy creating lexica and glossaries for various modern usages for Tamil, but from what we can gather, these have mainly generated new nominal terminology, not verbs. This is partly because Literary Tamil cannot borrow verbs easily, i.e. it cannot take a 'foreign' word and add Tamil morphological material to it, such as tense marking and person-number-gender marking, which all Tamil finite verbs must have.

So what does Tamil do if it needs a new verb? In the past, Tamil did borrow verbs from Sanskrit, but that is now frowned upon, and it no longer does so. It also, according to Fabricius (1972), has a few borrowings from Telugu, but that also seems to have ceased.

Past participle plus main verb. One simple way to make a new verb in Tamil is to take the past participle of another verb and preface it to a main verb. Such examples as *collikko* + *u* 'teach' are constructed by taking the past participle of *collu* 'say' and prefacing it before the main verb *ko* + *u* 'give.' Other examples, such as *ta* + *i vai* 'postpone', *ta* + *ippoo* + *u* 'put off', and many others like this abound in Tamil and can be found by perusing our entries.

Noun plus verb. Another way to make a new verb is to take a noun and follow it by a main verb. In the past, only Tamil nouns were used, but increasingly, borrowed nouns (Tamil can borrow nouns, even if it can't borrow verbs) are used. An example of the older type might be *ku* + *am collu* 'say blame', which of course gives us a verb 'blame.' That this phrase is closely bound together is shown by the fact that even though *collu* is transitive, the noun *ku* + *am* is not marked for accusative case. More 'modern' examples of this type of noun-verb compounding would be *aunloo* + *pa* + *u* which of course combines a noun borrowed from English (download) plus a common verb meaning 'make' or 'do': *pa* + *u*. Searching our database for examples of this type, using either *pa* + *u* or *cey*, both of which mean 'make' or 'do', which reveal dozens if not hundreds of examples.

Making an intransitive verb Transitive.

Most grammars of Tamil have discussed the transitivity status of Tamil verbs as being a case of either transitive or intransitive, i.e., as if this distinction were exactly parallel to that of English or some other western language. Actually any cursory examination of the Tamil verb will reveal that the semantic distinction so clearly marked in the morphology, i.e., the distinction between pairs like *oo□u* and *oo□ u* which is usually glossed as 'run' vs. 'cause to run' or 'run of one's own volition' vs. 'run something' is not as simple when all the verbs of the language have been taken into account. Some researchers on Tamil, such as Paramasivam 1979, have rejected the dichotomy between transitivity and intransitivity as inadequate for Tamil, and have opted for a distinction known as 'affective' vs. 'effective', which is felt to more adequately capture the distinction. We have opted to stick with the transitivity/ intransitivity distinction, however, because it is our experience that American students, at least, if they have any familiarity with this distinction, know it in this way, rather than as 'affective/ effective.'

In fact Hopper and Thompson (1982) show that verbs must be scaled for their *degree* of transitivity, since 'blaming' or 'seeing' is in some sense less transitive than 'breaking' or 'killing', actions which have a definite effect on an object, whereas to be blamed or seen does not affect the 'target' of the action in the same way. Thus to refer to *u□ai* as an intransitive kind of *breaking* since the process or person who caused the breaking is not known is also not as neat a distinction as one would like, even though the morphology of Tamil gives us two *u□ai*'s--one 'intransitive', i.e. without known agent, as in *ka□ aa□i u□aintatu* (spoken *ka□ aa□i o□enjadu*) 'the glass broke', the other 'transitive', as in *avan ka□ aa□iyai u□aittaan* (spoken *avan ka□ aa□iye o□eccaan*) 'He broke the glass.' These 'intransitives' are also usually possible only with a third-person, often neuter, 'subject,' i.e. 'glass.' Yet to think of glass as the 'subject' of 'intransitive' breaking but as the object or target of transitive breaking (when the agent of the action is known), is illogical.

Our solution to this problem is to issue caveats but not to attempt a wholesale reclassification or scaling of transitivity for the Tamil verbs. We continue to use the (probably archaic) bipolar scale of transitivity, with the two *u□ai*'s above given the traditional intransitive/transitive' labels, often with information about restrictions on person and number of 'subject.' Were it not for the fact that Tamil usually marks the distinction between intransitive and transitive morphological differences in the *tense*-marking of the two types, and that there are tense markers for *all* tenses in Tamil (unlike English, where only the past is morphologically marked) it would not be obvious to most non-Tamils that distinctions must be kept separate. English, for example, has only a small set of verbs that are paired in this way, one being transitive and the other intransitive. Even these (sit/set, lie/lay, fall/fell, rise/raise) are not kept separate by many speakers. In Tamil either the stem itself is different (such as the (c)vc/(c)vcc-type exemplified by *oo□u/oo□ u* 'run' vs. 'drive' or there is an alternation (c)vNC-/(c)vCC- (as with *tirumpu/tiruppu* 'return'), or the differences are marked in the tense markers, usually with weak types for intransitive and strong types for transitive. Similarly, there are verbs with *ngu/kku* contrast as in *a□angku/a□akku* 'control', *to□angku/to□akku* 'begin'. There are also some occasional cases of verbs with *vu/ppu* contrasts like *paravu* 'fan out' vs. *parappu* 'spread'. More work needs to be done on the ways that Tamil marks the distinction between transitive/ effective and intransitive/affective verbs; since the database for this dictionary can be easily searched, we hope future researchers will use it to look at various lexical patterns that have yet to be analyzed or described for Tamil. A search I did many years ago in the Fabricius database to see how many pairs of the *tirumbu/tiruppu* type existed came up with hundreds of pairs¹.

This feature of making a new verb with past participle of main verb, like *collikko□u* 'teach' and *ta□ i vai* 'postpone', *ta□ i poo□u* 'put off' as noted above, is common in the verbal system of most Indic languages and is often referred to as creating a 'compound' verb. By this is meant the use of two verbs

adjoined in such a way that only the last one has tense and person-number-gender marking, while the previous one(s) occurs in a form known in Tamil as an ‘adverbial participle’ (which is commonly referred to by the abbreviation AVP.) Thus where English or other languages might conjoin two sentences such as ‘I went to the store’ and ‘I saw him’ to get ‘I went to the store and saw him’ Tamil (and other Indic languages) typically has a sentence like ‘Having gone to the store, I saw him’, i.e. *naan uurukkup pooy, avaraip paartteen*. To complicate matters, aspectual verbs are also adjoined in this way, with the aspectual verb marked for tense and PNG, but not the lexical verb, which occurs in the AVP form. Beyond this, we also find that verbs are compounded in this way to in effect create new lexical verbs; since Tamil does not borrow *verbs* easily from other languages, it creates new ones by combining existing verbs, e.g. the verb ‘teach’ can be rendered as *collikko□u* ‘say and give; having said, give.’ Sometimes, such forms make homonymous pairs between lexical compounds and their corresponding verbal inflections as in *ko□uttu vi□u* ‘send’ vs. ‘give away’; *e□uttu vi□u* ‘untuck’ vs. ‘take away’ etc. Former type of meanings are a case of compound formation where as the later are verbal inflections with aspectual auxiliary ‘*vi□u*’. Interestingly, spoken version of these forms have a way of distinguishing this meaning distinction by lengthening the final vowel for the cases of compound forms but not for inflections. Thus, *ko□uttuu□u* is for ‘send’ and *ko□uttu□u* is for ‘give away’; *e□uttuu□u* is for ‘untuck’ and *e□uttu□u* is for ‘take away’.

The process of ‘derivation’. One of the ways languages have to innovate new vocabulary is by the grammatical process known as *derivation*. The term ‘derivation’ is also used to refer to deriving something from something else historically, but by morphological derivation I mean the process of creating a new form, e.g. by making a verb out of a noun, or a noun out of a verb. English is very good at this type of thing, e.g. the verb ‘to fedex’ which of course is derived from the noun Fedex, which is an abbreviation of ‘Federal Express.’ Tamil has a number of derivational processes that are semi-productive, such as ways to make nouns out of verbs by the addition of a suffix: *ve□u* ‘hate’ + *ppu* → *ve□uppu* ‘hatred.’ⁱⁱ What has not been studied so well in Tamil is the process of derivation of new verbs from nouns or from combinations of nouns, verbs, and various derivational *suffixes*.

A study of the verbs in this dictionary will show that a large number of them have been ‘created’ this way, either with aspectual verbs, or with other lexical verbs, or both. Certain lexical verbs tend to recur often in these combinations, especially when the result is a transitive verb:

- *aakku* ‘make s.t. become’;
- *uu□ u* ‘feed, nourish’
- *celuttu* ‘make s.t. go’.

The last example here is instructive, because it itself is an example of an intransitive verb made transitive by the addition of *-uttu*, which is a common way to create transitive verbs.

But it is even more interesting because *cel* alone does not occur in Spoken Tamil; but as a derived transitive, *seluttu* is acceptable in spoken when combined with other *verbs*, though not with nouns as the object. Again, this phenomenon needs to be studied; attention to it will reveal other interesting patterns, such as the fact that when *vi□u* ‘fall’ is made transitive by adding *-uttu* what we get is a form with a long vowel, but with only *ttu* suffixed to it: *vii□ttu* ‘bring down, make s.t. fall, defeat.’ Another common verbalizer is *pa□uttu* ‘cause to be made’ even though *pa□u* as a marker of passive is not used in ST. This verb then becomes a general ‘causativizer’ⁱⁱⁱ in Tamil, which, combined with other verbs in their AVP form, is found widely throughout the entries here

Another very common example of this is the verb *na□a* ‘run, walk’ which can be made causative by adding *-ttu*, i.e. *na□attu* ‘run something, make s.t. go, operate’. What was not obvious to me beforehand was the existence of many other verbs like this, such as the following:

- *taa* □ ‘be ruined, decline’ → *taa* □ *tu* ‘ruin, destroy’. By the addition of aspect markers, such as *ko* □ ‘self-benefactive’ we can get *taa* □ *tikko* □ ‘make lower, discredit, degrade, debase, devalue; cheapen, abase, humble, humiliate, disgrace, dishonor; behave unworthily; humble o.s.’
- *aa* □ ‘be deep, profound’ can be transitivized by adding *ttu* to get *aa* □ *ttu* ‘put to shame; further, with various aspect markers, other forms can be derived, such as *aa* □ *ttikko* □ ‘involve o.s. deeply in; throw o.s. into s.t., immerse o.s. in.’
- *nika* □ means ‘resemble, be similar to’; by the addition of *ttu* we get *nika* □ *ttu* meaning ‘create, form, work (a miracle), deliver (a speech)’
- *kavi* □ means ‘turn upside down, invert (o.s.)(intr.)’ and by the addition of *ttu* we can get *kavi* □ *ttu* ‘derail; overturn or upset s.t., as a boat; turn over, turn upside down, upend, flip/tip/keel over’

Notice incidentally that in the last few examples, the last sound in the basic stem is the ‘retroflex frictionless continuant’ □ symbolized in the Tamil orthography as □□. Why this sound should be so commonly found in these kinds of verbs seems strange, but needs perhaps to be investigated.

Another transitivizer already mentioned is the verb *uu* □ *u* ‘feed, nourish, imbue, instill, infuse, provide, nourish, inject or introduce new life or interest into s.t.’ which, in combination with certain verbs (or nouns) expressing emotions, makes new verbs that mean something like ‘propagate, contribute to, create or intensify an emotional state’. In the examples below, we either get a lexical noun such as *uyir* ‘life, life-breath’ compounded with *uu* □ *u* or we get nouns that have been derived from verbs, plus *uu* □ *u*.

- *ve* □ *uppu* ‘hatred’ → *ve* □ *uppuu* □ *u* ‘fan the fires of hatred’. Note that *ve* □ *u* is itself a verb; *ve* □ *uppu* is a nominalization formed on the base of *ve* □ *u* which is a transitive verb (6 tr) meaning ‘hate.’
- *uyiruu* □ *u* ‘animate, breathe life into, enliven, spark, perk up, liven up, freshen (up)’
- *ninaivuu* □ *u* ‘call forth/up; bring back to (the) mind; remind; recollect’
- *makiċci* *yuu* □ □ *u* ‘cheer up; inspire or encourage with cheer; make happy; gladden; inject some life into s.o. or s.t., stimulate; (inf.) tickle s.o. pink’
- *aruvaruppuu* □ *u* ‘cause loathing, aversion or nausea; cause s.o. to feel hate; offend the senses or sensibilities; make dizzy’
- *mayakkamuu* □ □ *u* ‘drive mad, crazy’
- *kacappuu* □ *u* ‘embitter, make bitter; cause to feel disappointed, hostile or bitter’
- *caktiyuu* □ □ *u* ‘energize, give energy to; make energetic’
- *calippuu* □ *u* ‘irk, weary or annoy; bother; irritate, gall, pique, nettle, exasperate, try s.o.’s patience; anger, infuriate, madden, incense, get on s.o.’s nerves; antagonize, provoke.’¹

Other Verbalizers: the case of *a* □ *i*

Another interesting verbalizer involves the use of the main verb *a* □ *i*, which of course means ‘beat, tap’. When combined with nouns or other verbs, however, we get some interesting examples. An older use of *a* □ *i* that retains the notion of ‘beating’ or ‘tapping’ is *tandi a* □ *i*, which means ‘send a telegram’ (literally ‘beat-wire’). But other uses of *a* □ *i* are more interesting. Another common usage is *veyil a* □ *i* as in *veyil a* □ *ikkudu* ‘(sun) beats down’

Compare the following:

boor pa □ *u* ‘bore (a hole)’ vs. *boor a* □ *i* ‘be boring’

¹ More examples of combinations involving *uu* □ □ *u* are found in Appendix 1.

kaappi pa u ‘make a copy’ vs. *kaappi a* i ‘cheat; copy illegally’
ta i *ku* i ‘drink water’ vs. *ta* i *a* i ‘drink (alcohol) in excess’

Other uses, such as *romba* all *a* *ikkriinga* ‘(you) seem gloomy, downcast’ show that certain usages of *a* i are definitely negative, or at least pejorative, and that we should not be surprised to find other examples like this.

The verb *e* u used ‘inchoatively.’ Another interesting usage is that of the verb *e* u, which has the basic meaning ‘take.’ But in combination with certain nouns, it means ‘begin to experience X’, e.g.:

daaham e u ‘begin to feel thirsty’
paci e u ‘begin to feel hungry’ and
vali e u ‘begin to feel pain.’

Enrichment of lexical stock

Some verbs tend to expand their shades of meanings using one of the verbalizers as noted above especially to empower the use of language in various genres such as in poems, novels, speeches etc.

taa ‘come down’ - *taa* vu *a* ai - *taa* vu *ko* - *taa* nduvi u etc.
vaa ‘live’ - *vaa* vu *pe* u - *vaa* kkai *pe* u etc.
a u ‘cry’ - *ka* iir *vi* u ‘shed tears’ - *ka* iir *malku* ‘fill with tears’ etc.

A Tamil Thesaurus?

Another idea for future research that emerged during the preparation of this dictionary was that while Tamil lacks a thesaurus, i.e. a dictionary similar to Roget's *Thesaurus of English* (Kipfer and Chapman 2001), which groups words by their similarity of meaning, into ‘fields of knowledge’, the database of this dictionary could be used to construct a first-step towards a Tamil Thesaurus.

This could be done by sorting words according to the general synonyms they are provided with. One of the main features of this dictionary is that most main entries are provided with one or more synonyms--verbs similar in meaning to the main entry. Originally many of these synonyms were separate entries but because of considerations of space and volume needed for sound files, we consolidated many examples into synonym files. But some general features were planned in advance. When I was in the early stages of planning this dictionary, and when studying the verbs in Fabricius' *Tamil-English Dictionary* (1972), I noticed that for every verb that had some kind of meaning associated with sound, he provided the synonym *cattam poo* u, i.e. ‘make a sound.’ We have continued this tradition, so every verb that involves making a sound is provided by the same synonym *cattam poo* u. If the database were searched for this synonym, a large number of verbs having to do with ‘making a sound’ would emerge, and could be brought together under one rubric for the purpose of the thesaurus. Similar studies could be done for other verbs, by first calculating the frequency of certain synonyms, and then sorting by synonym, rather than main entry. Thus a rudimentary Thesaurus for Tamil would emerge, which could be enlarged by consulting other electronic resources for Tamil.

Bibliography

Fabricius, Johann Philip and Johann Christian Breithaupt. *A Malabar and English Dictionary, wherein the words and phrases of the Tamulian language, commonly called by Europeans the Malabar language, are explained in English.* Vepery (Madras): 1779. iv, 185. (Revised 1809, 1911, 1933, 1972.)

- Hopper, Paul and Sandra A. Thompson, (eds.) 1982. *Studies in Transitivity*. New York: Academic Press.
- Kipfer, Ann and Robert L. Chapman (eds.) 2001. *Roget's international thesaurus*. New York: Harper Resource Press.
- Paramasivam, K. 1979. "Effectivity and Causativity in Tamil." *International Journal of Dravidian Linguistics* 8(1):71-151.
- Schiffman, Harold F. 1976. 'Causativity and the Tamil Verbal Base.' *International Journal of Dravidian Linguistics* Vol. V, No. 2, pgs. 238-248.
- Schiffman, Harold F. 1999. *A Reference Grammar of Spoken Tamil*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schiffman, Harold F. 2005. "Deverbal Nominal Derivation in Tamil" *International Journal of Dravidian Linguistics*, Vol. 34, No. 2, June 2005, pp. 159-166.

Appendix 1: Examples involving derivation using *uu* □ □ *u*

1. 'alert' *eccarippuu* □ □ *u*
2. 'comic, be' *sirippuu* □ *u*
3. 'irk' *salippuu* □ *u*
4. 'dishearten' *soorvuu* □ *u*
5. 'dreadful, be' *tikiluu* □ *u*, *ericcaluu* □ *u*
6. 'flavor' *vaasaneyuu* □ □ *u*
7. 'animate' *uyiruu* □ □ *u*
8. 'mammal' *paaluu* □ □ *um* *piraa* □ *i*
9. 'gun, accelerate' *veekamuu* □ *u*
10. 'happy, be' *u* □ *caakamuu* □ *u*
11. 'hopeful, be' *nambikkai uu* □ □ *u*
12. 'imbue (with)' *pe* □ *uppu* □ *arcciyai uu* □ □ *u*
13. 'incendiary, be' *koopamuu* □ □ *um* (*peeccu*)
14. 'infuse' *u* □ *caakattai uu* □ □ *u*
15. 'irritate' *ericcaluu* □ *u*
16. 'localize' *iyaluu* □ *u*
17. 'magnetize' *kaantavicai uu* □ □ *u*
18. 'embellish' *aā kuu* □ □ *u*
19. 'shock' *atirciyuu* □ □ *u*
20. 'sour, disgust, disenchant' *ve* □ *uppuu* □ □ *u*
21. 'mislead, throw s.o. off' *kuā ppiyuu* □ *u*

Appendix 2: derivation involving *celuttu*

- | | |
|---------------------|---|
| 1. 'active, be' | <i>gavanam seluttu</i> |
| 2. 'skim' | <i>ka</i> □ □ <i>oo</i> □ □ <i>am seluttu</i> |
| 3. 'thrust, insert' | <i>uuciyai seluttu</i> |
| 4. 'venerate' | <i>mariyaatai seluttu</i> |
| 5. 'command' | <i>atikaaram seluttu</i> |
| 6. 'dominate' | <i>aatikkam seluttu</i> |

7. 'make payment' *paṁam celuttu*
 8. 'reverse, back up' *(vaṁṁiyaip) pinnaale celuttu*

Appendix 3: derivation involving *aṁi*

- | | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| 1. 'apply whitewash' | <i>sunnambu aṁi</i> |
| 2. 'speak assertively' | <i>aṁiccu peecu</i> |
| 3. 'blow (hard)' | <i>(kaattu) veehamaa aṁiccadu; viici aṁi</i> |
| 4. 'belt (s.o.)' | <i>oongi aṁi</i> |
| 5. 'bilk (s.o.)' | <i>koṁṁe aṁi</i> |
| 6. 'blast' | <i>sedayaṁi</i> |
| 7. 'rate (storm)' | <i>viici aṁi</i> |
| 8. 'bore (s.o.)' | <i>boor aṁi</i> |
| 9. 'bustle about (cooking)' | <i>padariyaṁiccu kiṁ u (same)</i> |
| 10. 'butter up; apple-polish' | <i>aayil aṁi</i> |
| 11. 'catcall, heckle' | <i>ciikka i aṁi</i> |
| 12. 'caterwaul' | <i>puunai poola aṁi</i> |
| 13. 'defeat' | <i>tooṁkaṁi</i> |

ⁱ This is summarized in "Causativity and the Tamil Verbal Base" (Schiffman 1976)

ⁱⁱ See Schiffman 2005 for more on deverbal nominal derivation in Tamil.

ⁱⁱⁱ By this is meant that it can be used to make an intransitive verb transitive, or a non-causative verb causative.