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A Brief Review of *Relationship between Language Use and Status*,  
a book in Tamil by Dr. P. Perumalsamy

M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

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## **An Original and Significant Contribution to Indian Sociolinguistics**

This book, written in Tamil, *Relationship between Language Use and Status*, is a significant and original contribution to Tamil and Indian sociolinguistics by a senior language-census analyst and scholar. Dr. Perumalsamy has done an excellent in-depth study of a village in Tamilnadu.

This study is presented here as a monograph. The study identifies and describes the processes of language communication and shows how these processes include marking and allocation of social status among the interactants of conversations.

This is an empirical study based on the description of the data collected from the field. Statistical measures are not applied, but significant elements that signal status are clearly identified. Indeed, it is an excellent social anthropological investigation.

There are 10 chapters in the book.



Dr. P. Perumalsamy

### **Chapter 1**

Chapter 1 presents various factors that may impact conversations to reveal the social and other types of status of those engaged in the conversation or dialogue. Interestingly, the author starts with a very significant and easily identified linguistic variable of laterals used in Tamil. There is an introduction to the history of Tamilnadu and its people and how caste is established at present in all walks of life. That language is a very significant tool to reveal, establish and assert identity and status is presented with examples.

### **Chapter 2**

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Chapter 2 focuses on the description of research methodology adopted. A village well connected by roads is the focus of the study. A variety of castes, truly representing the spectrum found throughout Tamil Nadu, is found in this village which has several branch settlements in established distance from each other. Two types, among others, were investigated: conversations between relatives and conversations between non-relatives. Data collection was pursued using a questionnaire. Data was also collected through observation of conversations. In general, both methods and identification of contexts are done in such a way that there was abundant exposure to actual conversations.

### **Chapter 3**

Chapter 3 focuses on the use of second person pronouns and inflections which reveal the status of individuals or groups involved in conversations. Inclusive and exclusive provisions were also looked into. Indian languages, especially those belonging to the Indo-Aryan and Dravidian, have exploited these provisions for centuries to signal the status of individuals involved in conversations. Gods are also part of this scheme. Use of singular is not necessarily a sign that the person addressed is inferior. It could also signal endearments and even superior status. Hindus have the system of addressing their gods and goddesses in singular and this reveals their closeness and devotion to their gods. In the past, parents were addressed in singular, but this has changed in many castes now. Dr. Perumalsamy has done an excellent analysis of the context and status relating to the use of second person pronouns and their inflections and derivations.

### **Chapter 4**

Chapter 4 focuses on the status-revelation processes through the use of finite verbs and their inflections. Once again, the analysis is detailed with abundant illustrations from the data collected. Caste and other contexts are taken up for in-depth study relating to the revelation processes of status. Dr. Perumalsamy points out the changes that take place in the use of inflections for finite verbs. However, such changes are not widespread in village contexts. Education and job status force people to adopt honorific endings in face to face conversations. It may not be done when the same person is referred to in his or her absence. This is an ongoing conflict as Thirumalai pointed out in his 1983 book *Aspects of Language Use*. The sad part is that after 30 years since he published his study, we still find that the same factors continue to influence processes of status revelation. Urbanization in Tamil Nadu has not helped much to delete caste-based choice of terms of address and reference, etc. Dr. Perumalsamy uses carefully chosen words so that description is given an upper hand in his book.

**Chapter 5** discusses the nuances of terms of address and reference. This is an important part of conversation. Once again, terms of address and reference act as an important and **explicit** source to reveal the status of individuals in a conversation.

**Chapter 6** focuses on kinship and conversational elements. Kinship demands its own nuances to reveal the status of individuals in a conversation. For one thing, more often than not, kinship is established usually within the same caste. This eliminates several other connotations we may find in the use of second person pronouns, finite verb and its inflections and terms of address and reference. Kinship has put in place a system which all in the family, all the relatives and even those who may not be related but are part of the same caste may follow. Dr. Perumalsamy has offered many insights here also as in other chapters.

**Chapter 7** is an interesting investigation of how nonverbal communication reveals the status of individuals engaged in a conversation. Specific postures are prescribed in Indian societies.

**Chapter 8** focuses on how the use of space between individuals engaged in a conversation reveals their respective status. This, like other nonverbal features are universally found, with suitable variations adopted in each culture. Touch and space are crucial elements in Indian societies where stringent rules for bodily contact between male and female are enforced. **Chapter 9** is about the expression and revelation of power and authority through language use. **Chapter 10** presents a brief summary of the study.

### **What Shall We Do Now?**

What do we do to bring in some sense of respect for all involved in a conversation? It is undeniable that at present respect is extended in language use based on the caste or category of caste or the economic and educational status they belong to. Do our Tamil textbooks do anything about it? How do the characters in stories narrated in the textbooks address each other? Are signals of status revealed through terms of address and reference, second person pronoun choice and finite verb endings, etc.? Are there not caste stigmas indirectly communicated?

Tamil classes focus more on history and literary ethics and morals. Can we not deal with the reality of the present in the classes and suggest ways to address others in a respectful and loving manner irrespective of social, educational, economic and religious differences?

Dr. Perumalsamy has done a really useful study and has presented the findings in objective language and description.

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