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Teaching and Learning a Classical-Modern Language
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Every Language is a Product of History

A currently used language is a product of history. The historical changes and developments it has undergone may or may not form part of the current course curriculum and syllabus followed in teaching that language. Teaching English for general use, for example, does not focus on the historical developments of that language, although some information on lexical choice, semantic distinctive including metaphors, etc., and sentence construction of the past may still be necessary to decode and enjoy literary pieces.

Teaching and Learning Classical Stages of Languages

Consider teaching the classical stages of languages such as Latin and Greek. Teaching and learning these classical versions stand aloof from teaching their modern forms.

Do all need to understand and master the classical stages of a language to meet their current needs? Is knowledge of classical stages absolutely necessary to understand, use and appreciate the modern forms of those languages?

The answer, in some sense, is obvious.

However, when issues other than mere language learning and teaching are involved, we need to look at the context with some creative intent and strategy.

Sanskrit Teaching and Tamil Teaching

Teaching and learning Sanskrit, a great Indian classical language, involves several historical texts, although, in recent decades, there has been a great spurt in producing modern works through this medium. Rules of grammar, lexicon and semantics depend on historically approved and sanctioned rules. There have been changes, and such changes have been incorporated in a dynamic manner in Sanskrit.

Teaching and learning Tamil, another classical language of India, requires an added dimension of adopting both historical and currently used rules in current idiom. Such rules evolve as exposure to various contexts increases. This situation is also faced by other languages, Telugu and Kannada, declared classical recently.

How do we reconcile this situation of retaining historical texts while teaching modern idiom?

Continuity as the Most Important Trait

A basic fact about Tamil is its continuity as a large spoken and written idiom. It has abundant literary materials from the past. Such materials also clearly reveal changes in rules from century to century, while retaining the basic framework, both in the written and spoken levels. Lexical additions and additions to syntax and semantics add to the complexity. But, at the same time, one is struck by the continuity in all the levels of Tamil language.

Continuity of Tamil in inscriptions, copper plates and such other historical documents is also amazing. R. Panneerselvam's dissertation on Tamil inscriptions of the medieval period at the Department of Linguistics in Kerala University, some forty years ago, brought out, in an astonishing manner, certain phonological rules that are found in use even after 1000 years.

I have noticed the use of some interesting phonological constraints imposed in literary Tamil, such as the demand that all loan words beginning with alveolar trill [r] be written with i or u as the initial letter, is adopted in spoken Tamil as well. A generation ago, rukmini/rukhamani/rukhmini was pronounced in my dialect as urukkumani/urukkumini.

Likely to Lose This Continuity: Need to Take a Creative and Flexible Approach

This continuity, however, may be lost now at the spoken level, because of excessive code switching and code mixing. And yet, written Tamil still exhibits this continuity with classical stages of Tamil.

So, teaching and learning Tamil needs to take a creative and flexible approach. In the past, emphasis on poetry has made great contributions to keep generations of students in touch with old Tamil. And yet this did not result in elaborate absorption and understanding of the classical stage/s of Tamil.

For one thing, an earlier generation of textbook compilers did not view *puranaanooru* or *akanaanooru* (especially the latter) etc., as fit linguistic material for high school classes. When things were turning out to be favorable for their inclusion because of political changes in late 1960s, suddenly viewing literature more as a product of religion and the demand for equity in textbook content (mostly due to the directives from or consensus evolved by agencies such as NCERT), resulted in focusing more on medieval and modern literature. While Tirukkural was/is continuously offered in all classes, there didn't or doesn't seem to be a consistent policy of selection, gradation and presentation of classical/medieval Tamil pieces, which are mostly available in poetic form.

With the introduction of *pudukkavithai* as the dominant form of poetry now, convenience in readability naturally takes precedence over other ideas.

Classical Tamil Prose

Classical Tamil prose has never been a favorable form with textbook compilers. And for this they may have very good reasons. Even when traditional prosody dominated creative poetry, traditional prose was never a popular item. Only some great writers such as Maraimalai Adigal and VSP Manickam, among others, wrote extensively using this format.

Proper Planning

Where do we go from here? We certainly need to evolve a consensus on the need, quantum and kind of materials from classical stages of Tamil for use in mother tongue textbooks. One strategy is to keep all the grades (Standard 1 to Standard 12) in mind, and introduce pieces from the most recent period to the more remote period, spread through this 12-year mother tongue instruction.

However, there are other problems as well. Is our goal in mother tongue instruction meant predominantly for culture learning and retention of identity through language use, for which study of classical language may be a relevant, effective and justifiable part? Or is it our goal that Tamil be so taught that it is used as an effective medium for all purposes including purposes of science, business, politics and education?

When raised in this manner, both questions appear to be in conflict with each other. As for me, I see the relevance of the question, but I do not really see how learning and teaching classical Tamil could hamper the development of Tamil as an effective medium for all modern needs.

The question is one of attitude and motivation, and it is also a question relating to teaching strategies and involvement.

It is really an unusual thing for a language to be spoken and written continuously for 2000 years with its basics intact. To keep it going for another 2000 years, while developing it as a fit vehicle of communication for all purposes, will certainly need great creative strategies.

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