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Lexical Opposites in Tamil

A. Boologa Rambai, Ph.D.

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Introduction

The study of Tamil Semantics seems to be a neglected field. This may be due to the fact that semantics is in a state of flux and that it has not attained the status of rigorous methodological discipline, like other major branches of linguistics. As Lyons states in his major work on semantics (1977), there is so much vagueness, ambiguity and confusion about various concepts in semantic studies and, hence, we had to examine them afresh and to redefine them.

The present paper takes Lyon's treatment of the sense relations of

i) Opposition and Contrast and ii) Directional Orthogonal and Anti Podal Opposition as a model, I think that some illustrations given for English by Lyons are equally applicable to Tamil also.

Lexical Opposites

As in other Dravidian languages, in Tamil also, vocabulary contains a large number of opposites. The standard technical term for "Lexical Opposites", that is, oppositeness of meaning between Lexemes is *antonymy*. The term *antonymy* was coined in the nineteenth century to describe oppositeness of meaning which was itself conceived as the opposite of synonymy.

Antonymy, in its broader sense, has often been thought of as referring to the opposite extreme from identity of meaning. But this is obviously wrong as when two objects are compared and contrasted with respect to their possession or lack of some property, this is done generally on recognition of their similarity in other respects. The standard term antonymy has become as imprecise as the term oppositeness because all kinds of dichotomization are referred as antonymy.

Lyons (1983:68) suggests that "the fact that antonyms not only have polarity relative to one another, along the dimension that they constitute, but differ in their privilege of occurrence and in the relations that they contract with other lexical items may be thought of as contributing to the very definite sense which we have as native speakers that some lexical items have a "positive" and others a "negative" ring about them.

Binary opposition is one of the most important principles governing the structure of languages. Lyons draws up a workable and convenient classification and this will be the

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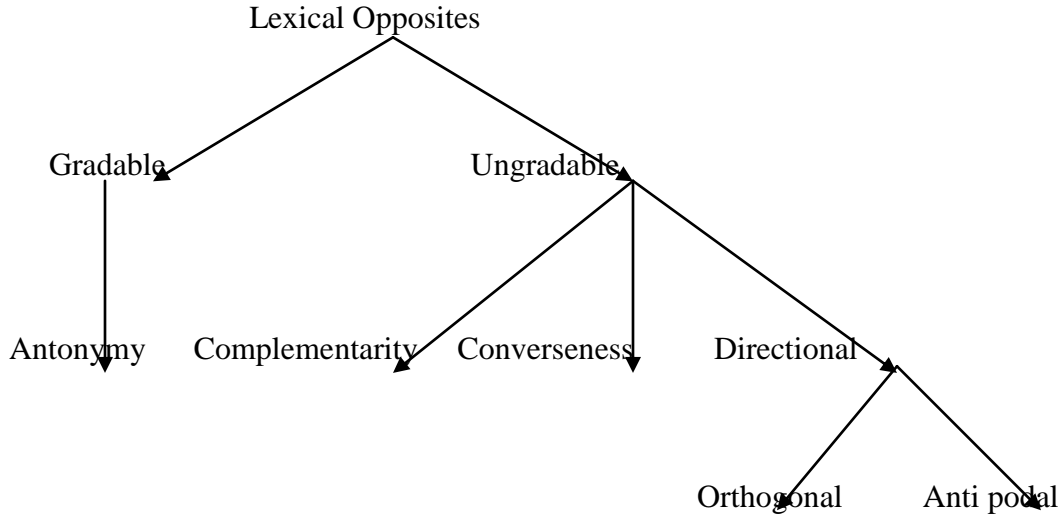
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basis for the present paper. Oppositeness will be restricted to dichotomous or binary contrasts. Antonymy will be restricted still further in to gradable opposites. Ungradable opposites will be termed complementarity. To be distinguished from both antonymy and complementarity is converseness.

Lexical Opposites in Tamil

Lexical opposites in Tamil can be classified as:



Gradable Lexical Opposites – Antonymy

In Tamil, the gradable opposites reflect the real polarization in sense relations. For example one can ask,

- i) inta viiDu anta viiDu poola periyata?
“Is this house as big as that house?”

The fact that one can say

- ii) inta viiDu anta viiDu poola periyatu
“This house is as big as that house”

(or)

- iii) inta viiDu anta viiTtilum periyatu
“This house is bigger than that house”

Depends upon the grad ability of periyatu.

The predication of the one implies the predication of the negation of the other; but not vice versa. The expression

cuuTaana paal “Hot Milk” implies aaraata paal “Not Cold Milk” and aaRina paal “Cold Milk” implies cuTaata paal “Not Hot Milk” not generally imply ‘aaRina paal’ “Cold Milk”. The traditional logical categories of contraries correspond in this oppositeness but it applies more widely.

Grading (Term given by Sapir) is bound up with the operation of comparison. The comparison may be explicit, implicit or semi-explicit. Explicit comparison involves two types of comparison i) two things may be compared with respect to a particular ‘property’ and this ‘property’ predicated of the one in a greater degree than it is of the other.

For Example

- iv) enkaL viiDu unkaL viiTtilum/viTta periyatu
“Our house is bigger than your house”

ii) two states of the same thing may be compared with respect to the property in question.

For Example

- v) enkaL viiDu saataaraNamaana viiTTai vita/illum periyatu
“Our house is bigger than the normal house”

These utterances (without context) may be ambiguous between the two types of comparison. The substitution of one pair of a gradable antonym for the other and the transposition of the relevant nominal expression with in a comparative sentence results in a semantically equivalent sentence.

This grading may also be implicit and semi-explicitly.

For Example

- vi) ennuTaiya aRai periyatu “My Room is big”

We are ascribing the property or ‘periyatu’ “bigness/size” to the referent of our room. Here the grading is made implicitly with some norm which is generally understood. We are implicitly comparing the room with something else and asserting that it is bigger.

The standard of comparison may here been explicitly introduced in the context where the sentence is uttered. We say then,

- vii) enkaL viiDu periyatu “Our house is big” will usually mean something like

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viii) enkaL viiDu cumaaraana viiTtilum periyatu
“Our house is bigger than the ordinary house”

(Or)

ix) enkaL viiDu oru viiTtukuriya aLaviLum periyatu
“Our house is bigger than the normal house”

Failure to recognize the logical properties of gradable, antonyms can give rise to a number of pseudo-problems.

By semi-explicitly grading is meant the use of some comparative construction without explicit mention of standard of comparison.

For Example

x) ennuTaiya viiDu rompap/mikap periyatu
“My house is very/too big”

is graded semi-explicitly and the standard of comparison will usually have been previously introduced in the context.

Ungradable Lexical Opposites

This type of Lexical Opposites is not possible in the comparison.

For Example

aaN	“Male”	peN	“Female”
aaciriyān	“Male teacher”	aaciriyai	“Female Teacher”

and so on. In each pairs “not only the predication of either one of the pair implies the predication of the negation of other, but also that the predication of the negation of either implies the predication of the other” (Lyons: 1977:272).

These ungradable lexical opposites can be classified in to three types namely i) Complementarity ii) Converseness and iii) Directional.

Complementarity

It deals with the ungradable opposites. For example aaN “Male” peN “Female”, a typical pair of ungradable opposites.

For Example

- xi) kaNNan oor aaN “Kannan is a male” implies
kaNNan oru peN illai “Kannan is not a female”

This dichotomization is due to the difference of sex which can be further illustrated from Tamil usages where both members of a pair are marked for Masculine and Feminine genders respectively.

For Example

- xii) maaNavan “Male Student” maaNavi “Female Student”
xiii) aaciriyān “Male Teacher” aaciriyai “Female Teacher”

Tamil Language has no common singular term to cover each of those pairs. Honorific singular form like ‘maanavar’ “Student” ‘aaciriyar’ “Teacher” can be used when one does not want to state the sex of the person concerned. In such cases there is a neutralization of oppositeness. This relationship is also illustrated by the following pairs of words.

For example

- xiv) maNamaana “Married” maNamaakaata “Un Married”
xv) uyiuTan iru “Be alive” iRa “To die”

The pair kanni verses maNamaanavaL expresses the complementarity in the case of a woman of marriageable age.

Converseness

Opposition different from antonymy and complementarity is converseness exemplified by pairs like kaNNavan “Husband” manaivi “Wife” which may be regarded as two-place predicates while Lyons suggests the term converseness for such type of relations. Palmer (1976:82) points out their essential relational characteristics and thus prefers the term relational opposites.

The comparative forms of explicitly graded antonyms and the corresponding active and passive forms of transitive verbs operate within the sentences as converses.

For Example

- xvi) ravi kaNNanai vita uyaramaanavan
“Ravi is taller than kannan” is the converse of
xvii) kaNNan raviyai viTak kuLLamaanavan
“Kannan is shorter than Ravi”

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- xviii) raaman siitaiyai virumpinaan
“Rama loves sita”
- xix) siitai raamanaal virumpappaTTaaL
Sita was loved by Rama”

Provided the appropriate grammatical changes are carried out after the transposition of the nominal expressions. Pairs of sentence containing converse lexemes or expressions can be so written that the two members of each pair of sentences will be equivalent.

Converse relations between lexemes which may be used as two place predicative expressions are especially common in areas of the vocabulary having to do with reciprocal social rules.

For Example

- xx) maruttuvar/vaittiyar “Doctor” X nooyaaLi “Patient”
xxi) mudalaaLi “Boss” X tozhilaaLi “Servant”
xxii) guru “Teacher” X siiTan “Follower/Student”
xxiii) aaNTaan “God” X aTimai “Slave”

The idea of presupposition and expectancy is expressed by some pairs.

For Example

- xxiv) vinaa “Question” viTai/patil “Answer”

Directional Lexical Opposites

The directional lexical opposites can be further divided into two types as i) Orthogonal and ii) Antipodal. It is also a major category of lexical opposites. John Lyons (1977:211) states that “though the directional lexical opposites cannot always be distinguished from the other three types of lexical opposites, that is, antonymy, complementarity and converseness is sufficiently important in language to be given a separate label”. This type of opposition is seen most clearly in the relationship which holds between

‘meelee’	“Up”	‘kiizhee’	“Down”
‘vaa’	“Come”	‘poo’	“Go”
‘vantatu’	“arrived it”	‘puRappaTTatu’	“Departure it”
‘iTa’	“Left”	‘vala’	“Right”
‘munnaal’	“Front”	‘pinnaal’	“Behind”

The directionality of ‘meelee’ X kiizhee in the vertical dimension is absolute in a way that the directionality of ‘iTam’ X ‘valam’ and ‘mun’ X ‘pin’ is not absolute.

Orthogonal

The oppositions which holds with in the set ‘vaTakku’ “North” ‘teRkku’ “South” ‘kizhakku’ “East” ‘meeRkku’ “West” each of the four members of the set is opposed in this way to ‘kizhakku’ and ‘meeRkku’; ‘kizhakku’ is opposed to ‘teRkku’ and ‘vaTakku’.

Antipodal Oppositions

This opposition which holds with in the set, that is, in the four directions, is to be opposed to one another. ‘vaTakku’ is thus opposed to ‘teRkku’ and ‘kizhakku’ is opposed to ‘meeRkku’.

The antipodal oppositions are dominant than the orthogonal oppositions. In Tamil ‘vaTakku’ X ‘teRkku’ and ‘kizhakku’ X ‘meeRkku’ are opposites rather than ‘vaTakku’ and ‘kizhakku’ or ‘teRkku’ and ‘meeRkku’. This opposition also seems to operate to some extent in the area of colour. John Lyons (1977:286) neither concludes “nor is the distinction between orthogonal and antipodal opposition always as clear in the vocabulary as might appear to be the case”.

Unlike in English, opposites in Tamil are usually expressed by suffixes. Loan words opposites are usually expressed by native prefixes.

For Example

xxv) ‘dharmaa’ “Justice” X ‘adharmaa’ “In justice”
‘niithi’ “Justice” X ‘aniithi’ “In justice”
‘niyaayam’ “Justice” X ‘aniyaayam’ “In justice”

Lexical opposites in Tamil may be morphologically related or unrelated irrespective of the fact that whether they are gradable or ungradable.

As in English and many other languages the most commonly used opposites in Tamil tend to be morphologically unrelated.

Fro Example

xxvi) ‘nalla’ “Good” X ‘keTTa’ “Bad”
‘uyaram’ “Tall/height” X ‘taazhvu’ “Low”
‘azhaku’ “Beautiful” X ‘avalaTshaNam’ “Ugly”
‘mutiya’ “Old” X ‘iLaiya’ “Young”
‘vanmai’ “Hardness” X ‘menmai’ “Softness”

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‘tuuram’ “Distance” X ‘kiTTa’ “Near”

Morphologically Related Opposites

In the case of morphologically related opposites the base form of one member of the pair is derived from the base form of the other by substituting the negative suffix.

For Example

xxvii)	‘aRivuTaiyaar’	“Knowledgeable people”
		X
	‘aRivilaar’	“Knowledge less people”
	‘maNamaana’	“Married”
		X
	‘maNamaakaata’	“Un married”
	‘naTppaana’	“Friendly”
		X
	‘naTppillaata’	“Un friendly”

Morphologically Reduplicative Unrelated Pairs

‘aTikkaTi’ “Frequently” ‘iTaiiTai’ “Not frequently”
‘UTanukkuTan’ “At once” ‘mellamella’ “Slowly”

Private Opposition

A privative opposition is a contrastive relation between two lexemes one of which denotes some positive property and the other of which denotes the absence of their property.

For Example

xxviii) ‘uyiruLLa’ “With Life” ‘uyirillaata’ “Without life”
‘acaiyum’ “Movable” ‘acaivillaata’ “Immovable”

Equipollent Opposition

An equipollent opposition is a relation in which each of the contrasting lexemes denotes a positive property.

For Example

xxix) 'aaN' "Male" X 'peN' "Female"

Conclusion

1. In Tamil the gradable opposites, that is, the antonymy is possible.
2. Grading is possible in Tamil by explicitly, implicitly and semi-explicitly.
3. Ungradable Lexical Opposite is not possible in the comparison.
4. Ungradable opposites other than comparison, that is, the complementarity, Converseness and Directional are possible in Tamil.
5. The two types of Directional opposites, that is, the orthogonal and the antipodal are possible in Tamil.
6. Morphologically related opposites, morphologically reduplicated unrelated opposites, private and equipollent opposition are possible in Tamil. In Tamil the opposites are suffixed to the words.

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