

The Names of Land, Field, and Soil in Madurai District – A Linguistic Study

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Abstract

Not only language but perception, categorization, cultivation methods, etc. also differ from region to region. Madurai district farmers have categorized lands and soils as cultivable and non-cultivable. Arable lands are two types: one is dry land and another one is wetland. Non-arable lands are divided into land for residence and land for grazing. Farmers are acquainted with many different types of soils and are able to differentiate muds which are treated as complete synonyms in dictionaries (Subramanian P.R, 1992 and Ramakrishnan S, 2020). The collected data reveals two types of naming systems for the fields: one is for the irrigated lands and another one is for the pieces of wet fields. Irrigation tanks and their irrigated lands share a common name and each wet field has a place name for easy reference and identification. As the land is the main property of the farmers, they are referred to by doublets in casual conversations.

Keywords: Nomenclature - land - field - soil - arable land - mud - irrigation tank - irrigated land - farmer.

1.1. Introduction

Agriculture is the second occupation of mankind after hunter-gatherer style of living in human history (National Geographic Society, 2022). Farmers cultivate crops as an occupation and get their knowledge about soils, rainfall expectations, seasons, crop rotation, pesticides, diseases that affect the crops, weeds and their control, etc. “Knowledge, innovations, and practices of indigenous and local communities around the world developed from experience gained over the centuries and adapted to the local culture and environment, traditional knowledge is transmitted orally from generation to generation. It tends to be collectively owned and takes the form of stories, songs, folklore, proverbs, cultural values, beliefs, rituals, community laws, local language, and agricultural

practices, including the development of plant species and animal breeds. Traditional knowledge is mainly of a practical nature, particularly in such fields as agriculture, fisheries, health, horticulture, forestry and environmental management in general” (Traditional Knowledge, UNESCO). This traditional knowledge about crop cultivation is as important as any other professional knowledge of any field. The compositions of soil, climate, irrigation facility, the choice of crop, method of cultivation differ from region to region. Region to region the variety of language, culture, perception, etc. play an important role in naming the agricultural implements, soils, seasons, weeds, etc.

Agriculture is the major and primary occupation of India and Madurai district is not an exception. Madurai district is one of the 38 districts of Tamilnadu. “Most of the areas of Madurai district contain red loam, black soil and clay loam” (District Diagnostic Reports – Vaazhndhu Kaattuvom Project, tnrt.org, Madurai).

A Survey on Agricultural occupational terms of Tamilnadu (Rajasekaran Nair et al, 2022) has shown significant dialectal differences. Madurai dialect has some unique words and expressions. While a language community is divided geographically or socially, the language differs, and the different varieties are called dialects.

The present article aims at recording the names of lands, fields and soils in Madurai district of Tamilnadu and unearths the naming methods of them through linguistic analysis of lexical items which are currently in use among the farmers of Madurai district.

1.2. Data Collection

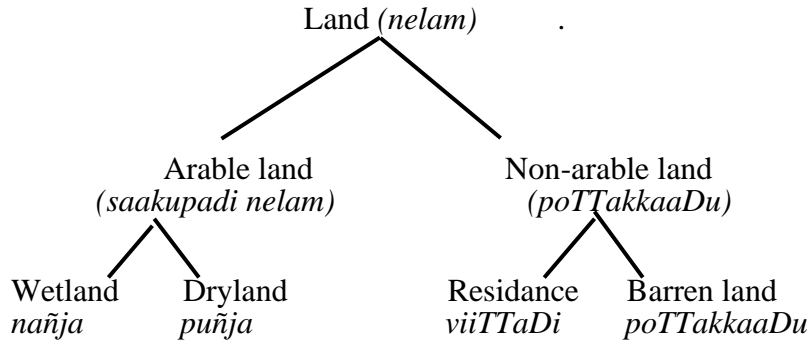
The data for this study has been collected from the farmers of Madurai district by direct interviews. The data is collected from landlords and agricultural workers. The secondary data is collected from the dictionaries and the Tamil Lexicon.

1.3. Analysis and Description

The collected data has been analyzed descriptively and presented in this paper.

1.4. Division of Land

One can easily deduce the system of naming and the categorization of lands, fields and soils from the data of these items by observation and analysis.



There is a dichotomy in the division of land on the basis of arability: arable land (*saakupadi nelam*) and non-arable land (*poTTak kaaDu*). This major division further divided into two each. The arable land is divided into two on the basis of irrigation: dry land (*puñja*) which is cultivated with rain water or well water and wet land (*nañja*) which gets irrigation from the water stream, irrigation tanks, etc. The soils of wet land also differ from dry land; while dry land is red soil (*semmaNNu*) and sand, wet land is black soil (*karamba maNNu*, *karisa maNNu*), or mixed soil (*irusaari*) or clay.

The non-arable land is divided into land of residence (*viiTTaDi*) and barren land (*poTTak kaaDu*) or land for grazing (*meeccak kaaDu*).

Irrigated Land

Irrigation tanks and their irrigated lands share the same names as the first part of their names in this district. One of the irrigation tank's names is '*aarik kammaa*', and the irrigated land's name is '*aari vaya*.' '*aari*' is the shared name and '*kammaa*' (tank) and '*vaya*' (wet field) are the second part of tank and irrigated land respectively.

Synonyms of 'field' and their distribution:

'*vaya*', '*seyyi*', '*nelam*', '*kaaDu*', '*kaaNi*', '*buumi*', '*kuNDu*' and '*kuRukkam*' are all synonyms for the meaning of 'field.' However, they have distribution restrictions in the farmer's language use.

kaaNi and nelam

Both are referring to 'a piece of arable land'. Compared with '*nelam*', '*kaaNi*' is less frequently used among farmers.

vaya and seyyi

Both are referring to wet land, while 'vaya' is a common name for a piece of wet land as well as the irrigated land of a tank, 'seyyi' is a specific name; it is always used as a reference for a piece of wetland. When a farmer has a number of fields, he named them differently to refer to them specifically, for example, 'pana marattu ceyyi', which means that a wet field with a palmyra tree on its boundary. This type of naming facilitates farmers to talk about particular field and direct the workers to the particular wet field. Most of the time, these types of names are transparent and sometimes they become opaque because they had been christened very long back, generations before.

nelam and buumi

Both are referring to land in general, however, the word 'buumi' is less frequently used than 'nelam'. 'buumi' is used in some set phrases like 'pon veLaiyum buumi' - 'land which yields gold'.

kuNDu and kuRukkam

Both are referring to small pieces of arable land; however, 'kuNDu' is referring to a 'wet land' and 'kuRukkam' referring to a 'dry land'.

Names of Soils

The following are the names of soils available in the Madurai district. The names are being used for many generations. The farmers have deep knowledge about these soils and are able to distinguish between the different types of soils and even the subtle contrasts between the varieties of soils.

'maNNU', 'semmaNNU', 'maNalu', 'karamba maNNU', 'karamba', 'kaLi maNNU', 'iizakkaLi', 'saraLa', 'señjaraLa', 'poTTa maNNU', 'uvar maNNU', 'uppu maNNU', 'ovaTTu maNNU', 'sukka maNNU', 'karusa maNNU' and 'seeha maNNU' are different names used by the farmers for different types of soils in Madurai district.

Comparison of Madurai Dialect form with Standard Forms

Madurai Dialect Forms	Standard Tamil Forms
<i>maNNU</i>	<i>maN</i> [soil]
<i>semmaNNU</i>	<i>semmaN</i> [red soil]

<i>maNalu</i>	<i>maNal</i> [sand]
<i>karamba maNNu</i>	<i>karusal maNNu</i> [black clay]
<i>karamba</i>	<i>vaNDal</i> [slit]
<i>karusa/ karuppu maNNu</i>	<i>karisal</i> [black soil]
<i>kaLi maNNu</i>	<i>kaLimaN</i> [clay soil]
<i>iizak kaLi</i>	[fine clay]
<i>saraLa</i>	<i>saraLai</i> [soil with small stones]
<i>señjaraLa</i>	[mixture of red soil with small stones]
<i>poTTa maNNu</i>	[infertile soil]
<i>uvar man NNu</i>	<i>uvar maN</i> [saline soil]
<i>uppu maNNu</i>	<i>uppu maN</i> [saline soil]
<i>ovaTTu maNNu</i>	[saline soil]
<i>sukkaa maNNu</i>	< <i>sukkaan</i> [limestone]
<i>seehamaNNu</i>	[mixture of fine soil with organic matter]

Farmers' Knowledge about Soils

Farmers in the study area are acquainted with more soil names as they have perceived many types of soils in this region. Some of them are totally different and some other are differently perceived. The soil names which are not found in dictionaries are *senjarala*, *iizak kaLi*, *poTTa maNNu* and *seekamaNNu*. The dialectal word for 'vaNDal' (silt) is 'karambai'; however, the standard word is also intelligible for many farmers of this study area. Interestingly, this 'karambai' has a different meaning in standard Tamil and in some other dialects and means the opposite. 'karambai' is the slit formed at the bottom of irrigation tanks and it is used to manure the lands in Madurai district. On the other hand 'karambai' or 'karambu' is a clayey soil which is unsuitable for cultivation.

Standard Form to Spoken Form Conversion

All words in Spoken Tamil end with a vowel sound. So, the Standard Tamil form 'maN' changes into 'maNNu'. Here, the last sonorant doubles to facilitate the addition of the enunciate /u/. The vowels /ai/ and /i/ change into /a/ and /e/ respectively in Spoken Tamil.

Ex. /saraLai/ -> /saraLa/ (ai → a)
/nilam/ ---> /nelam/ (i → e)

Transparent and Opaque Names

The word and its meaning usually do not have any natural relationship. The meaning of a word is mostly conventional. However, there are some words which have some kind of relationship to denote a meaning.

Ex. *naaRkaali* ---> *naaR* (<*naanku*) + *kaali* (four + legged) ---> chair

In Tamil, the word for 'chair' is '*naaRkaali*'. Literally it means an item which has four legs.

Transparent Soil Names

The soil names '*semmaNnu*', '*señjarala*', '*sukka maNnu*', '*poTTa maNnu*', '*uvar maNnu*', '*ovaTTu maNnu*' and '*uppu maNnu*' are transparent names, as the constituents' parts have meaning, and the compound meaning is the totality of the constituents.

semmaNnu ---> *sem* + *maNnu* ('*sem*' is an adjectival form of '*civappu*' = red).
red soil

señjarala ----> *señ* + *sarala* ('*señ*' is an alomorph of the adj. '*sem*')
red gravel

sukkaa maNnu ----> *sukkaa* + *maNnu*
lime stone soil

poTTa maNnu ----> *poTTa* + *maNnu* ('*poTTa*' is a dialect word means 'impotent')
impotent soil

'*uvar maNnu*', '*ovaTTu mannu*', and '*uppu maNnu*' mean the same soil, that is, 'saline soil'.

They are in free variation; they can be interchanged without any meaning change.

Soil and Field/Land Combination

Soil is the constituent of land or field. The possible combinations are listed in the following table:

Soil ↓ Land →	nelam	buumi	tara	kaaDu	-saari	vaya
<i>semmaNnu</i>	y	y	y	y	x	x
<i>maNalu</i>	x	x	y	y	y	x
<i>karamba maNnu</i>	-	-	y	-	-	x
<i>Karamba</i>	x	x	y	x	x	x
<i>kaLi (maNnu)</i>	y	x	y	x	x	x
<i>iizak kaLi</i>	y	x	y	x	x	x

<i>saraLa</i>	x	x	x	y	x	x
<i>señjaraLa</i>	x	x	x	y	x	x
<i>poTTa (maNNU)</i>	x	x	y	y	x	x
<i>uvar (maNNU)</i>	y	x	x	x	x	x
<i>uppu (maNNU)</i>	x	x	y	x	x	x
<i>ovaTTu (maNNU)</i>	y	x	y	x	x	x
<i>sukkaa (maNNU)</i>	x	x	x	y	x	x
<i>seeha maNNU</i>	y	x	y	x	x	x
<i>karusa maNNU</i>	x	x	x	y	x	x
<i>karuppu (maNNU)</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x

Names of Soil Mixed with Water

'ceeRu', 'sakadi', 'toLi', 'vadi', 'kaLi', and 'puzudi' are the different names for the different composition of different soil mix with water or in the absence of water.

'toLi' is the resultant of a well-mixed mixture of soil and water, it is more than a semi solid and it is made by tilling the field in the presence of water. It is prepared to plant paddy saplings easily. If the roots of the sapling are placed on *'toLi'* and pressed very little it would be planted effortlessly. It is mostly prepared for the plantation of paddy saplings. There will be a layer of water over the watery mud.

'ceeRu' is a mixture of soil and water, but there won't be a water layer over the mud. It is formed during the rainy season on the mud paths. It is very loose soil and clay with water.

'vadi' is a wet clay soil and looks like crease; it can stick to anything on which it is applied. It is thicker than *'seeRu'*. Children make dolls out of this wet clay.

'sakadi' is a mixture of wet soil with some other organic matter which is naturally mixed with mud. It is formed with water on the mud roads and paths.

'tuur' is the *'seeRu'* and it is formed at the bottom of a well or pond. It is formed as the soil particles settle down at the bottom of the water body in due course. *'tuur'* is the foot of a tree and

'seeRu' is visualized as the bottom of the water body. The place name metonymically stands for the 'seeRu' which is at the bottom of a water body.

'kaLi' means two things: one is wet clay and the other one is dry clay soil. Mostly the wet clay is referred to as 'iirak kaLi' and sometimes as a short form or due to contextual permission it is called as 'kaLi.'

'puzudi' is fine dry soil which can fly with strong wind.

Doublets of Land Names

The main property of an agriculturist is the land and it is referred to in doublets during conversations and enquiries. *nañja puñja*, *nila pulan*, *nilam niiccu*, *kaadu kaNNi*, *kaaDu kara*, *vaaykkaa varappu*, *puñjak kaaDu*, *vayak kaaDu* and *kuNDu kuRukkam* are the doublets which are referring to land and the surroundings of lands.

nela pulan

It is the combination of 'nela' and 'pulan' and mostly used to inquire about the land property of a farmer. The word 'pulan' is not found in the farmers' dialect, as a separate word. However, it is used as a technical term in the field of land survey and it refers to any section of land that is owned by a farmer.

nelam niiccu

It refers to arable land as the property of a farmer. Land refers to a general meaning of any kind of land and *niiccu* (Subramanian P.R:1992, P. 630) which does not occur as a word in the dialect may mean anything similar to land property.

kaaDu kara

kaaDu and *karai* have their own definite meanings. This doublet refers to any kind of land, but it is vast land, and it may include a vast plain and raised grounds or banks of water bodies.

vaaykkaa varappu

It is an implicit coordinate compound and they mean the shallow part of the channel and its bank.

Ex. *vaaykkaa varappula nadantu pookumpootu* -- 'When walk on the channel and its banks

kaadu kaNNi

This pair refers to a general meaning that is outside of the house and the place where works related to agriculture.

Ex. *kaadu kaNNikku veelaikkaip pooka veNDiyirukkum*

It may be needed to go out to the fields (of any kind) for (agricultural) work.

nañja puñja

This doublet is used when the farmers refer to their fields as their assets among themselves. *namakku nañja puñja ellam uNdu.* -- We (exclusive) have all - wet land and dry land.

kuNDu kuRukkam

This pair is used when someone has very nominal land property. It is opposite to '*nañja puñja*', '*nilam niiccu*', '*kaaDu kara*', etc. They are referring to the richness of the rich, but this is referring to the meager amount of land property. As it shown earlier, '*kuNDu*' is the small piece of wet land and '*kuRukkam*' is the small piece of dry land.

kaaDu

The primary meaning of '*kaaDu*' is 'forest' and it has the implied meaning of 'vastness' for which the word is the second constituent of some doublets.

Ex. *vayak kaaDu* - (vast) wet fields

puñjak kaaDu - (vast) dry land

The second part of '*puñjak kaaDu*' can stand for the whole of the doublet; that is '*puñjak kaaDu*' and '*kaaDu*' can be interchanged in contexts without any meaning change in the context of dry land. However, '*vayak kaaDu*' cannot represent the whole of wet fields as in the case of dry land. It is in contrastive distribution with '*vaya*' - 'wet land.' '*puñjak kaaDu*', '*puñja*', '*kaaDu*' are in free variation, that is they can be used interchangeably in contexts without any meaning difference. On the other hand, '*kaaDu*' and '*vaya*' are in free variation; '*kaaDu*' is not a synonym of '*vayak kaaDu*' and '*vaya*' in the context of wet land.

Conclusion

The study of names of lands, fields and soils of Madurai district shows a system of naming. Every wet field of a farmer has a place name; it is mostly transparent, however there are opaque names also. The irrigation tank and its beneficiary have the same name. The primary wealth of the farmers is their lands and they are being referred to by many doublets and some other doublets are used to refer to agricultural lands where farmers habitually work every day. Madurai district farmers use more names for the soil than what the dictionaries or lexicons have listed. Farmers are well acquainted with the different names of mud. The naming is guided by the Tamil language structure and culture. In future, linguistic study on weed names, implement names, etc. would bring out the underlying naming systems.

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