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Plural in Tamil and Telugu
A Comparison

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Introduction

Genetically related languages are grouped as a family like Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Tibeto-Burman, Austro-Asiatic, etc. Structurally related languages are divided into six categories namely SOV, OVS, VSO, VOS, SVO, and OSV. Among these six categories, Tamil and Telugu belong to SOV (Subject, Object and Verb) group. Tamil and Telugu have three way distinctions in person and two distinctions in number. These are First person singular and plural, Second person singular and plural and Third person singular and plural.

Aim of the Study

The present paper aims to describe the plurals, its surface markers and its functions in usage in Tamil and Telugu.

Plural

Plurals are the opposite form of singular. They indicate more than one thing or person. The plural markers are generally added with the nouns in Tamil and Telugu.

Example from Tamil

naay+kaL = naaykaL

Telugu

kukka+lu = kukkalu “dogs”

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Syntactically, when the plural noun occurs in a sentence it has its plural concord/agreement.

Example from Tamil

naaykaL kuraitthana

Telugu

kukkalu morigaayi “The dogs barked.”

Plural Markers

In Tamil, the bound form -kaL is a marker of plural. The agreement marker of this bound form kaL is -ar, -aar, -aarkaL -i and -na. In Telugu the bound form -lu is a marker of plural and the agreement marker for plural -lu is -ru and -yi.

There is a difference between Tamil and Telugu. The marker -kaL occurs with the noun and the verb. But in Telugu the plural marker -lu occurs only with the noun.

In Tamil, if the plural marker -kaL occurs with the human noun, then the plural marker also occurs with the verb as an agreement marker, whereas in Telugu, the plural marker -lu does not occur with the verb as an agreement.

Morphophonemic Changes

When the plural marker -kaL is added with the nouns, the following changes are made.

i) When -kaL is added with the -m ending words, the final m of the noun is changed into nasal n and voiceless velar k changed into voiced velar -g-.

Ex. from Tamil

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maram+kaL = marangaL “trees”
pazham+kaL = pazhangaL “fruits”

ii) When the plural marker –kaL is added with the words like muL, naaL, the final retroflex L of the noun changed into T. But there is a exception with the word kooL “planet” kooL+kaL = kooLkaL “planets”.

Example from Tamil

muL+kaL = muTkaL “thorns”
naaL+kaL = naaTkaL “days”

iii) When the –kaL marker is added with the words like kal, col, pal, etc. the final lateral l of the words is changed into trill R.

Example from Tamil

kal+kaL = kaRkaL “stones”
col+kaL = coRkaL “words”
pal+kaL = paRkaL “teeth”

This type of changes occurs only with the single syllable words. When the words have more than one syllable, then, the lateral l in those words are not changed like before. For example, with ural, it will be ural+kaL = uralkaL with kappal “ship” kappal+kaL = kappalkaL “ships”.

But in Telugu Bh. Krishnamurti (1985) and P.S.Subramaniam (1974) gave the following morpho-phonemic changes.

Examples from Telugu

i) pilli+lu= pillulu. The final i is changed into u due to the influence of the final u of the plural marker –lu.

ii) guDi+lu = GuLLu. Final syllable is dropped as well as the lateral l is changed into the retroflex LL.

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iii) paNDu+lu = paLLu. The final NDu is dropped and the lateral l is changed into the retroflex LL.

iv) BaNDi+lu = BaLLu. The final NDi is dropped and the lateral l is changed into the retroflex LL.

v) raayi+lu = raaLLu. The final yi is dropped and the lateral l is changed into LL.

vi) kuuturu+lu = kuutuLLu. The final ru is dropped and the lateral l is changed into LL.

vii) manavaDu+lu = manavaLLu. The final Du is dropped and the lateral l is changed into LL.

viii) manavaraalu+lu = manavaraaLLu. The final syllable li is dropped and the lateral l is changed into LL.

Agreement Markers

In Tamil, the agreement markers for plural are –ar, -aarkaL, -kaL and –na. Among these markers –ar, -aarkaL and kaL occur as agreement markers for human nouns whereas –na occurs as an agreement marker for non-human nouns. –KaL marker is used in the Imperative sense.

Example from Tamil

makkaL vanthanar	“People came.”
amaiccarkaL vantaarkaL	“The ministers came.”
niinkaL vaarunkaL	“You come.”
maaTukaL vantana	“Cattle came”

Whereas in Telugu, unlike Tamil, –ru is the only agreement marker for the human nouns and –yi for non-human nouns.

Example from Telugu

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manushulu vacceeru “Human beings came.”
kukkalu vacceeyi “Dogs came.”

In Telugu the mass nouns like paalu “milk” ‘niiLu’ “water” majjiga “butter milk” are always considered as plural and they take the agreement marker –yi. But in Tamil all these mass nouns ‘paal’, ‘taNNiir’ and ‘moor’ are considered as singular and they take the agreement marker –tu.

Example from Telugu

Paalu/niiLu/mooru unnaayi “Milk/water/butter milk is there”

Example from Tamil

Paal/taNNiir/moor irukku “Milk/water/butter milk is there”

In Tamil, while using numerals such as two, three, etc., the usage of the agreement marker is optional in both human and non-human whereas in Telugu the agreement marker for the above-said is obligatory. While using a numeral that denotes more than one, for humans the numeral classifier ‘peeru’ is optional in Tamil whereas in Telugu the classifiers –guru, and –mandi are obligatory. Up to eight, the classifier –guru is used. Above four, the classifier –mandi is used.

Examples from Telugu

enakku muunu puLLe/ puLLaiga
naakku mugguru pillalu
“I have three children.”

Examples from Tamil

naalu maram/marankanka irukku
naalugu cheTTTLu unnaayi
“There are four trees.”

naanga muunu peeru vantoom
meemu mugguramu vacceemu

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“We three members came.”

naanga eTTup peeru vantoom
meemu enimidhi manDi vacceemu
“We eight members came.”

In Tamil and Telugu, when one human noun and one non-human noun are combined together, the resultant phrase occurs as subject. The human agreement plural is used.

Example from

Tamil : Oru manitanum oru naayum vantaarkaL
Telugu: Oo manushi oka kukka vacceeru
“One man and one dog came.”

While using the inanimate nouns like kal “stone”, ilai “leaf”, maNal “sand,” etc., both the plural marker and the agreement marker are absent in Tamil. But in Telugu the above-said one is obligatory.

Examples from

Tamil: Anta malaiyil kal niraiya irukku
Telugu: Aa koNDaloo caalaa raaLLu unnaayi
“There are so many stones in that mountain.”

When more than one non-human noun occurs as subject, the subject may or may not take the plural marker. The plural agreement marker is also optional in Tamil. But, in Telugu, the plural marker with noun and the agreement marker with the verb are obligatory.

Example from Tamil

reNDu naayum muunu puunaiyum vantatu/vandhana

Telugu

reNDu kukkalu muuD u pillulu vacceeyi
“Two dogs and three cats came.”

In Tamil, though the non-human plural nouns have the agreement marker –na, the usage of that marker is optional, whereas. in Telugu, the non-human plural nouns have the agreement marker –yi. It is obligatory to use this marker.

Example from Tamil

ankee niraiya marankaL irukku

Telugu

akkaDa caalaa ceTTLu unnaayi

“There are so many trees.”

Tamil

naaykaL vantatu

Telugu

kukkaLu vaccaayi

“The dogs came.”

In Tamil, when the proper names like ramaa, siitaa, kamalaa, and umaa occur in combination as subject, they may not take the plural marker –kaL . They may take ellaarum. But, in Telugu, the last name in this phrase takes the plural marker –lu. There is no equal form in Telugu for ellaarum “all”.

Examples from Tamil

rama siita kamala uma vantaarkaL

rama siitaa kamala umaa elloorum vantaarkaL

Telugu

rama siitaa kamala umalu vacceeru

“Rama, Sita, Kamala and Uma came.”

In Tamil, the honorific nouns like amaiccar “minister”, talaivar “head”, tuNai veentar “Vice-Chancellor,” etc., take the honorific plural form ‘avarkaL’. But, in Telugu, the above-said nouns take either the plural marker -lu or the honorific form ‘vaaru’.

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Examples from Tamil

talaivar avarkaL peesuvaarkaL

Telugu

adyakskhula vaaru maaTlaaDutaaru

“The honourable head will take.”

tuNai veentar avarkaL varuvaar/varuvaarkaL

upaadyaashula vaaru vastaaru

“The Vice-Chancellor will come.”

Borrowed words like coffee, tea, bus, etc., will not take plural marker –kaL in Tamil. But, in Telugu, the above-said nouns take the plural marker –lu.

Examples from Tamil

Coffee Tea irukkaa?

Telugu

Coffiilu tiilu unnaayaa?

“Is there coffee or tea?”

Tamil

Bus caar ellam ooDudhu

Telugu

Bussulu caarulu tirugutunnaayi

“Buses and cars are running.”

Human body parts with two limbs are considered as plural in Telugu, whereas in Tamil the above are considered as singular.

Examples from Tamil

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Tangam kai maaRiyadhu

Telugu

Bungaaram ceetthulu maarindi

“The gold changed from hand to hand.”

Tamil

kaNNu teriyavillai

Telugu

kaLLu kaNipincha leevu

“I can see.”

Tamil

kai kaal ooDa villai

Telugu

kaaLLu cetthulu aaDaleedu

“I am not able work.”

In the above example, ‘kaaLLu cetthulu aaDaleedu’ the plural marker occurs with the subject but the agreement marker is absent in this particular context.

The Sanskrit borrowings formed as a compound take plural marker in Telugu. But in Tamil those are considered as singular.

Example from Tamil

satyamasatyam

Telugu

satyaasatyaalu “Truth and lie”

Tamil

niyaayamaniyaayam

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Telugu
niyaayaaniyaayaalu “Justice and injustice”

Conclusion

Though Tamil and Telugu genetically belong to same language family they vary in the above said points. This article mainly highlights those differences.

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A. Parimalagantham, M.A., M.Phil.

Department of Lexicography

P.S.Telugu University

Hyderabad – 500 004

India