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Language and Power (in Tamil) by L. Ramamoorthy
A Review by M. S. Thirumalai



A Research-oriented Book – Still Very Relevant

It is almost ten years since this book *Language and Power* (in Tamil) by L. Ramamoorthy was published (Publishers: AKARAM, Thanjavur 613007, Tamilnadu, India, 2005). It is amazing to note that the contents of this book are valid and relevant even today. Often books published in Tamil on such matters become rather outdated because of fast changes taking place in Tamil society, Tamil politics and Tamil linguistics. Dr. Ramamoorthy has identified, described and explained many elements relating to the use of language in relation to the expression of power in Tamil society. These elements continue to have their sway and relevance even after dramatic changes taking place in Tamil society. In recent years, Tamils have been greatly affected by issues such as developments in Sri Lanka, Mullai Periyar dam dispute, controversies relating to movie titles and dialogues and so on. Caste has become a hot issue, especially the much adumbrated inter-caste marriages coming under intense attack. The growth of caste-based politics is a very significant event which clearly involves the use of language in relation to exercise of power. Corruption is yet another important source of helping retention of power, etc. The language of corruption has its own link with the use of language as well as exercise of power.

In the midst of all these, Dr. Ramamoorthy's book on the use of language in relation to exercise of power reveals the fundamental constraints as well as the ease with which language is used to demonstrate and even to hide power.

The book *Language and Power* (in Tamil) has nine chapters, followed by detailed references/bibliography.

Chapter 1 presents an overview of the general relationship between language, language use and exercise as well as demonstration of power. That language expresses and reveals the status relation between interactants has been recognized in classical Tamil grammars. Kalidasa employs language to reveal the social status of some of his characters. On the other hand, in Tamil epics, use of second person singular to address the divinity is common and is accepted. The translation of the Bible into Tamil carefully chooses between available second person pronouns and adopts only *ni:r* (not *ni:ngaL* or *ni:*) to address Jesus. This example shows how language may be re-calibrated to meet the assumptions of users.

Dr. Ramamoorthy clearly identifies the general elements that govern the use of language to express, reveal and hide power in society. This chapter is a review of available theories relating to power and language with illustrations from Tamil society and Tamil language use. Ramamoorthy's discussion on media is an excellent contribution.

Chapter 2 is on passion for Tamil identity and Tamil development. Ramamoorthy points out that passion for and loyalty to a language need not necessarily result in the many-sided development of that language. This is true of all Indian languages, including Tamil. Enthusiasm and passion for Tamil marked the 20th century Tamil politics and social values. However, from 1970s, the tempo of passion started waning and along with this loyalty to Tamil has become rather thin now. Here I have presented only one of the many significant issues raised and

described in this chapter. Focus is on language development and how this is related to assumption and exercise of power.

Chapter 3 is on the need for and the processes of modernization of Tamil. Has modernization helped Tamil language to acquire a convincing social status? Language planning issues, literary trends, coinage and use of (or non-use of already coined) technical terms, loan words from other languages, use of Tamil in government and in various professions and industries are some of the issues discussed in this chapter. Examples are presented from current use. The discussion points out to the fact that although Tamil is now rich with terms and even agencies for the use of Tamil in all fields including administration and education, code switching and code mixing have much greater influence.

Chapter 4 is on maintaining purity of language use. Pure Tamil movement was a very influential trend in 20th century. The movement was closely associated with the struggle to gain political power and to make Tamil as the predominant language in Tamilnadu. There has been some success in getting rid of many loan words imposed on Tamil. However, a dichotomy between what is used in spoken language and what is preferred and used in written Tamil is nor a reality. Exercise and demonstration of power choose spoken dialect for certain contexts and written dialect for certain other contexts. Dr. Ramamoorthy's discussion is insightful and the examples he provides are very relevant.

Chapter 5 is on the processes of Tamil development in relation to self-sufficiency in terms of vocabulary, syntax and semantics. The role of standardization of Tamil in relation to the exercise of power is described with examples. Self-sufficiency is highly emphasized by adherents of Pure Tamil. However, as Dr. Ramamoorthy points out, self-sufficiency may not really be helpful for the development of any language. At the same, he also points out the need for the use of existing words to improve communication.

What really is Standard Tamil is discussed with insightful observations in Chapter 6. Often prestige is attached to the use of standard language. However, in the absence of a clear identity of standard language (because there may be more than one standard variety, and also which standard should be chosen – spoken or written) many interesting devices are used to express and hide power.

Chapter 7 discusses Tamil development in relation to Computer use. There is now widespread computer use. Government programs to increase the use of Tamil in computer fields have not really succeed much. Dr. Ramamoorthy's focus is rightly on the steps we can take to change our script order and other issues to make the use of Tamil easy for all of us. The five issues he has identified on page 134 are very significant. All these issues relate to the design of Tamil script. These issues are still debated although some really significant success is achieved. For example, the Tamil Hindu newspaper has software that helps write Tamil sentences using Roman Script. Yet we need some patience to go back and forth to make suitable corrections in spelling. Dr. Ramamoorthy's discussion is really a useful guide.

Chapter 8 focuses on learning Tamil using multi-media through computer. It is interesting to note that under the leadership of Dr. Ramamoorthy and his senior colleagues,

namely, Professor Nadaraja Pillai and Professor Sam Mohanlal, Central Institute of Indian Languages has brought out lessons available through the Internet. There are others as well: Dr. N. Deivasundaram and Dr. Vasu Renganathan, to mention a few important leaders, who also have contributed significantly to the development of lessons to teach Tamil through the Internet. The ideas offered in this chapter are very relevant even today for the development of lessons to teach Tamil through the Internet.

Chapter 9 is on the constraints and contradictions that we face when we want our languages to become effective means of communication. Power is not available to any Indian language in the social level if that language does not find a place in government and professional administration. There are many internal linguistic processes that do not allow modernization. Dr. Ramamoorthy identifies thirteen constraints: spoken vs. written dialects, classical vs. modern language variety, purity vs. mixing, globalizing trends vs. caste-based identities, traditional modern technology vs. computer-based technology, language development vs. literary development, Roles of Sanskrit vs. Roles of Tamil, Roles of English vs. Roles of Tamil, imaginative beliefs relating to high status of Tamil vs. reality of the situation relating to Tamil, Development of Tamil overseas vs. Development of Tamil in Tamilnadu, passion vs. reason, old vs. new, and language loss vs. language expansion/development. All these are significant issues.

Language and Power (in Tamil) is a significant contribution to sociolinguistics and language planning. And the arguments and data presented here are still valid. Hopefully, curriculum developers and syllabus framers will read this book to prevent existing hiatus between Tamil textbooks and the real needs of students. There should be workshops for Tamil teachers to discuss the issues presented here in relation to teaching and learning Tamil.

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