

The Status of Tamil as a Classical Language

George L Hart



Warm Up

a) Name a few languages spoken in India:

.....

b) Mention a few international languages:

.....

c) The box below gives details of a few languages and their origin. Arrange them chronologically.

| | | | |
|-------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|
| Chinese - 1250 BC (BCE) | Hebrew - 1000 BC (BCE) | Latin - 75 BC (BCE) | Arabic - 512 AD (CE) |
| Tamil - 300 BC (BCE) | Greek - 1500 BC (BCE) | Sanskrit - 2000 BC (BCE) | |

Answer

.....

.....

d) Following are some of the great works in Tamil. Find out their names by filling in the missing letters.

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|--|--|--|---|---|---|---|--|--|---|---|---|
| N | | | | | N | A | I | | | | | | |
| T | | | | | K | A | P | P | | | A | M | |
| | | | | | M | E | K | | | | | I | |
| P | A | | | | | P | P | A | | | | U | |
| | | | | | N | A | N | U | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | | | | | R | A | L |



Dr. U. Ve. Swaminatha Aiyar known as Tamil Thatha (1855-1942) and Damotharapillai (1832-1901) both Tamil scholars had collected old palm leaf and paper manuscripts and catalogued them. They had also edited most of the classical texts for the first time.

PRIMARY SOURCES: Immediate firsthand accounts from people or original documents, reports by people who witnessed the events.

SECONDARY SOURCES: Cover or quote the primary source for interpretation

Mr. George L Hart, a linguistic anthropologist, endeavours to make a comparative analysis of classical languages of the world. Now, let's see which languages emerge as the best amongst equals, from his point of view.

April 11, 2000

Professor Maraimalai has asked me to write regarding the position of Tamil as a classical language, and I am delighted to respond to his request.

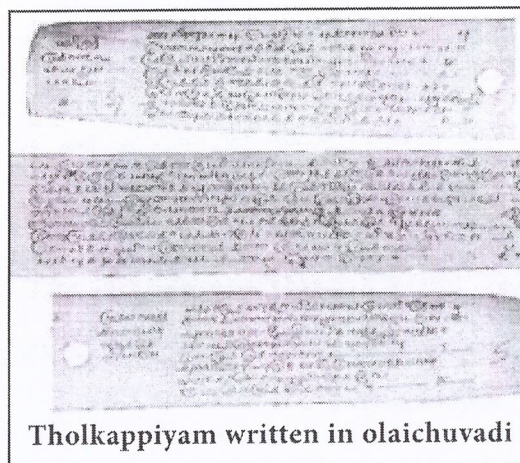
I have been a Professor of Tamil at the University of California, Berkeley, since 1975 and am currently holder of the Tamil Chair at that institution. My degree, which I received in 1970, is in Sanskrit, from Harvard, and my first employment was as a Sanskrit professor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in 1969. Besides Tamil and Sanskrit, I know the classical languages of Latin and Greek and have read extensively in their literatures in the original. I am also well-acquainted with comparative linguistics and the literatures of modern Europe.

Let me state unequivocally that, by any criteria one may choose, Tamil is one of the greatest classical literatures and traditions of the world.

The reasons for this are many; let me consider them one by one.

First, Tamil is of considerable antiquity. It predates the literatures of other modern Indian languages by more than a thousand years. Its oldest work, the *Tolkappiyam*, contains parts that, judging from the earliest Tamil inscriptions, date

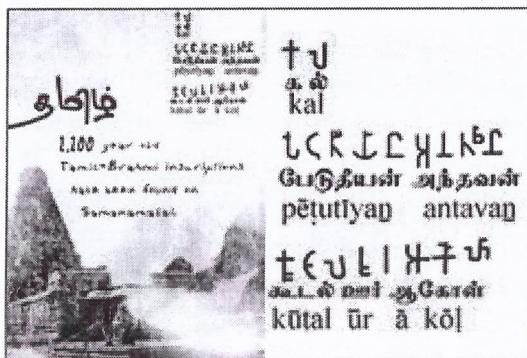
back to about 200 BCE. The greatest works of ancient Tamil, the *Sangam* anthologies and the *Pattuppattu*, date to the first two centuries of the current era. They are the first great secular body of poetry written in India, predating Kalidasa's works by two hundred years.



Second, Tamil constitutes the only literary tradition indigenous to India that is not derived from Sanskrit. Indeed, its literature arose before the influence of Sanskrit in the South became strong, and so is qualitatively different from anything we have in Sanskrit or other Indian languages. It has its own poetic theory, its own grammatical tradition, its own esthetics, and, above all, a large body of literature that is quite unique. It shows a sort of Indian sensibility that is quite different from anything in Sanskrit or other Indian languages, and it contains its own extremely rich and vast intellectual tradition.

Third, the quality of classical Tamil literature is such that it is fit to stand beside the great literatures of Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Chinese, Persian and Arabic. The subtlety and profundity of its works,

their varied scope (Tamil is the only pre modern Indian literature to treat the subaltern extensively), and their universality qualify Tamil to stand as one of the greatest classical traditions and literatures of the world. Everyone knows the Tirukkural, one of the world's greatest works on ethics; but this is merely one of a myriad of major and extremely varied works that comprise the Tamil classical tradition. There is not a facet of human existence that is not explored and illuminated by this great literature.



Finally, Tamil is one of the primary independent sources of modern Indian culture and tradition. I have written extensively on the influence of a Southern tradition on the Sanskrit poetic tradition. But equally important, the great sacred works of Tamil Hinduism, beginning with the Sangam Anthologies, have undergirded the development of modern Hinduism. Their ideas were taken into the Bhagavata Purana and other texts (in Telugu and Kannada as well as Sanskrit), whence they spread all over India. Tamil has its own works that are considered to be as sacred as the Vedas and that are recited alongside Vedic mantras in the great Vaisnava temples of South India. And just as Sanskrit is the source of the

modern Indo-Aryan languages, classical Tamil is the source language of modern Tamil and Malayalam. As Sanskrit is the most conservative and least changed of the Indo-Aryan languages, Tamil is the most conservative of the Dravidian languages, the touchstone that linguists must consult to understand the nature and development of Dravidian.



THE TAMIL CHAIR

Tamil chair is set up to protect Tamil culture and language across the globe and give the classical Tamil language a sense of pride. For instance, The Harvard Tamil Chair may cost around 40 crore rupees that involves recruitment fee and course implementation fee.

I am well aware of the richness of the modern Indian languages — I know that they are among the most fecund and productive languages on earth, each having begotten a modern (and often medieval) literature that can stand with any of the major literatures of the world. Yet none of them is a classical language. Like English and the other modern languages of Europe (with the exception of Greek), they rose on preexisting traditions rather late and developed in the second millennium.

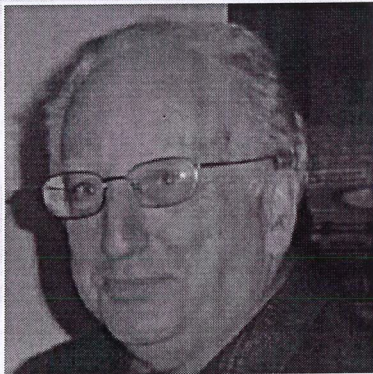
To qualify as a classical tradition, a language must fit several criteria: it should be ancient, it should be an independent tradition that arose mostly on its own not as an offshoot of another tradition, and it must have a large and extremely rich body of ancient literature. Unlike the other

modern languages of India, Tamil meets each of these requirements. It is extremely old (as old as Latin and older than Arabic); it arose as an entirely independent tradition, with almost no influence from Sanskrit or other languages; and its ancient literature is **indescribably** vast and rich.

The status of Tamil as one of the greatest classical languages of the world is something that is **patently** obvious to anyone who knows the subject. To deny that Tamil is a classical language is to deny a vital and central part of the greatness and richness of Indian culture.

*Sincerely,
George L. Hart*

About The Author



George Luzerne Hart is a professor of Tamil language at the University of California, Berkeley. His work focuses on classical Tamil literature and on identifying the relationships between Tamil and Sanskrit literature. In 2015, the Government of India awarded him the title of Padma Shri, the third highest civilian honour. He studied Latin, Greek, Sanskrit and several modern and European languages.



BC stands for "Before Christ" and represents the years before Christ was born.

AD stands for "Anno Domini," which is Latin for "the year of our Lord," and represents the years after Christ was born.

BCE stands for "Before Common Era," "Before Christian Era," or "Before Current Era" and represents the time before the last 2018 years (at the time this was written).

CE stands for "Common Era," "Christian Era," or "Current Era" BC and BCE represent the same time frame, but with BCE, the religious aspect is removed. The same goes for AD and CE (the religious aspect is removed with CE).

Glossary

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| unequivocally | - unambiguously |
| considerable | - ample, sizable |
| antiquity | - ancientness |
| inscriptions | - a historical, religious, or other record cut, impressed, painted, or other on a hard surface |
| Anthologies | - book or other collection of selected writings by various authors |
| secular | - non religious, temporal |

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| indigenous | - native |
| aesthetics | - American spelling for aesthetics, sense of beauty |
| subtlety | - distinction, nuance |
| profundity | - solidity, sophistication |
| subaltern | - subordinate, inferior |
| extensively | - broadly, largely |
| universality | - acceptance, prevalence |
| myriad | - indefinitely great number |
| facet | - feature, character |
| illuminated | - lucid or clear |
| undergird | - fundamental support |
| conservative | - traditional |
| Dravidian | - a family of languages spoken in southern India and Sri Lanka |
| Indo-Aryan | - Indo-European people |
| touchstone | - a standard or criterion |
| fecund | - fertile |
| preexisting | - antecedent, former |
| offshoot | - outgrowth, sprout |
| indescribably | - indefinably |
| patently | - clearly, undoubtedly |

1. Answer the following questions in one or two sentences based on your understanding of the letter.

- Which is considered the oldest work in Tamil? When was it written?
- What is the evidence that supports the finding of the oldest Tamil work?
- Mention the Tamil works that date to the first two centuries of the current era.
- Name the great Tamil work that speaks volumes on ethics.
- What are the other classical languages mentioned by the author?
- Can you define and list the themes explored in Tamil Literature? Why?
- What is unique about Tamil and its sources?
- Modern Indian languages are productive on earth. Why does the author say so?
- Which language is as old as Latin?
- Why is it said that Tamil has the most independent tradition?
- What is the role of Classical Tamil in Modern Tamil and Malayalam?

2. Answer the following questions in three or four sentences each.

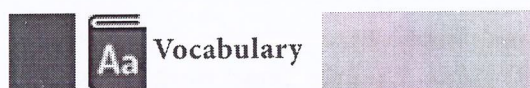
- Supreme works in Tamil elevate it to be treated as sacred as the Vedas. How?
- Tamil is a touchstone to understand the Dravidian's nature and development. Elucidate.

c) How do you correlate the richness of Tamil language with Indian culture?

3. Answer the following in a paragraph of 100-150 words each.

a) How does the author justify the statement that Tamil is a classical language?

b) Tirukkural is a fine example of an outstanding quality of classical Tamil Literature. Substantiate.



a) Analogy

A comparison of one thing with another thing that has similar features is known as analogy. In an analogy, the last two words must be related in the same manner in which the first two are related.

Example :

i) JOYOUS : UNHAPPY
hopeful : despondent

UNHAPPY is the antonym of JOYOUS, so is **despondent** the antonym of **hopeful**.

ii) APPRECIATION : ADULATION
felicitation : congratulation

ADULATION is the synonym of APPRECIATION, similarly **congratulation** is the synonym of **felicitation**.

Here are some analogies formed with words selected from the lesson you have just read.

Now complete each analogy with appropriate words from the list given below:

| | |
|------------|------------------|
| changeable | indifference |
| nuance | insignificant |
| refusal | long-established |
| drastic | hide |

1. CLASSICAL : TRADITIONAL
ancient : -----
2. UNIQUE : COMMON
sensitivity : -----
3. INDIGENOUS : NATIVE
extreme : -----
4. FACET : ASPECT
subtlety : -----
5. SACRED : IRREVERENT
conservative : -----
6. OBVIOUS : DOUBTFUL
vital : -----
7. INFLUENCE : IMPACT
denial : -----
8. ILLUMINATE : DARKEN
explore : -----

b) Suffixes

In the letter of Prof. George L Hart, we come across the words 'linguistics', and 'aesthetics'. The suffix '-ics' means 'pertaining to' or 'relating to'. The word 'linguistics' means the scientific study of a language.

Match the -ics words with their appropriate meanings. You can make use of a dictionary.

| S.No. | Words | Meanings |
|-------|------------------|---|
| 1. | Linguistics | the scientific study of a language |
| 2. | Numismatics | the study of principles of beauty |
| 3. | Electro Dynamics | the study of speech sounds |
| 4. | Phonetics | the study of genes |
| 5. | Aesthetics | the study of analysing information shown in numbers |
| 6. | Genetics | the study of government and using power in public life |
| 7. | Statistics | the study of building and flying air-craft |
| 8. | Politics | the study of money and coins |
| 9. | Aeronautics | the study of processing data for storage and retrieval |
| 10. | Informatics | the study of the way that electric currents and magnetic fields affect each other |

c) Homonyms, Homophones and Homograph

“The greatest works of ancient Tamil, the Sangam anthologies and the Pattupattu, date to the first two centuries of the current era”.

Note: In the above sentence, the words ‘to’ and ‘two’ sound the same but they have different meaning.

| | Sound | Spelling | Meaning | Example |
|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|--|
| Homophones | Same | Different | Different | stare(looking deeply) stair(steps) |
| Homonyms | Same | Same | Different | kind (type) kind (caring) |
| Homographs | Different | Same | Different | tear(pull apart) tear(drop of liquid from eyes) |

Complete the following with appropriate words from the box given.

| | | | | |
|--------------|------------------|------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| night/knight | scent/sent/ cent | stationary/ stationery | lead/lead | reign/rain/rein |
| band/banned | bows/boughs | sell/cell | pass/pause/paws | present/present |

- 1 My mother brought an expensive watch as a birthday-----
- 2 Everybody accepted the fact that overeating could easily _____ to obesity.
- 3 In the middle ages, people were trained to become a _____ at a young age.
- 4 Akshitha’s brother plays the bugle in his school_____.
- 5 The weather is fine and the air is filled with the _____ of lemons.

6 What a splendid _____ the emperor Alexander's might have been!

7 Humans have foot, animals have _____.

8 They know how to _____ their mobile phones online.

9 The teacher is so happy that all the students are _____ today.

10 The cars were _____ in the traffic jam.

11 It is not easy for him to tie _____ in his shoe laces.

d) Collocation

Collocation: It is a pair or group of words that always appears in the same order. Here are some collocations picked from the lesson:

| | |
|-------------------------|------------------------|
| subtlety and profundity | greatness and richness |
| culture and tradition | vast and rich |

Some of the commonly used collocations are:

| | | |
|----------------|---------------|-----------------|
| read and write | pros and cons | sooner or later |
| dead or alive | null and void | black and white |

e) Descriptive Words

Go through the letter of Prof. George L Hart once again and enlist the words describing Tamil.

e.g. oldest

Identify the words that mean the following.

| | |
|--------------|---------------|
| Indigenous | myriad |
| conservative | indescribable |
| antiquity | aesthetics |
| universality | secular |

1 This is something that is related to ancient time.....

2 The word that describes pleasing in appearance

3 Things that are not specifically religious

4 The word to mention a large number.....

5 This describes something which is produced or belongs to a particular region.....

6 The thing that cannot be described.....

7 This one is something which cannot come out of tradition.....

8 The quality of existing or involving everywhere.....



Listening

On successful completion of a university degree course, before taking up their professional careers, the graduates will wear their academic dress for the graduation ceremony, in which they declare their commitment to assume the responsibilities and obligations of the respective fields or professions. The underlying meaning of all oaths is always 'Service above Self'.

The oath taken by Graduates of Medicine is given as Listening passage.

After listening to the pledge played on the tape recorder carefully, fill in the following statements with the right options given.

a) The medical graduates take oath to dedicate their to the service of humanity.

- | | |
|-----------|------------|
| i) money | ii) talent |
| iii) life | iv) nation |

b) Theof the patient should be the doctor's greatest concern.

- | | |
|-------------|---------------|
| i) dignity | ii) gratitude |
| iii) health | iv) honour |

c) The would-be graduates promise to practise their profession withand dignity.

- | | |
|--------------------|---------------|
| i) conscience | ii) knowledge |
| iii) understanding | iv) respect |

d) They should respect theof the patients.

- | | |
|-----------------|-------------|
| i) age | ii) wealth |
| iii) background | iv) secrets |

e) The pledge is also to treat the patients without any.....

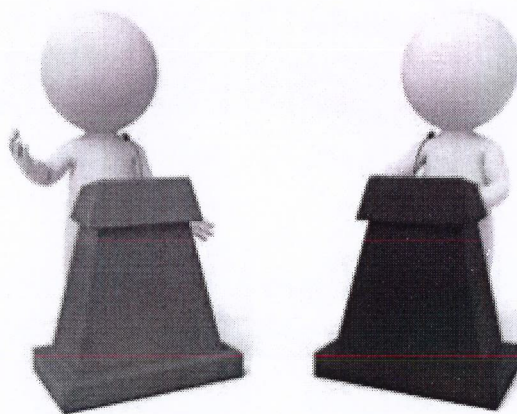
- | | |
|---------------|--------------------|
| i) fee | ii) discrimination |
| iii) interest | iv) hatred |



Speaking

Debate

A debate is a discussion in which speakers form two groups, and argue in favour of or against a topic. Debates are conducted in lecture halls, parliament, legislative assemblies and public places.



The speakers from each group not only give reasons to support their argument, but also counter the arguments made by the members from the opposite group.

