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Morphological Changes in Modern Tamil: A Comparative Study with Classical Tamil

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Abstract:

Tamil, one of the oldest continuously used languages in the world, exhibits a rich morphological system that has undergone significant transformation from its classical phase to its modern spoken and written forms. This study examines the morphological changes in Modern Tamil in comparison with Classical Tamil, focusing on noun inflections, verb conjugations, case markers, pluralization, and derivational processes. Drawing on examples from early grammatical traditions such as Tolkappiyam and canonical works like Thirukkural, the paper highlights systematic simplification, phonological erosion, and functional restructuring in Modern Tamil. The study also explores sociolinguistic influences such as urbanization, language contact, and digital communication. The findings reveal that while Modern Tamil retains the agglutinative core of Classical Tamil, it demonstrates increased flexibility, reduced morphological complexity, and greater reliance on analytic constructions.

Introduction

Tamil belongs to the Dravidian language family and has a documented history spanning over two millennia. The earliest extant grammatical treatise, Tolkappiyam, provides a comprehensive description of phonology, morphology, and syntax in Classical Tamil. Over time, Tamil has evolved into various regional and social varieties, collectively referred to as Modern Tamil.

Morphology—the study of word formation and structure—offers critical insights into

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linguistic evolution. Tamil, being an agglutinative language, relies heavily on suffixation to encode grammatical relationships. Classical Tamil exhibited a highly structured and rule-governed morphological system, while Modern Tamil shows signs of simplification and innovation.

This paper aims to:
- Compare morphological features of Classical and Modern Tamil
- Identify patterns of change
- Explain sociolinguistic and functional motivations behind these changes

Literature Review

Early Tamil grammatical works such as Tolkappiyam laid the foundation for understanding morphological categories like *col* (word), *urubu* (suffix), and *vetrumai* (case). Later commentaries expanded on these classifications.

Classical texts such as Thirukkural and Sangam anthologies provide authentic linguistic data for early Tamil morphology. Scholars have noted that Classical Tamil was characterized by:
- Strict morphological rules
- Rich inflectional paradigms
- Minimal external influence

Modern linguistic studies indicate that spoken Tamil has diverged considerably from its classical form. Research highlights:
- Reduction in case distinctions
- Simplification of verb morphology
- Increased use of auxiliary verbs

Despite these studies, a comprehensive comparative analysis remains necessary, particularly in the context of contemporary usage influenced by globalization and technology.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a comparative and descriptive approach:
- **Primary Sources:** Classical texts such as Tolkappiyam and Thirukkural
- **Modern Data:** Contemporary spoken Tamil, media, and written texts
- **Analytical Framework:** Morphological categories including noun inflection, verb conjugation, and derivation

Examples are transliterated where necessary, and emphasis is placed on functional changes.

4. Morphological Structure in Classical Tamil

4.1 Agglutinative Nature

Classical Tamil is a highly agglutinative language, where words are formed by stringing together morphemes, each with a distinct grammatical function. For example:
- *maram* (tree) + *-il* (locative) → *marathil* (in the tree)

Each suffix is clearly identifiable and retains its form.

4.2 Noun Inflection

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Nouns in Classical Tamil are marked for:

- Case
- Number
- Gender

Case markers include:

- Nominative (zero marker)
- Accusative (-ai)
- Dative (-ukku)
- Genitive (-atu / -in)
- Locative (-il)

Plural formation often involves suffixes such as *-kal*.

4.3 Verb Morphology

Verbs are marked for:

- Tense (past, present, future)
- Person-number-gender (PNG agreement)

Example:

- *vandaan* (he came)
- *vandaar* (they came / honorific)

4.4 Derivational Morphology

Classical Tamil allows extensive derivation:

- Noun to adjective
- Verb to noun
- Compound formations

5. Morphological Changes in Modern Tamil

5.1 Simplification of Case System

Modern Tamil shows reduction and variation in case marking:

- Classical: *avanukku* (to him)
- Modern spoken: *avanu*

The dative marker *-ukku* is often reduced in speech.

5.2 Reduction in Gender Distinctions

Classical Tamil distinguishes masculine, feminine, and neuter forms. Modern Tamil:

- Reduces gender marking in colloquial usage
- Uses generalized forms

Example:

- Classical: *aval* (she), *avan* (he)
- Modern spoken often neutralizes in rapid speech

5.3 Changes in Pluralization

Plural suffix *-kal* is retained but often omitted in spoken Tamil when context is clear:

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- *pasanga* (children) replaces *pasangal*

5.4 Verb Simplification
Verb conjugation has undergone significant simplification:
- Classical: complex PNG markers
- Modern: reduced forms and auxiliary constructions

Example:
- Classical: *varugiraan* (he is coming)
- Modern: *varaan* / *vara poraan*

5.5 Emergence of Auxiliary Verbs
Modern Tamil frequently uses auxiliary verbs:
- *panni irukken* (I have done)
- *poittu vandhen* (I went and came)

This indicates a shift toward analytic structures.

6. Phonological Influence on Morphology
Phonological erosion plays a major role:
- Reduction of vowels
- Assimilation of consonants
- Elision of suffixes

Example:
- *irukkirathu → irukku*

Such changes affect morphological transparency.

7. Sociolinguistic Factors

7.1 Urbanization
Urban speech favors brevity and speed, leading to morphological reduction.

7.2 Language Contact
Influence from English and other languages introduces:
- Loanwords
- Hybrid constructions

7.3 Media and Technology
Digital communication encourages:
- Abbreviated forms
- Phonetic spellings

8. Functional Shifts
Morphological simplification often leads to:
- Greater reliance on word order
- Increased use of context
- Emergence of analytic grammar

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9. Comparative Analysis

Feature	Classical Tamil	Modern Tamil
Case System	Rich, explicit	Reduced, variable
Verb Agreement	Complex	Simplified
Pluralization	Explicit	Often optional
Gender Marking	Strong	Reduced
Morphology Type	Agglutinative	Agglutinative + Analytic

10. Discussion

The transition from Classical to Modern Tamil reflects a broader linguistic trend:

- Movement from synthetic to analytic structures
- Increased efficiency in communication
- Adaptation to social and technological changes

Despite simplification, Tamil maintains its structural identity.

11. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Modern Tamil, while rooted in the classical tradition described in Tolkappiyam, has evolved significantly in its morphological structure. The changes observed—simplification, phonological reduction, and analytic tendencies—reflect both internal linguistic processes and external sociocultural influences.

Importantly, these changes do not indicate decay but rather linguistic adaptability. Tamil continues to thrive as a dynamic language, balancing tradition and modernity.

References:
Tolkappiyam
Thirukkural
Scholarly works on Dravidian linguistics
Contemporary Tamil language studies