



Complications of translating *Tolkāppiyam Pirappiyal*

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Submission Date:04.03.2025

Acceptance Date:24.03.2025

Abstract

From the early days of Tamil grammar to its modern development, notions about ‘The Production and Articulation of Speech Sounds’ have been continuously present. This subtle chapter of study describes the fundamental elements that ensure that the circulation of a language does not become distorted. This section gains importance through its description of the production of the basic scales by which a language is written and pronounced with flawlessness. As an ancient grammatical text of Tamil, *Tolkāppiyam* has effectively advanced innovative approaches to the phonological system of Tamil through the third chapter of its first section (*Eluttatikāram*), namely, *Pirappiyal*. Many sophisticated studies have been conducted on the phonological tradition described by *Tolkāppiyar* with linguistic base. Although some of them put forward the idea that *Tolkāppiyar* had given these descriptions by following the Sanskrit tradition, which provides priority to the perfection in articulating the terms used in Vedas, most of them conclude that this portion of science is a unique part of the Tamil language. The commentary texts by the earlier commentators are the initial studies to embrace research ideas about this chapter. A complete understanding of *Tolkāppiyam* would not be complete without these commentaries. Furthermore, these commentary texts themselves serve as an important source for the translation works of the *Tolkāppiyam*.

Translation for this specific chapter involves various fundamentals such as the concept and theory of the author, the tendency of the commentators, clarity on the source language (SL), linguistic background, especially a thorough understanding of phonology, knowledge of physiology, translation and interpretation techniques, etc. This multidisciplinary approach demonstrates both the sophistication of its translation and also the difficulties it poses.

This treatise aims to identify and indicate the complications embedded in the translation efforts ever done for this specific chapter, i.e., *Pirappiyal*, with some possible solutions. Among the translations of the *Tolkāppiyam* that have appeared so far, the following is a list of those who have translated the *Pirappiyal* portion.

- 1) P. S. Subrahmanya Sastri (1930),
- 2) S. Ilakkuvaṇār (1963),
- 3) Kamil Zvelebil (1972),
- 4) D. Albert (1985),
- 5) V. Murugan (2000),
- 6) S. V. Subramanian (2004).

V. Vaṭalūraṇār (1969) should also be included in their list. Although his work is not intended to be a complete translation, we must not forget to consider the translated parts in his work ‘The Wealth of Tolkappiyam’. It is not a direct translation of the source text, but rather a translation that conveys their essence and ideas as a whole. Therefore, the above seven translation works constitute the primary sources for this study.

The first *Nūrpā* (verse) of this chapter deals with the basis of the articulation process in general by mentioning those organs that are involved in the air stream mechanism. Although the organs mentioned by *Tolkāppiyar* are eight in number, he has subtly classified them into two categories. The importance of this classification can only be realized through a clear understanding of phonology, a branch of linguistics.

‘Unti mutalā muntuvaḷi tōṇṇit

Talaiyiṇum miṭarriṇum neñciṇum nilai’ip
Pallum itaḷum nāvum mūkkum Aṇṇamum
uḷappaṭa eṇmurai nilaiyāṇ Uruppur ramaiya
nerippaṭa nāṭi
Ellā veluttuṇ colluṇ kālaip

Pirappiṇ ākkam vēruvē riyala

Tirappaṭat teriyuṇ kāṭci yāṇa’

(Tol.Pirappiyal.1)

The above verse explains that kinds of sounds are articulated according to the modifications in the air pressure that flows from the chest to the oral cavity. While pointing out the eight organs that take part in modifying the airflow, the source text (ST) distinguishes the air chambers from the articulators by using the term ‘*nilai’i*’. That means the air flows from the abdomen and finds a place in those three air chambers, i.e., the head (*talai*), the throat (*miṭaru*), and the chest (*neñcu*), so that the other articulatory organs can be involved in the process of changing simultaneously. Here the term ‘*nilai’i*’ plays a subtle role in revealing the basic differences among those two categories. But in translations, the role of the same term is being substituted with some other nearer meanings. Moreover, in some translations, we can see the tendency to simply list eight organs without revealing the categories that the original text implicitly distinguishes. The following are the translations made for the part

‘Talaiyiṇum miṭarriṇum neñciṇum nilai’ip

Pallum itaḷum nāvum mūkkum Aṇṇamum
uḷappaṭa eṇmurai nilaiyāṇ Uruppur
ramaiya.....’

- P. S. Sastri:** ‘passing through the eight parts chest, neck, head, tongue, hard palate, teeth, lips and nose.’
- Ilakkuvanar:** ‘finds place in the chest, larynx, and pharynx, and touches the teeth, lips, tongue, nose and palate.’
- Vaṭalūraṇār:** ‘And find place in chest
Larynx pharynx touches teeth
Lips tongue nose and palate’
- K. Zvelebil:** ‘passing through the eight places in [its] course – the head, and the throat, and the chest, the teeth, and the lips, and the tongue, and the nose, and the palate.’
- D. Albert:** ‘gets modified in the head, throat, and chest and articulated by the teeth, lips, tongue, nose and palate.’
- V. Murugan:** ‘Moves through the chest, throat and head
And reaches the teeth, lips, tongue, nose and palate.’
- S. V. S:** ‘passing through the head, the throat, and the chest, will pass through the teeth, and the lips, and the tongue and the nose, and the palate in total in the above eight places..’

Here, another interesting portion to be noted is the equivalent word used for the term ‘*Unti*’. Except V. Murugan, all the translators select ‘navel’ as the equivalent word in the sense of its direct meaning. ‘*Unti*’ is the place where the essential airflow for the articulation process gets originated. There is also the idea that the term ‘*Unti*’ is a descriptive noun derived from the fact that it is a region (placed below the lungs) where the breath air is thrusting up and down in the respiration process. In Tamil, ‘*Untutal*’ also refers to ‘thrusting’. For this reason, while understanding the word ‘*Unti*’ as ‘the diaphragm’ rather than the navel is more consistent with physiological concepts, V. Murugan’s terminology seems closer to the source text, naturally.

If the aim of translations is to emphasize only the centralized concepts of the source text, it can only be incomplete. Especially in attempts to translate grammatical texts, it is essential to translate all segments of the verse or text without the choice of neglecting and the chance of modifying. Any part that is omitted or altered is more likely to disrupt the continuity of understanding provided by the source text. Here, regarding the production of vowels, *Tolkāppiyar* states that,

‘*Avvalip*

Pannī ruyirum tannilai tīriyā

Miṭarrup pīranta vaḷiyiṇ icaikkum’

(*Tol.Pirappiyal.2*)

In general, the above verse indicates the production place of all the twelve vowels. In this, ‘*Pannī ruyirum*’ denotes the twelve vowels, and ‘*Miṭarṛup pīranta vaḷiyiṇ icaikkum*’ denotes ‘the voicing cause for those vowels is the air stream from the throat (*miṭaru*)’. The part to be discussed here is about the phrase ‘*tannilai tiriyā*’. It should be in place to convey the condition of deviation in its state during vowel production.

‘The basic energy for all the vowels is given by the pulse generated at the larynx and the differences are made according to the size and shape of the oral cavity. So it is clear that basically all the vowels are nothing but the pulses generated at the larynx on the egressive airflow. All the twelve vowels [of Tamil] sounding with voice are not different as they are produced by the pulses generated at the throat.’ (Civaliṅkaṇār, Ā, 1981, xxxvi).

The above explanation is essential in realizing the reasonable meaning of this entire verse. But, with reference to commentaries and notions, the translators vary among each other in translating this specific *Nūrpā*.

Translators	Translation of the verse
P. S. Sastri	All the twelve vowels are produced by the air starting from navel and passing through the neck <u>without undergoing any modification</u> .
Ilakkuvanar	In the course of production, the twelve vowels are born by the air which finds lace in larynx.
Vaṭalūraṇār	Air in larynx produces vowels.
K. Zvelebil	In that way, all the twelve vowels, <u>without changing their quality</u> , are uttered with the air born in the throat.
D. Albert	In this way twelve vowels are produced as the air stream passes through the throat <u>without any obstruction</u> .
V. Murugan	The egressive airstream mechanism operating, <u>The flow of air unobstructed</u> Through the throat’s region Witnesses the articulation of the twelve vowels.
S. V. S	In that way all the twelve vowels <u>without changing their quality</u> , will be produced by the air stream born and passes through the throat.

Apart from these, complications in translating this specific chapter can be detected through many more nuanced approaches. While there is subtleness and difficulty in identifying articulatory organs as well as phonetic elements and distinguishing between phonological processes in the source text and commentaries that arose from them, it is natural that such difficulties exist in their translations. To translate the term ‘*Nuṇinā*’, the translator expresses his notions about the complications in it as

‘The exact interpretation of this term presents some difficulties. We have two alternatives: either to proceed in analogy with the terms in cs. 89 and 90 and translate nuṇinā as ‘the front tongue’. Or to follow the meaning of nuṇi in which case we have to interpret the term as ‘tip(ped) tongue’; i.e., ‘tip of the tongue’. nuṇi (DED 3080) and its related items (nuṇai, Ma, nuṇi) has always the meaning of ‘tip, point’, never just ‘front part’. Cf. also nuti ‘tip point’. Also, the interpretation of nuṇinā as ‘tongue tip’ agrees rather closely with the actual articulatory movements when the cacuminal/retroflex t, n are generated’ (Journal of Tamil studies, 1972, 59)

The problems inherent in such translations need to be explored. Only when examined in this way will the subtleties of translation techniques and the need for effective language skills become clear.

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