

Trying to visit a time loop, while searching for “book” inside a book about a book, with the help of early Tamil scholars

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The love of “embedded languages”,¹ such as Classical Tamil — செந்தமிழ் —, Latin, Ancient Greek, Vedic Sanskrit, is something that progressively grows on one, through practice, just like the love of music comes through the practice of music and the love of poetry comes through the practice of poetry. It creates its own reward through the mental vision expansion which it provides. An embedded language is a language which exists on top of another language with which it can historically be related or not, and some kind of mental time-sharing is performed by the concerned language users, in a manner which will only be suggested here, by providing a few snippet views. The end result



is that the group of those who have been initiated have access to another man-made universe, which is a kind of time-loop, periodically visited in the case of செந்தமிழ் by the current continuators of the activity of ancient புலவர். Inside that time loop, which is historically multi-layered, one can find some of the past creations of Tamil poets, preserved

1 I am importing the technical expression „embedded language” from the usage of the computer scientist Michael KAY, as seen on p. 39 of the 2008 book XSLT 2.0 and XPath 2.0 Programmer’s Reference (4th edition). Kay uses it for explaining the relationship between XPath, the “embedded language”, on the one hand, and XSLT or XQuery, the “host language” on the other hand. My point is that by embedding in the context of an artistic performance —or of a religious ritual— a statement in செந்தமிழ் inside a context where ordinary Tamil —as “host language”— is used, one accesses another plane of human activity, which has its own rules. And this is how the time loop, which stands outside normal time, is created.



in anthologies, some of them such as the எட்டுத் தொகை being the most ancient layer, and others such as the தேவாரம், divided into ஏழு திருமுறை, belonging to a more recent layer. One also finds texts such as the தொல்காப்பியம் —an ancient grammatical treatise centred on poetry— or such as the திவாகரம் —an ancient poetical vocabulary— which must have been progressively created as “guides” for the students who wanted to become புலவர்.

Although I was not born in Tamil Nadu or in Sri Lanka, it was the effect of my lucky star at birth that I would meet at some point with that thing of beauty which I have sometimes called the Tamil “triglossia”, where we see the native masters of ordinary Tamil diglossia (இரட்டை வழக்கு) add to that capacity the conquest of செந்தமிழ், as an effect of their untiring முயற்சி. And since that encounter took place in Tamil Nadu, from 1981 onwards, forty-four years ago, with the help of many friends and teachers, who spoke with me, read books with me, and sometimes even gave me some of their books — this has been for me the occasion for countless discoveries and an inexhaustible source of intellectual stimulations—I have thought that a good way of contributing to this magazine issue, celebrating the Jubilee of Jaffna university and its intellectual life, was to revisit the several occasions where I had received help from books prepared by Tamil scholars from Sri Lanka, such as is the case with the one whose cover appears in Figure 1, where we read the well-known name of ஆறுமுக நாவலர் (1822-1879). Similarly, I shall evoke later a book composed by another Sri Lankan Tamil scholar சீ. கணேசையர் (1878-1958)—See Figure 2.

Being born in 1956, I belong to a generation which believes in the value of physical books, although my relationship with them is probably not identical to the relationship of earlier generations, because I have seen in my lifetime the birth of the Internet and of E-mail, the rise of the PC, the appearance of the CD and its relative decline, the creation of Unicode and many other things, which make today's present.

One of the concrete consequences of my encounter with the Tamil universe is that there are several places in two countries on this continent, namely France and Germany, where I am surrounded by many Tamil books, which I have progressively accumulated in the course of 44 years, and that their number still regularly increases. I also have in many hard disks, inside folders generally identified by the string “DiBo” —for «Digital Books»— collections of .jpg, .png, .tiff and other types of image files, as well as .pdf files, which all result from the act of photographing or scanning printed books or manuscripts —they are another form of books— this operation

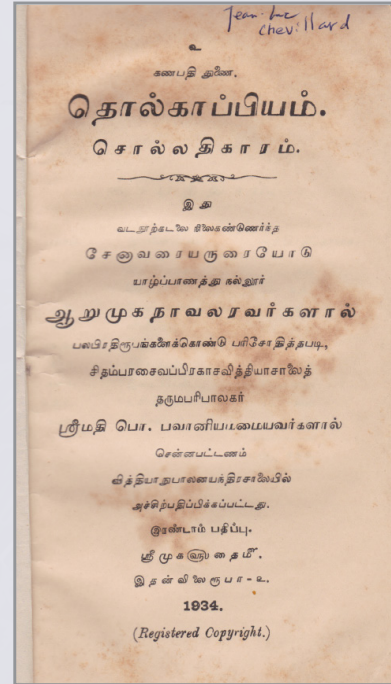


Figure 1: ஆறுமுக நாவலர் 1934 edition of சேனாவரையம்





தொல்காப்பியம் and this is why we can call it “a book about a book”. Because of that, my Ph.D. thesis also contains a complete French translation of the தொல்காப்பியம் சொல்லதிகாரம் —henceforth TC.

Let us now move forward and try to find references to புத்தகம் and to நூல் inside the சேனாவரையம், which is a text of ca. 60,000 word-forms. More precisely, those “words-forms” are the occurrences of ca. 8,000 distinct strings, which means that a sizeable share of them occur many times, whereas others are rare. Counting the words—or dictionary entries—is of course more difficult because a word such as நூல், which occurs 25 times inside the C, appears under several case forms, such as நூல், நூலை, நூலான், நூலின், etc, and the variety of forms seen is increased by the effect of sandhi rules. We shall start with the word which has the smaller number of occurrences, namely புத்தகம், which is seen three times. We are for instance told by C, when he comments on TC413, a சூத்திரம் dealing with case compounds, that the compound form சாத்தன் புத்தகம் can be glossed by the explicit form சாத்தனது புத்தகம் “The book of சாத்தன்”, where the genitive form சாத்தனது is used.

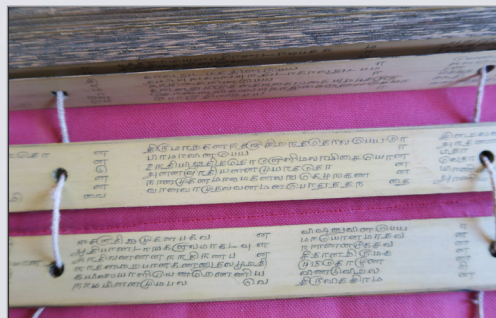


Figure 3: the நாண் controlling the leaves of a திவாகரம் MS (BnF indien 239, Paris)

After that simple example, we find inside the commentary by C to TC449, a much more sophisticated one, which involves a riddle in the form of a four-line stanza, composed in the நேரிசை வெண்பா meter. This is a riddle—or பிசி—because the poem—using உயர்திணை forms—seems to describe women but is in fact a physical description of what C reveals to be a புத்தகம் “book”, for the sake of those who would not have guessed. The poem is provided in (1), below, with a separation between metrical lines, following the presentation seen in the 1938 edition by சீ. கணேசையர்—see Figure 2—which contains many explanatory footnotes and is more bulky—145 mm by 220mm—and three times heavier—829g—than the 1934 edition mentioned before.

- (1) எழுதுவரிக் கோலத்தா ரீவார்க் குரியார்
தொழுதிமைக் கண்ணணைந்த தோட்டார்— முழுதகலா
நாணிற் செறிந்தார் நலங்கிள்ளி நாடோறும்
பேணற் கமைந்தார் பெரிது [C’s illustration for line 4 in TC449]

The reason for C to provide this verse is that he needs to provide an illustration for the fourth line in TC449. That line is provided in (2), below:

- (2) மெய்ந்நிலை மயக்கி னாஅ குநவு(ம்) “And those which occur (ஆஅகுந) on the basis of a confusion (மயக்கின்) with respect to the ontological status (மெய்ந்நிலை) [TC449, line 4]

It is not so easy to elegantly translate the poem into English because English lacks the natural distinction which Tamil makes between உயர்திணை (U) “They-U” and அஃறிணை (A) “They-A”. The expression கோலத்தார் “they-U have a beautiful configu-

ration”, which is deceptively referring to women must be mentally transformed into “they-A have a beautiful configuration” in order to be applied to a book (புத்தகம்). Of course, both the terms which specify கோலத்தார் namely வரி (“lines”) and எழுது (“which are painted/written”) can equally be applied to women and to books.

Time does not allow me to do full justice to the poem, but I must at least point out that through the passage முழுதகலா // நாணிற் செறிந்தார், where நாண் is either the “bashfulness” of women or the “string” which keeps together the leaves —see Figure 3— we recognize easily the type of “book” which is described in this poem, namely a palm-leaf manuscript.

As already indicated, I have in my library several copies of C’s commentary, but I should add to that I have also worked on palm-leaf MS, and that it is important to emphasize that the existence of printed books for many of the works of ancient Tamil literature does not suppress the need to preserve the ancient artefacts preserved in many libraries around the world. Establishing the text of those ancient works is very much a work in progress, which must be continued, and it was certainly the wish of the scholars who made the first editions, that their work would be continued and improved upon. It is however quite a challenge to read the content of a manuscript, because the writing system which we see in them is quite different from the modern writing system seen in books printed in 2025. I shall illustrate this by displaying now —see Figure 4— a facsimile² of what the poem shown in (1) would like like in a palm-leaf manuscript. The main difficulties are:

- The fact that no புள்ளி is used
- The fact that கே is not distinguished from கெ, etc, because there is only one type of கொம்பு.
- The fact that ற and ள are not distinguished from the symbol —called கால்— which distinguishes க from கா, ச from சா, etc

I must now leave the reader in the middle of the field, wondering how scholars in the past could make use of such an ambiguous system. The answer lies probably in the fact that much of their knowledge was oral, and that written knowledge was secondary to that oral knowledge. Imagining their knowledge transmission methods is a difficult but worthy challenge and it is the only way to maintain our access to the time loop in which their minds operated. “We must run as fast as we can, just to stay in place”, as Lewis Carroll once wrote.

2 I have discussed some of the arguments for making facsimile transcriptions in a presentation made in February 2024 during the கணித்தமிழ்மாநாடு 24 organized by the Tamil Virtual Academy. My presentation “For the sake of future Tamil philologists/ புத்தம்புது புலவர்களுக்காக” is available online at: <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04455964v1>

எழுதுவரிக் கொலத்தாரீவார்கு
ரியார்தொழுதிமைக்கண்ணைந
ததொட்டாரமுழுதகலாநாணிற்
செறிந்தாநலங்கிள்ளிநாடொ
றுமபெணற்கமைந்தாரபெரிது

Figure 4: Facsimile of what verse (1) would look like in a palm-leaf MS



Université de Jaffna, Sri Lanka
1974 - 2024

La Voie d'Avenir

50 ans de quête académique

Anciens Élèves de l'Université de Jaffna
France
Juin 2025





Titre du Livre
La Voie d'Avenir

Auteur | Anciens Élèves de l'Université de Jaffna, Royaume-Uni

Éditeur | UOJ France 50

Page de couverture & Conception du livre
S. Poongunran
spkunran@gmail.com

Date de publication : 08 Juin 2025

Nombre de pages | VIII+84

Imprimé au Royaume-Uni par

JR Print
61 Hoe Street, Walthamstow E17 4SA, UK
+442085036643





நூலுருவாக்கக் குழுவினர்:

சிவசிறி தங்கராஜா
அல்போன்ஸஸ் ஜொஸ்ஸி
திவ்வியநாதன் வரதராசா
புவனேந்திரன் வேல்முருகு
சுந்தரம்பிள்ளை பூங்குன்றன்
பி. எல். மனுவேற்பிள்ளை
ஹொனி மருசலீன்
லக்ஷ்மன் குலசிங்கம்
விதுஷா வசிட்டன்
கைலேந்திரா செல்வேந்திரா
நிதிராஜ் தேவராஜா

வெளியீடு:

யாழ்ப்பாணப் பல்கலைக்கழக பழைய மாணவர்கள், பிரான்ஸ்
08 யூன் 2025





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