

## TAMIL LOAN WORDS IN ENGLISH

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This essay refers to a number of English-Tamil and Tamil-English Dictionaries of the East India Company period as its source. Etymological meanings are also given for a number of Tamil words that were taken into English.

Most discussions of the subject of loanwords in connection with the Tamil language tend to be directed toward the question of words that Tamil is assumed to have borrowed from other languages. What proportion of the Tamil vocabulary, it may be asked, is not of pure Dravidian stock? In spite of the difficulty of producing an exact figure, the evidence of various sources, such as dictionaries, might be called into account. Thus it may be shown that in Winslow's Dictionary (1862), for example, 8,000 of the 22,000 primary terms are Sanskrit, or that in the Tranquebar Tamil-English Dictionary (1933) 48 per cent of the entries are non Tamil in origin. Such figures, however, can be grossly misleading for a number of reasons. In the first place, there are errors in the body of words marked as being derived from Sanskrit. For, as recent research has shown, it is in some cases more reasonable to assume the debt of Sanskrit to Tamil. Then again, calculations based on a dictionary word-count do not take note of the fact that a large number of the 'loans' occurred only in one or two isolated texts and are not, nor have ever been, in common and constant use. Farther, they take into account neither those Tamil texts, but have since passed out of use, nor those for which there is a more frequently of native Tamil words, Tamil, in fact, as Bishop Caldwell pointed out a century ago, are readily dispense with the greater part of the whole of its Sanskrit.' Though modern technical and scientific developments mean that it must open its doors to entrants from European languages, for example, it remains one that Tamil, much more than most languages which have had so frequent contact over the centuries with alien

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\* Source: *Souvenir:1972-73*, London Tamil Sangam, p.25-27

cultures, has kept as its central body of vocabulary those words which cannot be shown ever to have been imported from outside.

The same could not be said of English, which throughout its history has generally been no reluctant to accept words from other languages with which it has been in contact. The result is that, though it may sometimes seem on the surface that the proportion of Anglo-Saxon words in English is no less than the proportion of Dravidian words in Tamil, the reality is quite otherwise.

One of the very frequently tapped sources of English vocabulary is that provided by the British connection with the Indian subcontinent. Of the languages relevant to this topic, those of the Dravidian group are far from being the least important. As was shown above to be the case with Tamil, it is again not possible to establish the exact proportion of non-native words in English. If words that have at one time or another occurred in books or documents written in English are all taken into account, then the number of Dravidian words in English is exceedingly large. Thus Wilson's Glossary contains upwards of 4,000 Dravidian words, about one thousand of them being Tamil. The greater part of these, however, are plainly very specialized and from no permanent part of the English stock of words. Far more selective was *Whitworth's Dictionary*, containing nevertheless over 400 Dravidian words, more than one third of them being Tamil. A number of these, too, must be considered obsolete, and the great *Oxford English Dictionary* (in common with the more recent *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*) includes only about sixty words of which the etymology is definitely Tamil. This number, however, is plainly in no sense insignificant.

Most of the Indian words that are found in current English entered into it after the establishment of the East India Company. But English does share with Tamil a few words that came to it by the route of classical European languages. Though it is plainly not possible to affirm that they were borrowed directly from Tamil by Greek or Latin, the parallels are perhaps worth nothing in the case of 'rice' and (ÜKC), 'ginger' and (P...C).

It has been suggested that the origin of the latter word is Malayalam, though it is doubtful whether we can usefully distinguish between a Tamil and a Malayalam source for words borrowed 2,000 years ago. Even for loans of the last two or three centuries, it is not always possible to say with certainty from which of the Dravidian languages a word passed of the Dravidian languages a word passed into English. Thus 'fanam' (đí), 'olla' (æ-ô), 'chuckler' (ê,AL), 'poonga'

(*fè*), 'teak' («î,ḡ) might have come from either Tamil or Malayalam. Similarly, 'tope' («îĤŠ'), 'chatty' (ê†®), 'pollam', 'Poligar' (ðĤ-ḡ÷ò, ðĤ-ḡ÷ò,èĤó) could, equally well be tracked back to Telugu.

Similar difficulties occur with a small number of words which have north-Indian affinities. Such words are 'Cot', (è†®™) for which a Hindù derivation is just as reasonable, and 'coolie' (short for ĀĤ,èĤó or ĀĤ) which could, though far less plausibly, be traced to various non- Tamil sources.

A further problem arises as to whether words reached English directly from Tamil, or indirectly through Portuguese. Fairly certain examples of the indirect route are 'Mango' (ñĤfèĤĤ), 'betel' (²ðŸP-ò) and 'teak'. In the same way 'cheroot' (²¼†) reached English by way of French.

Other words of very doubtful origin have been hesitantly traced back to Tamil for want of any more satisfactory etymology. The best known of these is 'anaconda' applied originally to a very large and terrible snake of Ceylon, but now to a South American variety, or even to any large snake that crushes its prey. Because a nineteenth century story told of a snake so large that it could crush an elephant, the name has been said to come from (Ÿ-ù²èĤjø) an explanation which lacks nothing in ingenuity.

By contrast, a considerable number of words unquestionably came into English directly from Tamil. Among these it is appropriate to note first of all the word 'Tamil' itself. 'Dravidian' might have come to English from Sanskrit, and in any case the word in its present form must be considered to be a Tamil borrowing from Sanskrit. In origin, however, it is most probably a Sanskrit adaptation of the word (FóĤMi).

Other proper names that should not be forgotten are the numerous south Indian place- names which have passed into use in English, being adapted to the process. Here it is not without interest that the abbreviated English form sometimes finds its way back into Tamil. Thus 'Ooty' leads to á†® leads to and, Pondy to ðĤ†® to ( a considerable change from ¹Ĥ,«êĤ). One town gave its name in English to an object made there, so that a 'Trichi' (short form of Trichinopoly) was a cigar made in that town. Though there seems some uncertainty about the true derivation of some geographical names, such as that of 'Coromandel' Coast, the Tamil «êĤöñ†ìò is certainly the best explanation that has been offered.

Of the common nouns that Tamil gave to English, those referring to food figure high on the first. 'Curry' (èP) is a word well – known throughout western Europe. The English version of namely, 'mulligatawny' soup (l-° iṭa~) is still quite widely appreciated, as is 'popadam' which may have some connection with (ÜŠđ÷) Similarly the less well-known 'hopper' probably comes from ÜŠđ. 'Conjee' (è...C) is less familiar than it used to be, but the word is worthy of note because of its extended use as a verb meaning 'to starch with rich water.' 'Tyre' (iJ) is probably unknown to people without Indian back ground. Among fodder for animals is 'poonac' (†í£,ḡ).

A few products of plants and shrubs have Tamil names in English. They include 'patchouli' (đ,C-ô), 'yercum' (â¼,ḡ), 'chay' (ê£ò).

It is inevitable that the English resident in India should adopt the native words for coins and local weights and measures, and a large number from Tamil occur in writings in English. The best known coins were 'fanam' 'cash' and (è£²). Weight include 'viss' (i-ê) and 'candy' (è†®) in the same realm is the grain – measure 'mercal' (ñó,è£™) and the land- measure 'cawney' (è£E).

Contact with a new civilization means contact with unfamiliar social groupings and occupations, and so led to the taking over of terms to describe them. 'Poligar' 'chuckler' and 'coolie' have already been mentioned. Other names of social or religious groups are 'modeliar' (°iLò£) and 'pandaram' (đ†i£ó). Among occupation are 'conicopoly' (èí,ŠHœ÷) and 'thoty' («î£†®). Though the meaning of these English words may not in all cases correspond exactly to that of the Tamil original, their use is largely restricted to Indian context.

Most of the other words that English has borrowed from Tamil do not admit of too ready a classification. With 'tope' we might group 'shola' («ê£-ô). 'Anicut' (Ü-í,è†) and 'chunam' (²†í) are little known, though the latter is interesting as another case of a verb being formed in addition to the noun borrowed to chunam'. 'Pandal' (đ%ôî™) adds nothing to the Tamil meaning, but 'Catamaram' (è†'ñó) has travelled far. Originally applied to the rafts used for fishing of the coast of south India, used in the St. Lawrence River of Canada. Now, along with the abbreviated form 'cat', the word is having a new lease of life to designate a type of twin-hulled sailing boat that is becoming increasingly popular in Britain and Australia. More recently the word 'catamaran' had led to the coining of 'trimaran' for a three- hulled cost.

As was noted above, the list of words contained in this essay is far from exhaustive, but it is enough to show that among the languages to which English owes the Tamil holds a significant place, among the speakers, it is true, consciously use quiet number of English words. English frequently return the compliment by using at least a small number of Tamil words more often that not without knowing it, even though a fair proportion of the words which are likely to be found only in Indian context, a certain number is the property of specialists whose knowledge of Tamilnadu may be fair. One important fact has therefore been certainly illustrated, namely that linguistic borrowing is always a two way affair. A language that gives of its stock to another is almost certain to take some words back in return.

One other feature not yet mentioned is that over half the loan-words, discussed here were taken over in the late 16th and in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the flow apparently is much slower for 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century perhaps we may hope to see an interruption in the traffic in the 20<sup>th</sup>, for we in west are again beginning to realise the importance of Asian culture. If we take interest in the civilization, ideas achievements of the peoples of the East shall once again find ourselves borrowing new words. And as always throughout history, we can assume that Tamil will have much to offer.

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