The Morphophonology of Tamil Pronouns: A solution to a locality problem

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Take-home message: To account for the Tamil pronominal paradigm we need to examine the phonology and the morphosyntactic structure of both the Tamil pronominal and verbal systems. Importantly, paying close attention to the phonology of Tamil solves a significant problem in the morpho-syntactic literature. (Data from Annamalai & Steever 1998; Schiffman 1999; Subrahmanyam 1967/1968). **An autosegmental analysis:** To account for the variations in the Tamil pronominal paradigm we need to note/propose two things. (A) Final sonorant consonants are floating (as in French liaison). They will only be pronounced as onsets to following vowels. E.g. *naal* 'day': [naal~~ɻ~~] or [naa]. Final nasals will nasalize a preceding vowel if not pronounced as an onset. E.g. *maram* 'tree': [marõ]. (B) Tamil has a phonological reflex triggered by word minimality. If a word is mono-syllabic a CV/σ may be inserted (note that the epenthetic vowel 'saves' the final C in *naal* but not in longer words like *maram*). Floating segments and the insertion of a CV for sub-minimal words will be crucial below. **The data:** The pronominal base alternates in the 1st and 2nd person in Tamil (not the 3rd. See Harley & Ritter 2002 for the relevant morphosyntactic distinctions). Nominative bases are distinct from bases in all other Cases.

(1) a. Nominative: (i) 1sg. [nã:~~n~~-Ø] (ii) 1pl. [na:ŋ-kaɭ-Ø]
b. Accusative: (i) 1sg. [en:-ai] (ii) 1pl. [eŋ-kaɭ-ai] (and other Cases)

(2) a. Nominative: (i) 1sg. [ni:-Ø] (ii) 1pl. [ni:-ŋkaɭ-Ø]
b. Accusative: (i) 1sg. [un:-ai] (ii) 1pl. [uŋ-kaɭ-ai] (and other Cases)

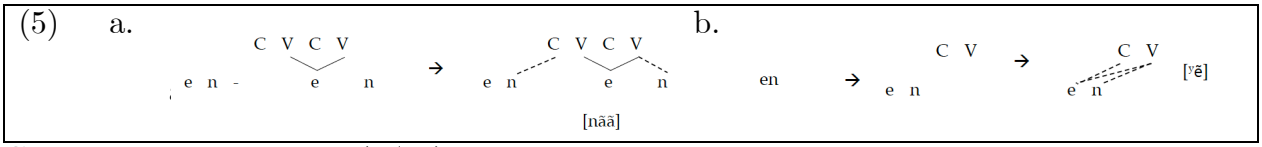
Allomorphy and Locality: The standard assumption is that morphemes need to be adjacent in the syntactic structure in order to condition allomorphy. E.g. *go* → *went* when local to *PAST* (*I went*), but not across an intervening negator (*I did not go*). Importantly, the Tamil evidence in (1) has been proposed to be the best evidence morphologists have for non-local allomorphy; allomorphy conditioned across an intervener, here the plural morpheme. The analysis of (1) in Smith et al. (2019) necessitates a serious complication of the theory of allomorphy to account for this non-local conditioning of the form of the base. This complication is proposed here to be an error. **Two parts to the solution:** The above pattern is argued here to not be allomorphy, but phonology. ***Morphosyntax:*** The root in (1ai) is proposed to be bi-morphemic. *V:n/V:* is the shape of 1st/2nd person agreement in the verbal system (*iru-kur-een* : be located-PRES-1sg 'I am located', *poo-v-ii-ngaɭ* go-fut-2sg.pl 'You will go'). Distinctions in vowel quality in the verbal and nominal systems are to be discussed in the talk. ***Phonology:*** The pronominal bases are 1sg *en* and 2sg *on*; the segments in these forms are floating. There is agreement morphology on the Nominative pronouns but not in the other cases. (3/4) demonstrates this difference:

(3) a. en 'D.1SG.OBLIQUE' [ʸẽ] 'my'
b. en-a:n 'D.1SG-AGR' [nã:] 'I'

(4) a. on 'D.2SG.OBLIQUE' [ʷõ] 'your'
b. on-i: 'D.2SG-AGR' [ni:] 'you'

The onglides in (3/4a) are part of the regular phonology of Tamil. The agreement suffixes come with linked CV structure. The oblique pronouns, lacking any underlying CV structure, are augmented with a CV due to minimality (to be discussed further in the talk). This gives us the following derivations of (3b/5a) and (3a/5b):

(5) a. b.



Conclusion: The data in (1/2a) are more complex than presumed in the analysis of Smith et al. The phonological shape of the agreement morphemes determines the variation seen in the base (*en/n, on/n*). This complete morpho-phonological analysis relieves the problem that arises in the morpho-syntactic literature: there is no allomorphy here, and therefore no problem for locality. In sum, without an understanding of the phonology of the language, morpho-syntactic analyses may encounter serious problems.

References

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