

Sound-words in Old Tamil.

Synopsis

It's not unusual for a language to have different nouns denoting different sounds and different verbs for the production of different sounds. There may be several reasons for the multiplicity of these nouns and verbs. Some variables that trigger such multiplicity can be identified as (a) sounds produced by human beings, (b) sounds produced by birds/animals, (c) sounds produced by mammals, (d) sounds produced by musical instruments, and so on. A few examples may be drawn from English. The English language has nouns such as sound, noise, voice, roar, howl, cry, call, shout, and so on. As for the verbs denoting the production of various sounds, the examples are as follows:

a man/woman/child	talks
an elephant	trumpets
a cow	moos
a dog	barks
a goose	honks
a trumpet	blows
a bird	chirps

We also find verbs that are common:

a woman/man/child	sings
a bird	sings
people	cry
animals	cry

Another factor to be considered is the fact that a source (human, animals, neuter objects) may produce more than one type of sound.

people	talk, sing, cry
cows	moo, bellow
drums	blare, beat

It is interesting to note that there are distinct words to denote each type of sound. A study of these words might reveal something about the language that uses such words and about the culture and world-view of the people that speak that language.

This paper attempts to study how Old Tamil (as reflected in the Cankam texts) describes various types of sounds and sound sources, and employs the verbs associated with the sounds.

Some examples follow.

Sources of sounds: minstrels, warriors, people, elephant, cow, tiger, deer, bear, peacock, thunder, drum

Outcome of a sound: song, echo, speech, bustle, blabber, prattle, cooing, cawing, scream

Sound verbs: to roar, to echo, to bustle, to thunder, to bark, to scream

To check again and verify: There are approximately 45~48 distinct sounds words, and more than 85 distinct sound verbs in Old Tamil. The number of sound-sources go beyond 80. Thus, it is obvious that there is no one-to-one correspondence between sound sources and the sounds that they produce.

Sound-verbs in old Tamil can be semantically categorized as follows:

sound-verbs meaning "to call, summon, invite, ..."
sound-verbs meaning "to announce, declare, state, ..."
sound-verbs expressing an "excited noise"
sound-verbs that are specific to specific sound-sources
...
...
...

Each category contains more than one sound-verb. For example, the verbs அகவும், கூப்பிடும், கூஉம், பயிரும், விளிக்கும், அழைக்கும் all share a common feature namely "to call/summon someone/something." However, they differ in their nuances. Different attributes such as the loudness, duration, frequency, mood, distance that the sound travels, ... and so on seem to play a role in the choice of their usage.

Although the sounds described by the words attested in poetry cannot be "heard" today, their poetic contexts may throw light into their different attributes. And, a perception of different attributes seems to be the deciding factor for the multiplicity of sound words in Old Tamil.