

## Deverbal Nominal Derivation in Tamil

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Deverbal nominal derivation in Tamil is described in missionary grammars as a way of forming “verbal nouns” from verb roots (Arden 1942:219-27). Such analyses lead one to believe that the various processes described are productive and predictable in the language. This study will attempt to show that the ways Tamil has of forming nouns from verbs are theoretically productive, and exhibit a certain amount of regularity, but in actuality are less regular and less predictable than they are in theory, since they form part of the morphology of Tamil that is essentially *derivational*. As most linguists recognize, derivational morphology, that part of grammar that provides ways to change one ‘part of speech’ into another, seems universally to be inherently unpredictable and unproductive.

### **Review of Literature.**

The most complete statement we have about the formation of deverbal nouns is in Arden 1942. On the subject of the fixity or gradience of morphological categories, Ross 1972 introduces the notion of degrees of ‘nouniness’ and ‘verbiness’ while Anderson 1974 refers to the gradience of these categories as ‘fuzzy.’ Steviade (1997) raises a number of issues about noun formation in a number of languages, but does not address the issue of deverbal nominalizations. Heyvert

deals with the issue of deverbal nominalization in English, emphasizing a functional approach. Rajendran 2001 considers two types of processes—one set that are less productive, and a second set that deals more with the kind of morphology we are dealing with here. He notes that ”nominalization by the second set of suffixes is productive and the nominals derived by these suffixes are rich resources from which derivative nouns can be obtained by the process of semantic lexicalization. It has been noted also that there are suffixes among the first set which are productive if we can condition them by conjugation class, and/or phonological environments and/or syllabic patterns.” I will argue, however, that though the ‘second set’ are theoretically productive, they are not in practice as productive as they seem, or as Arden and others describe them.

**This study.** This study will attempt to show that for Tamil, the derivational processes in question are based morphologically on roots that resemble various tense-markers of the verb, and exhibit a scale of ‘noun-iness’, i.e. the scale of past-present-infinitive-future bases correlates with a scale of less ‘noun-iness’ (and more ‘verb-iness’) to more ‘noun-iness’ (and less ‘verb-iness’). ‘Noun-iness’ and ‘verb-iness’ are defined<sup>1</sup> according to whether a constituent is constrained by the rules of nominal or verbal syntax, respectively. Nounier verbal nouns are semantically more abstract; verbier verbal nouns are semantically less abstract and can exhibit more of the morphology of verbs, such as being marked

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<sup>1</sup>Ross, in his 1972 paper, introduced the notion that the categories of ‘parts of speech’ are not as clearly-defined as some have claimed, and suggested that lexical items can be arranged in a kind of continuum from ‘nounier’ to ‘less nounier’, etc. He also referred to this phenomenon as ‘squishy’ but this term is now less favored. But see also Anderson 1974, who uses the term ‘fuzzy’ data.

with tense morphemes. The most verby (and least nouny) of these derivational processes are shown to be the most productive and regular, with the scale of productivity and regularity declining as they become more nouny in morphology and syntax.

Arden (1942:219) states that there are five kinds of verbal nouns; within each of the first four there are subsets dependent on whether the verb from which they are derived is weak or strong.<sup>2</sup>

Before proceeding it is necessary to note that before discussing verbal nouns, Arden made a distinction between verbal nouns and what he calls ‘participial nouns’, (p. 224 ff.) which are pronominalized deverbal adjectives. That is, adjectival participles (marked for any of the three tenses) may be prefixed to pronouns; when the pronoun has an animate antecedent, the meaning is ‘he who (verbs)’, e.g. *ceykiravan* ‘one who does.’ When the pronoun is neuter, e.g. *ceykiratu*, the meaning can range from ‘that which does (something)’ to ‘the act of doing (something)’ to ‘the fact of doing (something)’. These neuter participial nouns may be the subjects or objects of sentences, may be marked for various cases, and as noted, for all tenses. Arden notes that they “are frequently used as Verbal Nouns expressing the action of the Verb as in present, past or future time.” (Arden 1942:219). Later he includes these participial nouns as a fifth kind of verbal noun, since they may be used as Verbal Nouns. But it is clear that they are morphologically quite different from the other four kinds, and are

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<sup>2</sup>Actually, Arden states that the conditioning factor is whether the verb takes *-kkir-* or *-kir-* as a present tense marker, which is the criterion for the establishment of ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ verbs.

more clearly verbal than the others. I would also note that this type is perhaps more common in the spoken language than in the Literary language; certainly it has broader functions in spoken than in Literary, although it does not replace the other four kinds of Verbal Nouns, especially those that are ‘nounier.’

Arden does not state that the four kinds of verbal noun formation show a strong phonological resemblance to the tense markers of canonically weak and strong verbs; the first kind he describes, that is verbal nouns in *-tal-* and *-ttal-* (or *-kkutal*), look like they may be formed on the past tense stem of Verb classes I and VI<sup>3</sup>. The second type, verbal nouns in *-kai* and *-kkai*, resemble of course the weak and strong present-tense markers mentioned previously; actually, they resemble even more closely the *infinitives* of certain weak and strong verbs, e.g. *pooka* ‘to go’ (verbal noun *pookai*) and *keetka* ‘to ask’ (verbal noun *keetkai*).

Arden does state that the third kind of verbal noun formation, those in *-al*, are formed by attaching this morpheme to the infinitive. He also notes that this form is usually used only with [the modal auxiliary] *aam*, the equivalent of English ‘may, might’, e.g. *irukkal-aam* ‘someone may be’, *varal-aam* ‘s.o. may come’. In the modern language one would have a difficult time demonstrating that there is an independent morpheme *-al* in such forms; since verbal nouns such as *irukkal* now rarely occur except with *aam* attached, I analyze these as being the infinitive *irukka* plus a modal with the form *-laam*. The morpheme boundary may be historically justified, but on synchronic grounds cannot be

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<sup>3</sup>These classes are those referred to by Arden and others as ‘Dr. Graul’s classification.’

upheld.

The fourth type of verbal noun, those in *-ppu* and *-vu*, closely resemble the FUTURE formatives of strong and weak verbs, e.g. *paṭippeen* ‘I will study’ (verbal noun *paṭippu* ‘studies, education’) and *varuveen* ‘I will come’ (verbal noun *varavu* ‘arrival, income, advent’).<sup>4</sup> There are a number of other ways to form verbal nouns in Tamil, but for reasons that can only be guessed at, Arden did not choose to discuss them.<sup>5</sup> Arden probably chose to describe these four kinds of verbal nouns, and not others, because they SEEM to be quite regular and productive in the language, and because their morphology is easy to describe (i.e., can be shown to be closely related to the formation of weak and strong present tense markers.)

In theory, of course, these four types are quite regular, and one could easily generate a complete set of these nouns from all the verbs in the lexicon, and native speakers of Tamil would accept them all (which would not be the case if one were to randomly generate verbal nouns based on the morphemes given in endnote 3.) The problem with the theoretical productivity of these four types is that there is a scale of abstractness of the nouns so generated, and as the more

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<sup>4</sup>But note that the weak form is not as close to the future formation as the strong form is, because it is *varavu* rather than *varuvu*, making it look like it is either formed on the infinitive, or must be analyzed as stem plus *-avu*.

<sup>5</sup>A short list might include *-ccal*, as in *kaayccal* ‘fever’ from *kaay* ‘be dry, burn’; *cci* as in *vaḷarcci* ‘growth’ from *vaḷar* ‘grow’; *-ttu* (or *-ccu*), as in *eṟuttu* ‘letter, character’ from *eṟutu* ‘write’ and *peeccu* ‘speech’ from *peecu* ‘speak’; *-ttai*, as in *naḷattai* ‘conduct’ from *naḷa* ‘walk, run’, and *-ti*, as in *amaiti* ‘calmness, peace’ from *amai* ‘become settled, quiet, or *ceyti* ‘deed’ from *cey* ‘do’. There is also the regular formation of deverbal nouns from class III verbs such as *tuunku* ‘sleep’ which involves replacing the velar nasal by another homorganic stop, e.g. *tuukkam* ‘sleep’, *vaṇanku* ‘be submissive, be obeisant’ *vaṇakkam* ‘submission, obeisance’ (now used as a form of greeting replacing *namaskāram*, etc.

abstract end of the scale is reached (that being those of the fourth type, with labial consonants), there is a tendency for these to have a life of their own, and a semantic field of their own that may be somewhat independent of the meaning of the original verb.

This question of how to deal with nominalizations has of course been one that has concerned transformational grammarians to a certain extent, and one that raised one of the first serious challenges to Chomsky's theories by dissident students of his such as Ross, Lakoff, and McCawley. The controversy became known as the 'Lexicalists versus the Transformationalists' and had to do with the question of whether nominalizations could all be generated by transformational rules, or whether some (or all) nominalizations were already LEXICALIZED and had to therefore be listed in the lexicon (or dictionary) of the language. The question was also one of how abstract a grammar could be; Chomsky held to a lesser degree of abstraction, while his opponents, known curiously as the 'transformationalists', argued for a more abstract grammar, with many things derived by transformation rather than given independent status in the lexicon. The controversy ranged quite widely over other areas of grammar, and each found strong evidence for their own position in one or more areas of syntax, but usually neglected to admit that in other areas their arguments were weaker. Partisans of each viewpoint claimed victory for their theory in the areas that strengthened their arguments, ignoring those areas where their evidence was weak. Nominalization was a topic in which the lexicalists had the stronger

defences, and although I personally was originally in the other camp (i.e. among the Transformationalists, also known eventually as generative semantics), one can not fail to see that the Tamil evidence also gives credence to the arguments of the lexicalists.

There is clearly a scale of abstractness (or ‘verbiness’ to ‘nouniness’) in this area of deverbal noun formation, and as Arden points out, the type near the ‘verby’ end of the scale do act more like verbs: Type (a) may, like verbs, have both a subject and an object; type (b) is most often used to express time, i.e. ‘in the time of (verb)-ing’, and may be marked for locative (for time) or instrumental (to express cause or reason). This type may have a subject but the ‘strong’ ones (in *-kkai*) (which are usually from transitive verbs), do not (says Arden) and ‘are treated as pure nouns.’ (Arden 1942:222). Type (c) is closer to the verbal end of the scale in that it usually has a subject, especially when used with *-laam* (or, if you prefer, *-aam*), as in *nii uurukkup pookalaam* ‘you may go to town.’ Arden states that this type is sometimes used as a pure noun, but does not give examples. In fact this is rare. This may be a case of a type that has lost some of its nouniness, and is retreating toward the verbal end of the continuum as the *-laam* morpheme is becoming grammaticalized as a modal verb, as I claim.

A gap in the abstractness scale seems to exist between the above three and the last type, type (d), which are formed with labial consonants and closely resemble the future formatives of strong and weak verbs. As Arden states,

“These nouns are only names for the action; they have no verbal force, they cannot govern other words, they are pure nouns.”

The fact that members of this type have become lexicalized as nouns is demonstrated by the following observations:

- These nouns tend to function only as subjects of sentences; if marked for case, their meaning is less abstract than if not so marked. They begin life in the sentence as nouns, rather than undergoing some transformation from a verbal element.
- Many of these nouns have verbal roots that are less frequent than the derived noun; in spoken Tamil many of the nouns are frequent while the verbs are not used at all in spoken. In Literary Tamil, for example, *cel* ‘go’ is a verb that is often used in a rarified or pundit style, and the nominalization *celavu* means ‘outgo’ or ‘expense’. *selavu* is also used in Spoken Tamil with this meaning, but *cel* as a verb is not. Therefore one would be hard pressed to try to derive *selavu* from the verb *cel* by a transformation, since the latter is simply unknown.
- Certain type (d) formatives, while relatable to existing verbs, show some mysterious deviance from what one would expect if the process of deriving them were totally regular. The verb *paar* ‘see’, is a strong verb of the class VI, and a (d) type nominalization ought to give us *\*paarppu* to mean something like ‘sight’ or ‘view’. Instead, we get *paarvai* (‘sight, view,



vista’), which looks like it should be derived from a WEAK verb. Many verbs in Tamil have weak and strong correlates, but *paar* does not. Does this mean that historically there was once a weak verb *paar*, from which the form *paarvai* is derived? The dictionaries list no such form, but the question remains valid.

The problems with the regularity hypothesis increase as we reach the more abstract level of nominalizations, i.e. as nouns become lexicalized. A glance in any dictionary reveals that for any verb in the language, a number of possible forms may be listed (or perhaps none are given, meaning nothing has become lexicalized), but the semantic range of the given forms is often not what one would expect. When a word like *varavu* can have a range of meanings such as ‘income’, ‘advent’, and ‘arrival’, but in actual use means only ‘income’, then some other form has to be found to express the meanings of ‘advent’, and ‘arrival’.

This is of course a dilemma that faces many languages, and the solution is to utilize some other process or device. In Tamil one can resort to the 5th type (type e), the very productive participial noun formation that also functions as a verbal noun. But there is also some life in the 5th (mixed bag) type, those that are supposedly not very productive or regular, as evidenced in two different attempts to nominalize the verb *kaṇi* ‘calculate, compute’, to derive a word for ‘computer’. One of these attempts arrived at *kaṇini* (this was the version derived in Tamilnadu), and the other attempt, in Malaysia, produced *kaṇippori*.

This last is a compound of *kaṇi* plus *pori* ‘machine’, while the former is *kaṇi* plus *ni*, a formative that is not widely used (and is rather difficult to define). It (the derivation in *ni*) is the one gaining the most currency, while a derivation based on the type 4/d *kaṇippu* is what is used as the basis of other computer terminology, e.g. ‘computer science’ is *kaṇippiyal*, *kaṇippu* ‘computation’ plus *iyal* ‘science.’ Tamil is still groping with ways to standardize this kind of process of lexicalization that will permit the most logical derivation of a number of terms, not just one. Obviously *kaṇini* works well for ‘computer’ but not for ‘computer science,’ since *iyal* grafted onto *kaṇini* would give \*ka3i2iyiyal \**kaṇiniyiyal*, which is too many [i] vowels for most mouths. Obviously derivational processes have to yield agreeable forms or they will not be accepted. This is perhaps one explanation for why the regularity of this particular derivational process cannot be relied on to help us predict the outcome of new forms, and is another reason why derivational processes are so irregular.

## References

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