

UNIVERSITÀ DI NAPOLI L'ORIENTALE
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n.s. 48

For the Love of Tamil:

Essays in Honor of E. Annamalai

a cura di
Margherita Trento, Constantine V. Nakassis
N. Govindarajan, and Sascha Ebeling



Napoli
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E. Annamalai and his life-companion Nageswari (1940-2025) stand in front of a map of the world they traveled together.

Introduction:
For the Love of Tamil

Margherita Trento and Constantine V. Nakassis

Elayaperumal Annamalai (b. 1938) is the pre-eminent Tamil linguist of his generation, with an illustrious career spanning four continents and six decades. He has held positions at the Central Institute of Indian Languages in Mysore, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies in Japan, the Max Planck Institute in Germany and the University of Leiden's International Institute of Asian Studies, the University of Melbourne in Australia, and Yale University and the University of Chicago in the United States. He arrived at Chicago first as a Ph.D. student and Tamil instructor in 1966, and then returned, nearly five decades later, as a Visiting Professor of Tamil, the position from which he officially retired in 2021. Despite retirement, his life as a scholar continues on just as vigorously: ever the teacher and curious intellectual, he continues to read, write and publish, participate in conferences and workshops, and travel the world to engage discussions in and about Tamil.

Professor Annamalai's academic career began in Tamil Nadu in the early 1960s. He graduated with a master's degree in Tamil Language and Literature from Annamalai University (1960), where he worked with the renowned doyen of Tamil linguistics T. P. Meenakshisundaram (1901–1980), after which he began teaching Tamil at his alma mater. Inspired by his encounter with

disciplinary linguistics and the emergent generativist paradigm, Annamalai seized upon the chance invitation to teach Tamil at the University of Chicago that came from none other than the eminent linguist and folklorist A. K. Ramanujan (1929–1993)—but only on the condition that he also be able to matriculate in the Ph.D. program in Linguistics at the University. Focusing on the syntax of Tamil adjectival clauses, under the supervision of James MacCawley, Annamalai completed his dissertation in 1969 (which was published in 1997 as *Adjectival Clauses in Tamil*). It was at this time as well that Annamalai began his career as a teacher of Tamil as a second language, developing the famous “Jim and Raja” conversations, together with his University of Chicago colleague James Lindholm (1940–2020). Upon completing his Ph.D., Annamalai went on to the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL) in Mysore in 1971, where he remained until 1996, retiring as its director. From there, he took visiting positions at Tokyo University and the University of Leiden, followed by longer stints in the U.S., first to start up the Tamil program, alongside Bernard Bate (1960–2016), at Yale University, and then, after his former colleague and collaborator Jim Lindholm retired, to teach Tamil at the University of Chicago, from 2010 until 2021.

These different phases of his career correspond to Professor Annamalai’s kaleidoscope of interests in all things linguistic and all things Tamil. Like all great linguists, Annamalai’s research encompasses every aspect of language (“general linguistics” as it is sometimes called), from formal structures, as reflected in his dissertation and later work on Tamil syntax and semantics, to the social and political aspects of language. The latter aspect took on importance in his work as the Director of CIIL, where he focused on minoritized South Asian languages, processes of endangerment and revitalization, and language pedagogy. Annamalai continued his reflection on language pedagogy as an instructor of Tamil at Yale University and the University of Chicago, where he also began to focus more and more on Tamil poetics and literature. This element of his research was both what Annamalai began with as a master’s student in India and what he eventually returned to, becoming a teacher and exegete of the long Tamil literary tradition to students and faculty alike at the University of Chicago, from the Sangam period to medieval works to modern literature.

There is no topic of Tamil that Annamalai's scholarly curiosity and intellectual acumen have not touched on.

This career path resulted in a resolutely cosmopolitan thinker, but one firmly rooted in his Tamil and Indian identity and education. Indeed, before he became a professional linguist, he was a student in 1960s Tamil Nadu, a period of intense political unrest and emerging political pride in the Tamil language and identity. It was the height of the Dravidian Movement. Following Independence and the 1956 States Reorganization Act, during the 1960s the political vanguard of the so-called Dravidian Movement—the DMK party—swept the Indian National Congress out of power in the newly formed state of Tamil Nadu, taking control of the Secretariat in 1967. A long-emerging political force, the Dravidian Movement in the 1960s captured the consciousness of a whole generation and much of its energy was invested in the question of language, particularly in shoring up the place of Tamil, in the nation, the region, and the hearts of its speakers. This took form in many ways, but most visibly in the anti-Hindi protests that exploded on college campuses across Tamil Nadu. January of 1965—the year when Annamalai took his master's degree—witnessed mass student protests on the campus of Annamalai University, one key epicenter of the unrest. A witness and participant to these transformative political movements, the anti-Hindi protests of the Dravidian movement left a deep impression on the young linguist-to-be, as it did on many of his generation.

It was in this context that Annamalai's interest and love for Tamil developed in many directions. While the academic study of the language would be his lifelong mission, he also experimented with poetry, and in the early 1960s some of his compositions were published in the literary magazine *Eluttu* edited by Ci. Cu. Cellappā (1912–1998), one of the protagonists of the “new poetry” (*putukkavitai*) movement in Tamil. As was typical of this movement, Annamalai experimented with free verse and new themes drawn from the everyday lives of people who had little representation in classical Tamil poetry. A taste for realism and the ethical concerns of representation always remained with him in his aesthetic and intellectual predilections, be it in literature or cinema. From the million Tamil films he could choose for his classrooms, for

example, he often used Balu Mahendra's rather somber 1988 *Vīṭu* ("House") to teach second-year Tamil students in Chicago. He also retained a fondness for writing poetry, as shown by his New Year poems in Tamil and English, which he shares via email with students, colleagues, and friends. His wife and lifelong companion of adventure, Nageswari (1940-2025), shared with him the joy of reading and writing about the world in Tamil and is a well-known author of nonfiction books in Tamil Nadu.

Perhaps as a result of his simultaneous rootedness and cosmopolitanism, it is with a certain love, pride, and attachment to Tamil that Annamalai approaches the language, as generations of students and colleagues can attest. It is also with curiosity, openness, and spirit of discovery—his knowledge gleaned through a lifetime of immersion in the seas of the Tamil language—that Annamalai approaches and teaches Tamil, as a language, a culture, and a way of being in the world. One result of this is that, as a scholar of the science of language, Annamalai has taken an ecumenical, if nonconformist, view of Tamil, one that led him to see certain limitations of the Dravidian ideological vision for a scientific approach to language. This is evident in his publications on issues of language purism and language ideology, and in his pedagogical publications and teaching style, always with a focus on colloquial Tamil, the language as it is spoken and used by everyday speakers. Exposure to different scientific approaches (at Chicago), different languages (at the CIIL, in his travels in Asia, North America, and Europe), different language ideologies, and different types of language learners (American political scientists and anthropologists in search of colloquial Tamil for their field research; Sanskritists seeking to understand premodern language contact; heritage language learners hoping to reclaim their "mother tongue"), have forged a scholar deeply passionate and committed to the Tamil language in all its facets, without ever succumbing to the chauvinism that can sometimes be found in the Tamil political landscape. In Annamalai's research and teaching, Tamil is many faceted: written and spoken, literary and colloquial, it is structure, practice, and culture, a political object and a medium of knowledge, and it is always embedded in all its complex and dialogic relations, with other Dravidian languages, with the Indo-Aryan languages of South Asia, and with English.

All this has meant a commitment to understanding Tamil as it *is* (and could be), not only to “correct” literary registers or purified styles, not only focused on a glorious past but on the wondrous, diverse fabric of Tamil as a living, breathing medium of thought, social relationality, and aesthetic beauty. In this, Annamalai perhaps stands out as something of a heterodox figure; but if so, this is what makes him special and what has made his scholarship—in its great diversity, from Chomskian generativism to anthropological views of the social life of language, from practical pedagogical primers to profound philological hermeneutics—stand the test of time.

The chapters

The chapters that follow hope to live up to this diversity, with contributions ranging from Tamil syntax and poetics to cinematic analysis, from the premodern to the medieval and the modern, and from disciplines that reflect all of Annamalai’s own scholarship: literature, linguistics, history, and anthropology.

The first section of the book (“Literature, Language Encounters, and Poetic Form”) gathers contributions on Tamil literature and its frontiers, both linguistic and geographical. It opens with an essay by David Shulman on a Tamil version of Kalidāsa’s *Raghuvamśa* composed in sixteenth-century Sri Lanka, which honors Annamalai’s lifelong engagement with Sri Lankan Tamil, a variety of the language for which he has recently prepared course materials for its teaching. The section continues with an essay by George Hart on a selection of ancient poems of the Sangam corpus and continues with a chapter by Jackson Cyril on the many lives of the famous Tamil ethical treatise, the *Tirukkural*, through its commentaries. Talia Ariav’s contribution investigates the boundary between text and performance, and the interplay of Sanskrit and Tamil in Maratha Thanjavur, while N. Govindarajan’s chapter is situated at another frontier. A study of an early modern poem by a Dalit woman, Govindarajan excavates a kind of voice we do not get to hear often in classical literature. The last two chapters of this section deal with two topics that have also been at the center of Annamalai’s own reflections over many decades, namely the “Pure Tamil” movement (Jesse Pruitt), and the history of the Tamil grammatical tradition (Victor D’Avella), in this

case through a close reading of the Tamil translation of Daṇḍin's Sanskrit compendium on poetics.

D'Avella's essay also marks the transition to the second section of the book, "Linguistics, Grammar, and the Social Life of Language." This section includes essays on the linguistic analysis of a number of different varieties of Tamil and other South Asian languages. It opens with a chapter by Eva Wilden on class-changing verbs in the classical corpus of Sangam literature. The next two chapters return to topics that were central to Annamalai's Ph.D. research: clausal and interclausal syntax. Sanford Steever revisits the topic of Annamalai's dissertation on adjectival clauses in Tamil and explores the unique syntactic properties among complement clauses (in particular, the adnominal form that Steever calls, after Annamalai, the Complement Adjectival Clause) that, while initially identified in Annamalai's thesis, have since failed to be properly differentiated and worked out by later linguists. While Steever's paper branches out from Tamil to the wider Dravidian language family (with comparisons with Kota, Toda, Kannada, Telugu, Parji, and Kurux), Probal Dasgupta's chapter shifts focus to the Indo-Aryan language Bangla. With intriguing parallels to Tamil, Dasgupta's analysis of complementization explores the distinct syntactic properties, specifically of omission, in the Bangla complementizers *je* and *bole* (akin to "that" in English, *enru* in Tamil). K. Rangan's chapter returns to the Tamil grammatical tradition. Rangan examines the ancient Tamil grammar *Tolkāppiyam* to determine its views on what linguists today call *pragmatics*, focusing on the categories of *valu* (error) and *valuvamaiti* (the sanctioned deviation from a grammatical rule). With Vasu Renganathan's chapter we move from ancient Tamil grammar to modern Tamil linguistics. The chapter studies the phonological phenomenon of lenition in different varieties of Tamil diglossia, arguing for lenition as a key factor in Tamil grammatical changes from the ancient to the medieval period. Both these chapters dovetail with Annamalai's own research on the *Tolkāppiyam* and on Tamil diglossia. The final chapter of this section, by Rama Kant Agnihotri, is a reflection on multilingualism and its politics in India more generally, a theme that is an undercurrent in many papers in the volume as well as a recurring topic in Annamalai's own scholarly work.

The third section of this book (“Culture, History, and Social Meaning”) takes up themes from the previous sections (e.g., literature, language, society) from anthropological and historical perspectives. It opens with a study by Jean-Luc Chevillard on missionary lexicography at the boundary between linguistics and the history of science. In a similar vein, but at a different disciplinary boundary—between sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology—Cristina Muru analyzes the language of a tribal group in the Nilgiris, the Paniyas. The following chapter by Swarnavel Eswaran and Constantine V. Nakassis explores the richness of “double meaning” in modern Tamil cinema, while the next chapter, by Sascha Ebeling, examines how representations of the controversial figure of the Devadasi in early Tamil cinema can be traced back to nineteenth-century Tamil drama. With the following essay by Justin Henry, we travel once again to Sri Lanka, to examine the way in which Tamil language and literature and their long history on the island have left important echoes in Buddhist Sinhala literature. Margherita Trento’s chapter focuses on religious Śaiva prose literature, in order to map changes in education and reading practices in precolonial Tamil Nadu, while the final chapter of this section, by Whitney Cox, reflects on the history of Buddhism in the region, and its early disappearance, by analyzing poems, inscriptions, and sculptures.

As one might expect for a proper *Festschrift*, the fourth and final section of this volume contains short essays of a more personal nature. Through their contributions, Dennis McGilvray, Robert Phillipson, and Margherita Trento provide a glimpse of what it is like to see Annamalai’s critical mind and erudition in action, as a colleague and a student, to think with him and to be inspired by the breadth and depth of his vision.

In a way, the essays gathered here demonstrate that it takes at least twenty different types of scholars to reflect the breadth and depth of Annamalai’s research over sixty years. While his work has traversed disciplines and historical periods, it has always remained firmly grounded in the Tamil language, using it as a lens to explore our being in the world in and through language. This volume honors and expresses our deep affection and gratitude for Professor Annamalai. He has been to all of us at different times a teacher, colleague, friend, *aṇṇan*, and *aiyā*, and we have all learned at his feet. But if the contributions gathered

here are meant to honor the work Annamalai *has done*, they are also meant to honor the work he will *yet* offer us in return. We look forward to many future conversations, rubies and pearls on the garland of Tamil, and gifts from one of the greatest Tamil scholars of our time.

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