FUNCTIONAL STABILITY IN LANGUAGE CHANGE:
THE EVOLUTION OF TENSE AND ASPECT IN TAMIL*

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the question of whether tense markers in Modern Tamil were historically aspectual in function, as Zvelebil (1962) has claimed. The methodological approach employed is that developed by Hopper (1979a, 1979b, 1982) for the analysis of foreground and background in narrative discourse. Narrative texts representing three historical periods — Old Tamil (5th c.), Middle Tamil (12th c.), and Modern Tamil (20th c.) — are analyzed for correlations between foreground-background marking and the distribution of alleged 'tense' forms. On the basis of the grounding analysis, it is discovered that the forms function aspectually in Old Tamil, analogous to the functioning of aspectual auxiliary verbs in the modern language. The overall diachronic picture which emerges is one in which surface forms and categories undergo change, while underlying functional contrasts remain remarkably stable over time.

1. Introduction

There is a great deal that we will probably never know about the history of even the best-documented language; our reliance on the evidence of written texts insures that our knowledge of, say, everyday conversation in any far-distant time can only be speculative at best. Nevertheless, historical linguists have shown themselves willing to draw on advances in other areas of linguistics and to apply new methods to diachronic analysis, with encouraging results: syntactic reconstruction has derived new impetus from generative theory, and historical semantics has been significantly enriched in recent years by the influence of cognitive and metaphorical approaches to meaning. There is hope that we may go further yet, beyond individual lexemes and sentence patterns to the meanings and structures of discourse,

and to a consideration of how these latter change. The methods of such inquiry stem logically, it would seem, from the developing field of discourse analysis.

The investigation presented here pilots such an approach. In an attempt to shed new light on the hitherto unsolved problem of whether Old Tamil had aspect or tense, I employ a methodology which focuses on discourse functions rather than verbal forms. In addition to providing compelling evidence in favor of the aspect interpretation, the "historical discourse" method uncovers an intriguing fact; namely, that the functional system encoded by Tamil tense/aspect forms has remained remarkably stable over time, even as the forms themselves change meaning and are lost and replaced.[1] Diachronic Tamil evidence spanning fifteen centuries suggests that the functional system serves as a "template" or "blueprint" for the language, determining in rough outline form the number and nature of contrasts to be encoded, irrespective for the most part of the structure and meaning of the actual forms involved. The discovery of a functional template has important implications for the development of tense and aspect in Tamil, and for an understanding of language change (and nonchange) more generally. In what follows, I describe the Tamil tense/aspect problem and develop an analysis based on discourse analytic methods. In concluding, I explore the implications of the methodology and its results, pointing out both strengths and limitations of a historical discourse approach.

2. Tamil tense/aspect: an unsolved problem

Tamil, a Dravidian language currently spoken by some 60 million people in South India and in parts of Sri Lanka and Malaysia, is an ancient language which rivals Sanskrit in the richness and time-depth of its attested literary records. As such, it constitutes a valuable resource for diachronic analysis. Until recent times, published research on Old Dravidian focused primarily on phonology and morphology (see for example Andronov 1969; Emeneau 1967; Meenakshisundaran 1965; Subrahmanyam 1971). More recently, however, scholars have begun to explore the meanings and functions of older forms, and have found themselves drawn to the verbal system, and especially, to the expression of tense and aspect (Herring 1985, Forthcoming; Rajam 1985; Steever 1984, 1989).

The reason for this interest is not difficult to ascertain: Tamil has undergone striking changes in tense and aspect in the more than two thousand years of its attested history. Modern Tamil has three simple tense forms, Old Tamil had only two.[2] Modern Tamil has a productive system of aspectual auxiliary verbs, Old Tamil had none.[3] The questions that have been raised naturally focus on the genesis of the new distinctions: what were the lexical or grammatical sources of the aspects and the third tense; what meanings did they originally encode, and how did they attain their present productive status?

The meanings of the two older tenses, in contrast, are generally not called into question. The Modern Tamil "past" and "future" tense morphemes preserve the allomorphic variants of the Old Tamil "past" and "non-past" forms,[4] and the meanings of the two sets of forms are assumed to be correspondingly similar. The single exception is that the Old Tamil "non-past" form is thought originally to have referred to both present and future/habitual time, subsequently narrowing in meaning to future/habitual time reference as a consequence of the introduction of the present tense form.

However, Zvelebil (1962) has proposed a rather different interpretation, which is that the two forms originally expressed not tense but aspect:

> The opposition of tenses in the system of Early Old Tamil seems to have been "perfective past versus imperfective future" which indicates perhaps a primary aspectual (and not temporal) dichotomy. (Zvelebil 1962: 15)

To anyone who has worked extensively with Old Tamil texts, this suggestion has intuitive appeal. Yet surprisingly, it has never been empirically investigated.[5]

Part of the problem, of course, is how to distinguish between the closely related categories of tense and aspect in a language variety for which there are no living speakers to whom diagnostic sentence pairs can be submitted for judgments of semantic contrast. We are entirely dependent on textual evidence, much of it poetic and highly conventionalized in nature. It is here that we may productively employ the methodology of discourse analysis, which focuses on textual structures and the functions of individual forms within those larger structures.[6]

3. Aspect and "grounding"

The particular methodology employed in this study derives from the work of Paul Hopper (1979a, 1979b, 1982) on **grounding**. Hopper analyzed literary narratives from a sampling of languages (French, Russian, Malay), observing that all evidenced an underlying binary structure. Drawing on a distinction from Gestalt psychology, he termed the sequence of plot-line events the "foreground", and the description of ongoing states or processes the "background" of the narrative. In each language, a strong correlation was found to exist between foreground events and grammatical marking via **perfective aspect** on the one hand, and background situations and **imperfective aspect** on the other. These and other correlations associated with the contrast are summarized in Table 1.

Since the publication of Hopper's seminal work, similar correlations have been noted by other researchers for a variety of languages (Andreason (1981) for written Chinese folk tales; Rafferty (1982) for spoken Indonesian; Chvany (1984) for written Russian folk tales; Fleischman (1985, 1986, 1990) for medieval French epics and contemporary spoken French; Sims

Table 1: Aspect and grounding (adapted from Hopper 1979a:61)

PERFECTIVE	IMPERFECTIVE
Strict chronological sequencing	Simultaneity or chronological overlapping of situation C with event A and/or B.
View of event as a whole, whose completion is a necessary prerequisite to a subsequent event	View of a situation or happening whose completion is not a necessary prerequisite to a subsequent happening
Identity of subject within each discrete episode	Frequent changes of subject
Dynamic, kinetic events	Static, descriptive situations
Foregrounding. Event indispensible to narrative	Backgrounding. State or situation necessary for understanding motives, attitudes, etc.

(1986) for spoken Ketengban (Irian Jaya); Herring (1988, 1991) for contemporary spoken Tamil). The results of these studies show that the correlation between grounding and aspect extends to a variety of narrative types, spoken and written, conversational and epic, contemporary and medieval.

There is thus broad-based cross-linguistic evidence that grammatical aspect exhibits distinctive distributional properties in narrative discourse. Applying this knowledge to the analysis of the Old Tamil "tense" forms leads to the following prediction: If the forms originally indicated not tense but aspect, as Zvelebil claims, then their distribution in narrative discourse should, all other things being equal, reflect grounding functions.

4. The investigation

In order to test this prediction, narrative texts were analyzed from three periods in Tamil history: Old Tamil (*Cilappatikāram*; verse epic, 5th c. A.D.), Middle Tamil (*Kamparāmāyaṇam*; verse epic, 12th c. A.D.), and Modern Tamil (19 contemporary oral narratives, including professionally-performed epics and elicited retellings of epics). While it might be objected that the modern and the ancient data are not comparable, on the grounds that the former are oral and the latter written, this disparity is more apparent than real. First, as noted above, the correlation between aspect and grounding is not restricted to either the spoken or written language; rather, it is characteristic of both modalities. Nor can a distinct line be drawn between "oral" and "written" in Tamil epic narratives. The Old Tamil epic *Cilappatikāram* may well have been originally oral in composition, the product of a bardic tradition (Zvelebil 1990b). And Modern Tamil oral epics are closer to their classical literary sources than are contempary written narratives, which have been heavily influenced by Western novelistic conventions. More relevant than the oral/written distinction, therefore, is the fact that the texts in all three time periods form part of a continuous narrative tradition.

For each time period, the data contain complete narrative sequences, that is, stories with a beginning, a middle, and an end. The Old Tamil sample includes the entire core narrative sequence of the *Cilappatikāram* epic (1336 lines of text).[7] The Middle Tamil sample includes two complete episodes (1076 total lines of text) from the longer, multi-episodic *Kamparāmāyaṇam*.[8] Finally, the 19 oral narratives are either complete tales or complete episodes within larger epic performances (3314 lines of transcribed text). A total of 5726 lines of text was analyzed in all.

The initial procedure followed was to identify all finite verbs, that is, all verbal forms overtly marked with person-number-gender and "tense" suffixes (in Modern Tamil, "aspect" is optionally marked by means of verbal auxiliaries as well). In light of the controversy surrounding the meanings of the tense/aspect forms in the earlier stages of the language, I henceforth adopt the practice of referring to them by idealized morphological representations, rather than by functional labels. Thus -T- represents the morpheme (and its allomorphs -t-, -tt-, -nt-, -iṇ-, etc.) traditionally labelled "past tense" in both Old and Modern Tamil, -P- (allomorphs -p-, -pp-, -v-, -um-, etc.) the "future tense" in Modern Tamil and the so-called "non-past tense" in Old Tamil, and -KINR- (-(k)kiṇṛ-, -(k)kiṛ-) the "present tense" form in Modern and Middle Tamil. Of the aspectual auxiliaries in Modern Tamil, -VITU- signals "perfective", -KONTIRU- "continuative", and IRU "perfect" aspect.[9] Table 2 shows the relative frequency of finite verbal forms at each of the three historical stages.[10]

5. Old Tamil

Even the most cursory examination of Table 2 reveals that there has been an increase in the number of verbal categories marked on the finite verb from the Old to the Modern period. Old Tamil had the choice between two forms, -T- and -P-, while Modern Tamil boasts a repertoire of 12 (three simple tenses plus each of three compound aspects multiplied by three

Table 2: Frequency of finite verbal forms in Tamil narrative

	Old Tamil Cilappatikāram			Middle Tamil Kambarāmāyaṇam			Modern Tamil Oral narratives		
total lines of text	1336			1076			3314		
total finite verbs	129		1:10.4	271		1:4.0	1395		1:2.4
	N	%	per line	N	%	per line	N	%	per line
T	102	79.1	1:13	241	88.9	1:5	516	37.0	1:6
P	27	20.9	1:50	28	10.3	1:38	145	10.4	1:23
KINR	0			2	.7	1:500	639	45.8	1:5
VITU	0			0			239	17.1	1:14
KONTIRU	0			0			74	5.3	1:46
IRU	0			1	.4	1:1000	116	8.3	1:29

tenses, or $3 + (3 \times 3) = 12$). One might be tempted to conclude from this that Old Tamil lacked the formal means for expressing functional distinctions available in the modern language. However, a concurrent development partially mitigates such a view. The Tamil language has seen a significant increase over time in the frequency of finite verbal forms: while Modern Tamil narrative has one finite form per 2.4 lines (clauses) of transcribed text, finite forms in Old Tamil are rarer, occurring on the average only once per 10.4 lines.[11] A consequence of this is that large amounts of narrative information in Old Tamil — both foreground and background — are conveyed through non-finite medial forms, the majority of which lack tense indications. Consider, for example, the sequence of non-finite forms in (1), a description of a scene in which a young couple prepares to attend a festival:[12]

(1) **poykait** tāmaraip puḷ vāy **pulampa** vaikaṛai
pond   lotus   bird aloud lament:INF daybreak

yāmam vāraṇam **kāṭṭa** veḷḷi viḷakkam naḷ
time rooster show:INF moon illumination thick

iruḷ **kuṭiyat** tār aṇi mārpaṇōṭu
darkness dispel:INF garland adorn chested-one:with

pěr aṇi **aṇintu** vāṇa vaṇkaiyaṇ
great jewel wear:CP cloud munificent:handed-one

attari ēṛa māṇ amar nōkkiyum vaiyam ēṛik
mule climb:INF deer like glance-one:and ox-cart climb:CP

'As water fowl **lamented** aloud among the pond lotuses, as the rooster **signalled** the dawn, and as the illumination from the moon **dispelled** the thick darkness, she, **having put on** great jewels [in order to accompany] him whose chest was adorned with garlands, and as he whose hands were like munificent clouds **mounted** his mule, she of the deer-like glance, **having climbed into** her ox-cart...'

All of the verbs in this segment of text are non-finite forms, i.e. infinitives (INF) and conjunctive participles (CP). Nevertheless, the literal translation attempted above seems awkward, in that it belies our intuition that a series of discrete events are involved ('She put on her jewels; he mounted his mule; she climbed into her ox-cart'). Modern Tamil, which maintains a closer one-to-one correspondence between events and finite verbs, would be

likely to employ several finite forms in rendering the above passage, including one or more marked for imperfective aspect (e.g. to describe the background wailing of the water fowl and crowing of the rooster). The lack of finite forms in Old Tamil should not be taken to mean that the situations thus described are not viewed as sequential events, however, nor indeed that a distinction is not being drawn between "background" and "foreground" in non-finite verbal clauses, e.g. with infinitives signalling ongoing activities, and conjunctive participles signalling events in sequence.[13]

Because of their rarity, the finite verbs that do appear in the *Cilappatikāram* are stylistically salient. The majority of these are marked with -T- (79.1%), as compared with 20.9% marked with -P-. There is a regular functional pattern to the distribution of finite forms in the Old Tamil data: -T- encodes sequential, foreground events that are especially crucial to the narrative plot progression, while -P- selectively encodes a variety of background situations. These functions are considered separately below.

Finite -T- forms in the *Cilappatikāram* serve primarily to highlight core narrative events, or the primary foreground of the narrative. The following example relates a sequence of dynamic actions at the dramatic peak of the *Cilappatikāram* story:

(2) *Kallāk   kaḷimakaṇ   oruvaṇ,   kaiyil*
     learn:NEG:AjP intoxicated:one one:person hand:LOC

     veḷvāḷ   eṟi-nt-aṇaṇ!   vilaṅkūṭu   aṟu-tt-atu;
     new:sword   throw:T:3SG.M across:through cut:T:3SG.N

     puṇṇumiḷ   kuruti poḷintuṭaṇ   parappa,
     wound:spit blood stream:down:CP:with   expand:INF

     maṇṇaka maṭantai vāṇtuyar kūrak   kāvalaṇ
     earth   woman   great:grief be:copious:INF king

     ceṅkōl   vaḷaiīya,   vīḻ-nt-aṇaṇ. kōvalaṇ   paṇṭai
     sceptre bend:INF   fall:T:3SG.M Kovalan   ancient

     ūḷviṇai   uruttu-   eṇ.
     deed:karma take:form:CP Ø

'[Then] a drunken, uneducated fellow **thrust** with the new sword in his hand! It **cut** clean through [Kovalan's body]. The grief of the earth goddess was immense as blood spitting from the wound streamed down and spread. The karma from

his past deeds taking form, Kovalan **fell**, causing the sceptre of the king to bend.'

This passage describes the murder of the heroine's husband, Kovalan, by the king's soldiers. Kovalan's murder constitutes, in many respects, the pivotal event of the plot structure; as a consequence of his unjust death, the king's honor is destroyed, the city burns, and Kannaki, his wife, is ultimately deified. In keeping with the special significance of the events narrated, there is a clustering of finite, "foregrounding" -T- forms — **thrust**, **cut**, **fell**.

Past forms are also found with sequential events which, to modern Western sensibilities, appear to be secondary in importance to the plot development, but which have special ritual or cultural significance. For example, clusterings of finite forms are found in relating ritual aspects of Kannaki and Kovalan's wedding:

(3) *avvaḷi,   muracu iyamp-iṇ-a   muruṭu atir-nt-aṇa*
     that:way drum   sound:T:3PL.N drum   vibrate:T:3PL.N

     muṟai eḻa-nt-aṇa   paṇilam veṇkuṭai   aracu
     in:order rise:T:3PL.N conch   white:parasol king

     eḷantatu or paṭi   eḻa-nt-aṇa   akaluḷ
     set:forth:T:VN one manner sound:T:3PL.N sky:in

     maṅkala aṇi   eḻa-nt-atu
     auspicious instrument sound:T:3SG.N

'Following that, large drums **boomed**; small drums **vibrated**; white parasols **rose** in order; and conches **sounded** as if the king were setting forth; the auspicious instrument **sounded** in the skies.'

In this passage, one recognizes, even fifteen centuries later, the characteristics of a traditional South Indian wedding ceremony: the exuberant sounding of drums and horns, the use of parasols or canopies to protect participants from the heat of the tropical sun, the wedding procession. The events encoded by finite past forms — **boomed**, **vibrated**, **rose**, **sounded** — , although individually minor, constitute a ritual sequence which taken as a whole, represents the single — and narratively significant — event of the wedding. A similar usage is found in the description of a dance performance that bewitches Kovalan into abandoning his young wife to take up residence with the dancer. Rather than a single finite -T- verb to relate the

event of the dance performance, its ritual aspects (including the sounding of the appropriate instruments) are narrated in a sequence of finite -T-forms. Omens interjected into the narrative sequence constitute further examples of events "foregrounded" for reasons of cultural significance.

A test for foregrounding employed by narrative discourse analysts (Longacre 1976; Fleischman 1986; Herring 1988) is to consider in isolation only those clauses which contain the hypothesized foreground marker; such clauses often trace in rough outline form the basic plot or "primary event sequence" (Labov and Waletzky 1967). The results of this test are particularly revealing for a lengthy epic such as the *Cilappatikāram*, which has relatively few "foregrounded" clauses. Extracting only those clauses containing a finite verb marked by -T- from the first *kāntam* ('book') of the epic produces the following summary:

(4) a. Kovalan and Kannaki's parents **decided** to marry them off.
     b. They **proclaimed** the wedding.
     c. (The wedding took place — ritual sequence.)
     d. Serving women **lifted** Kannaki onto the auspicious (wedding) bed.
     e. A few years **passed**.
     f. (Madavi put on a dance performance — ritual sequence)
     g. Madavi **received** a reward from the king.
     h. Kovalan **fell** under her spell.
     i. He **conceived** the desire never to leave her.
     j. Madavi's left eye (a bad omen) and Kannaki's right eye (a good omen) **twitched**.
     k. Madavi **asked** Kovalan if they could go watch the festivities at the seashore.
     l. Madavi and Kovalan **sat down** (at the seashore).
     m. Kovalan (having become disenchanted with Madavi) **left** her.
     n. Madavi **returned** to her house alone.
     o. Kannaki's serving maid **announced** that Kovalan was at the door.
     p. Kovalan and Kannaki **set out** for the city of Madurai (to start a new life).

Although lacking in important background information pertaining to characterization, motives, etc., the above sequence constitutes a relatively complete summary of the plot-line events, lacking only the events of Kova-

lan taking up residence with the dancer Madavi, and the misunderstanding at the seashore which led to his ultimate disenchantment with her. It is also remarkably free from extraneous or secondary events, particularly once the culturally-foregrounded events in lines (c), (f), and (j) are understood in their proper perspective. This test supports the claim that the -T- form was a selective foregrounding device in Old Tamil.

What, then, of the use of -P-? The very existence of "non-past" forms in past time narration suggests a discourse, rather than a temporal, function. Indeed, the distribution of -P- forms complements that of -T- forms in encoding functions associated with narrative **background**, and correspondingly, with aspectual **imperfectivity**. The majority of finite -P- forms represent situations as incomplete, ongoing, or otherwise temporally unbounded. A smaller percentage has as its function the expression of habitual activities and events. Finally, the remaining uses precede quoted material or introduce narrative events. Generalizing, we may state that the function of -P- is to provide descriptive information as a backdrop or lead-in to the narrative event sequence. Example (5), which introduces a new character into the narrative, contains two instances of finite -P-:

(5) *Purañcirai mūtūrp pūñkan iyakkikkup*
     outskirts old:town flower:eye Iyakki:DAT

     *pālmatai   kotuttup panpin   **peyar-v-ōl**,*
     milk:boiled:rice give:CP   suitability:LOC return:P:3SG.F

     āyar   mutumakal, mātari en-p-ōl,
     cowherd old:woman Matari be:called:P:3SG.F

     'An old cowherd woman **is returning** home as usual after offering milk and boiled rice to the goddess Iyakki on the outskirts of the old town. She **is called** Matari.'[14]

The situation described by the first finite verb, **is returning**, is a background activity which is in progress at the time that the old woman encounters Kannaki and Kovalan. The second finite verb, **is called**, must be construed as describing a state (i.e. 'her name is ...') with non-specific temporal reference. Many of the uses of -P- are associated with participant identification and description of this sort. That is, finite -P- forms are used selectively to encode "important" features of the narrative background (participant identification), just as finite -T- forms highlight the most "important" features of the narrative foreground (event sequence).

Another characteristic use of -P- in *Cilappatikāram* is to introduce quotes. In Modern Tamil, a verb-final language, the verb of saying generally follows the quoted material. In Old Tamil, both QUOTE-V and V-QUOTE orders occur freely; however, a pattern may be noted according to which the verb that embeds the quote is in the -T- form if the verb follows, but in the -P- form if the verb of saying precedes the quote. Why are postposed quotes introduced by -P-? The quote need not be of particular narrative significance, although it tends to be lengthy. Such usage appears to be part of a more general "build-up" or "introductory" function of the -P- form, which, in keeping with its other imperfective qualities, signals a temporally open-ended situation; it generates the inference that there is "more to come".

To sum up thus far, discourse-based analysis reveals evidence of grounding in Old Tamil texts. The -T- form was used to highlight sequential events of the narrative foreground (including rituals and omens, which are culturally foregrounded), and the -P- form was used to highlight ongoing activities and states of the narrative background, as well as in a more general introductory function. In these uses, the two forms behave in a manner that is consistent with the interpretation that they are aspectually perfective and imperfective, respectively. The analysis thus provides support for Zvelebil's (1962) view that the forms were originally aspectual in meaning.

Assuming that this conclusion is valid, we are left to account for how Tamil evolved from a two-way aspectual system to the twelve-way tense + aspect system of the modern language. The key to understanding this evolution lies in an examination of Middle Tamil.

6. Middle Tamil

A glance at the first and center columns of Table 2 reveals a number of differences between the distribution of finite forms in Old and Middle Tamil. The Middle Tamil epic, *Kamparāmāyaṇam*, contains a significantly greater proportion of finite forms: one in four lines of text has a finite verb, as compared with fewer than one in ten in the *Cilappatikāram*. There is also a new morphological formation — -KINR- — which appears several times in finite form.[15] Despite the availability of a greater selection of forms, -T- predominates more than ever, accounting for nearly 90% of all finite verbs. What functions do the three Middle Tamil finite forms fulfill?

There is some evidence that a foreground/background distinction is still signalled by simple finite forms in Middle Tamil, with -P- and -KINR- together expressing the imperfective, background component of the contrast. The functional value of the emergent form -KINR- can be discerned by considering both finite and non-finite uses. In the narrative episodes analyzed, -KINR- expresses ongoing situations which are both **in progress** at the time of (i.e. temporally overlapping with) some other event or situation, and which can be viewed as **persisting** over time.

(6)   *īr aiññūṟu irākkatarkaḷ vaṇ   toḷilāl   **tuyil-kiṉr-a***
        2 500   demons   strong skill:INSTR   sleep:KINR:AjP

        maṇṇavaṇ taṇ māṭu   aṇuki,
        king   his nearness approach:CP

        '1000 demons approached the **sleeping** king, and using all their strength...'

In this passage, the demon king has been sleeping for years; attempts to wake him extend over 52 lines of text, and hence the 'sleeping' is encoded as a persistent activity.

In the following example, after a lengthy description (encoded by -T-forms) of the dejected behavior of another demon king, we are given an explanation of his persistent condition in the -KINR-form:

(7)   *cāṇaki   nakuval   eṉṟē   nāṇattāl*
        Janaka:F mock:P:3SG.F thus:CP:EMPH shame:INSTR

        cāmpu-kiṉr-āṇ.
        wither:KINR:3SG.M

        ['He's not ashamed thinking that the sky would mock him, the earth would mock him, all the enemies that he mocked before would mock him. Rather,] **he's cringing** with shame at the thought that Janaka's daughter would mock him.'

The -P- form, in contrast, preserves a more general backgrounding function, which includes the expression of background **states** and **habitual** activities or events. Examples of these two backgrounding types are given in (8) and (9) below:

(8)   *Viṇṇiṇai   iṭar-um   mōli   vicumpiṇai niṟaikk-um*
        heaven:ACC break:P:3SG.N diadem sky:ACC   fill:P:3SG.N

mēṇi kaṇṇeṇum avai iraṇṭuñ kaṭalkaḷiṇ periya
body eyes:thus they two:and oceans:like large

vāk-um
become:P:3SG.N

'[Kumbakarna's] diadem **scrapes** the heavens; his body **fills**
the sky; his eyes **are** as large as two oceans.'

The -P- forms here describe the (relatively permanent) physical attributes of
the demon. Note, too, the other "background" features of the passage, in
accordance with Hopper's functional dichotomy given in Table 1: static,
descriptive situations, and frequent changes of subject from clause to
clause.

In example (9) below, -P- describes the demon's habitual behavior:

(9)   *corinta   cōri   taṇ vāy   varat*
       flow:down:T:AjP blood his mouth come:INF

       tūñku-v-āṇ.
       sleep:P:3SG.M

       'He **sleeps** with blood dripping down from his mouth (i.e.
       from the raw meat he has eaten).'

The habitual 'sleeping' here contrasts with the progressive 'sleeping'
(encoded by -KINR-) in example (6) above.

Finally, -P- is also used to introduce quoted material, as in Old Tamil.
The quote thus introduced may be closed or bounded by a following -T-
form, a strategy which exploits the imperfective value of the former, and
the perfective value of the latter:

(10)   *mā   muni paṇi-pp-āṇ: "mā iru vicumpiṇ kankai*
       great sage say:P:3SG.M great vast sky:OBL Ganges

       maṇmicaik koṇarntōṇ   mainta! (...) akalikai
       earth:on   bring:T:PN:3SG.M son   (...) Akalikai

       āk-um"   eṇ-ṛ-āṇ.
       be:P:3SG.N say:T:3SG.M

       '[in answer to the question: "Who is this woman?"] The great
       sage **says**: "O son of he who brought the Ganges to earth
       from the great vast sky! (...) She is Akalikai," he **said**.'

Despite the variety of background functions mentioned above, however,
explicit backgrounding in the Kamparāmāyaṇam is rare — -P- and -KINR-
forms together account for only 11% of all finite verbs, and they are
encountered, on the average, only once in every 50 lines of text.

One cannot read far, on the other hand, without encountering a finite
-T- form. Given the frequency of such forms, it is predictable that they
would lose some of their evaluative impact, and indeed, not all -T- marked
events are of primary significance to the development of the narrative plot.
For example, the passage below recounts a sequence in which a demon king
gives an order and it is obeyed.

(11)   *'Naṇṛu   itu karumam' eṇṇā, 'nampiyai naṇuka*
       good:thing this deed   say:CP our:lord approach:INF

       ōṭi   ceṇṛu ivaṭ ṭarutir'   eṇ-ṛ-āṇ;   eṇṛalum
       run:CP go:CP here give:P:2PL say:T:3SG.M say:as:soon:as

       nālver   ceṇ-ṛ-ār; teṇṛicaik   kiḷavaṇ tūtar
       four:people go:T:3PL south:direction lord   messengers

       tēṭiṇar   tirivar   eṇṇa kuṇṛiṇum
       search:T:PN:3PL wander:P:PN:3PL like mountain:like:and

       uyarnta   tōḷāṇ   koṛṛamāk kōyil
       be:high:T:AjP shoulder:PN:3SG.M victory:great palace

       puk-k-ār.
       enter:T:3PL

       'Having said, "This is a good idea", [the demon king] **said**
       "Go run and approach our lord [Kumbakarna] and bring him
       here". As soon as he said that, the four men **went off**. Like
       the messengers of Death (lit. the lord of the southern direc-
       tion) who search and wander, they **entered** the great victori-
       ous palace of the one with shoulders higher than mountains.'

The events of the king's servants taking leave and going where he sent them
are routine, predictable, and of no special significance to the plot develop-
ment in this episode. Nor do they appear to be culturally foregrounded in
any sense. The use of -T- here simply signals discrete, past-time events in
sequence, without regard to their narrative significance. Moreover, if we
isolate all finite -T- clauses for the episode as a whole, applying the "fore-
grounding" test described above for Old Tamil, the result is not a concise

summary of the plot, but rather a long and somewhat tedious list including many secondary events.

Further evidence that -T- has ceased to be purely a foregrounding device in Middle Tamil comes from instances where the association of the form with "events" — as opposed to "activities" or "states" — breaks down. This is illustrated in the passage below, which describes the departure of the boy Rama with the ascetic Vishvamitra to kill demons in the forest:

(12) a. *Mēl aṭutta   vēḷvi   pōy   muṭittum   nām'eṉā,*
          on   proceed:T:AjP sacrifice go:CP finish:T:1PL we   say:CP

          naṭattal mēy-iṉ-āṉ,   navaikkaṇ nīṅkiṉāṉ.
          walk:VN start:T:3SG.M misery   remove:T:PN:3SG.M

       'Saying "We'll go and finish the ongoing ritual sacrifice", he **began** the walk, he who was removed from misery (=Vishvamitra).'

     b. *Veṉṟi vāḷ   puṭai vicittu, meymai pōl eṉṟum*
         victory sword side bind:CP truth like thus:T:AjP

         tēyv-   uṟāt   tūṇi yāttu, iru
         diminuation: experience:NEG:CP quiver bind:CP two

         oṉṟu tāṅk-iṉ-āṉ — ulakam tāṅk-iṉ-ā-ṉ.
         one bear:T:3SG.M world bear:T:3SG.M

       Having fastened his victorious sword at his waist, and having tied on his quiver which, like truth, never empties, [Rama] **carried** a victorious bow on his high shoulders which were like two mountains — he **carried** the world.

     c. [...] *coṉṉa   mā   tavaṉ toṭarntu, cāyai pōl,*
             say:T:AjP great ascetic follow:CP shadow like

         poṉṉiṉ mā nakarp puricai   nīṅk-iṉ-āṉ.
         gold:OBL great town surrounding:wall leave:T:3SG.M

       [...] Following the (above-)mentioned great ascetic like a shadow, he **left** the outer wall of the great golden city (behind).'

The -T- verbs in lines (a) and (c) encode discrete sequential events. The verb **carried**, however, repeated twice in line (b), expresses a situation which is logically contemporaneous with the events in (a) and (c) — that is, Rama is understood as carrying the bow throughout. In the Old Tamil system, a background clause of this type would be encoded by -P- or by means of a non-finite form, i.e. to contrast it with the event sequence. In Middle Tamil, the same finite -T- form is used for clauses of both types; as a consequence, the functional contrast between events and non-events is partially neutralized. In general, the -T- form during this period appears to be on its way to becoming the base form of narration, a function conventionally associated with past tense (Fleischman 1990; Herring 1985). These extensions in the use of -T- foreshadow the more extreme changes to the tense-aspect system attested in Modern Tamil.

7. Modern Tamil

Modern Tamil differs from the earlier stages of the language in three basic respects. First, the frequency of finite verbs has continued to rise: as Table 2 shows, 1 out of 2.4 lines, or nearly half of all lines of text, contains a finite verb, each of which (with the exception of a few invariant forms) is formally marked for tense (-T- "past", -P- "future", or -KINR- "present"). Second, -KINR- has replaced -T- as the most popular narrative tense, a change which reflects the growing use of the "historical present" as the base tense of narration for story types such as folk tales and plot summaries (Herring 1985; 1991). Finally, and most significantly for the purposes of this investigation, Modern Tamil makes regular use of three compound auxiliary constructions — -VITU-, -KONTIRU-, and -IRU- — to express the aspectual notions "perfective", "continuative", and "perfect", respectively. When such auxiliaries are used, tense is obligatorily encoded on the verb; there are no restrictions on any tense co-occurring with any aspect. It would seem, then, that Modern Tamil has resolved the tense/aspect tension characteristic of the earlier stages of the language by creating two formally distinct categories: simple suffixation on the verb for tense, and compound (verb + auxiliary) constructions for aspect.

Functionally speaking, however, there is evidence that the change has not yet carried through to completion. The use of simple finite forms still reveals traces of a binary grounding contrast, the only difference being that -KINR-, rather than -P-, now represents the imperfective, background

member of the contrast. In the following passage, taken from a contemporary performance of a traditional epic, simple "eventive" -T- forms alternate with a static, "background" -KINR-:

(13)   *Inta mârkaḷi mātattilē   oru nâḷ tarma   puttirar*
       this March   month:LOC one day Dharma Putra

       *pūjai   ellām **muṭi-tt-ār**.   Avarukku maṇacule aṇr*
       worship all   finish:T:3RESP he:DAT mind:LOC   that: day

       *oru eṇṇam **ērpaṭ-ṭ-atu.**   [...] appaṭi ṇṇu   avarukku*
       one idea   occur:T:3SG.N   thus   QUOT he:DAT

       *oru eṇṇam **ērpaṭ-ṭ-atu**   maṇacule. Tiraupati*
       one idea   occur:T:3SG.N mind:LOC Draupadi

       aruccuṇaṇ nakula cakātēvarkaḷ ivvaḷavu pērum kûṭa
       Arjuna   Nakula Cakadeva:PL this:many people with

       iru-kkiṟ- ārkaḷ.
       be:KINR:3PL

       'One March day, Dharma Putra **finished** his morning worship. That day, an idea **occurred** to him. The idea **occurred** to him [to invite Krishna to breakfast]. Draupadi, Arjuna, Nakula and Cakadeva, all these people **are** with him.'

This pattern of distribution is especially characteristic of traditional epic narrative performances, which preserve other archaic language features as well (Herring 1991). At the same time, the texts in the modern sample attest a different grounding pattern, one which features -VITU- ("perfective") in the foregrounding role and -KONTIRU- ("continuative") in the backgrounding role, i.e. when the background situation is an ongoing activity. An example of this contrast is found in the passage in (14):

(14)   *Kuḷantai kaiyilē   villai   **eṭuttu-viṭ-ṭ-āṇ.**   Kaiyilē*
       child   hand:LOC bow:ACC take:VITU:T:3SG.M hand:LOC

       villai   eṭukkiṟa   pōtu, vicuvāmittirar
       bow:ACC take:KINR:AjP time Vishvamitra

       *pakkattilē   **pārtt-iṇṭu iru-kk-ār.**[16]*
       side:LOC:EMPH watch:KONTIRU:KINR:3RESP

       'The child **took** the bow in his hands. As he [the child] takes the bow in his hands, Vishvamitra **is watching** him from the side'.

In this example, -VITU- co-occurs with -T-, and -KONTIRU- co-occurs with -KINR- — the grounding distinction is marked redundantly, as it were. However, such need not be the case: narratives related exclusively in either past (-T-) or present (-KINR-) tense still employ aspect marking (-VITU-; -KONTIRU-) to selectively contrast core sequential events and ongoing activities.

Of the two Modern Tamil grounding strategies, the one signalled by explicit aspectual auxiliaries appears to be gaining in productivity at the expense of the older strategy signalled by the opposition of simple -T- and -P- forms. The new compound aspectual forms are restricted in function and are employed selectively, as were the original grounding markers in Old Tamil. The functions of the -T- and -P- forms, in contrast, have become increasingly general, as revealed by the fact that either form can be used to the exclusion of the other in Modern Tamil to encode situations of all functional types. It is likely that this extension led to the weakening of the grounding values of the simple forms, already evident in the Middle Tamil period, and to the subsequent grammaticalization of new grounding markers — the aspectual auxiliaries — to take their place.

8.   Functional stability

That the new aspects express already existing functions cannot be doubted. There are striking parallels between the Old Tamil "tenses" and the Modern Tamil aspects in terms of both function and distribution. Old Tamil -T- and Modern Tamil -VITU- both signal dynamic, sequential events which are central to the narrative plot — that is, primary or "core" events. Extracting only the -VITU- marked clauses from a Modern Tamil text produces a summary of the basic plot, as for example the following collection of clauses from a traditional "Bow Song" performance relating how a young god, Kāttavarāya Swāmi, came to suffer a curse:

(15)   a.   '[...] Kāttavarāya Swāmi took the silk dress of the youngest maiden in his hand and **hid** it in a tamarind tree.
       b.   [She] **got** very worried.
       c.   She **commited** suicide.
       d.   Thinking "I must no longer live", she **commited** suicide.
       e.   Lord Shiva **came** to Kanji Forest.
       f.   He **cursed** [Kāttavarāya Swāmi], saying, "Go [burn] to ashes at the immortal burning ground."

With the exception of the two -VITU- marked clauses in (c) - (d) which reiterate the event of the suicide (the peak event of the episode, and hence rhetorically highlighted by repetition (Longacre 1981), this sequence constitutes a concise summary of the events of the story, similar to sequences of finite -T- marked clauses in Old Tamil (cf. ex. (4)).

The parallels between the Modern and the Old Tamil functional systems emerge even more clearly when we compare modern retellings of the *Cilappatikāram* story with the 5th century version. In the Old Tamil example (2), Kovalan's violent murder is foregrounded by the use of finite -T- forms. In the modern retelling below, the same events — the death blows — are also foregrounded, but the form now associated with this function is -VITU-.

(16) *Rājā cilampai   vāñki   pār-tt-āṇ.   Taṇṇuṭaiya*
      king anklet:ACC receive look:T:3SG.M self:GEN

      rāṇiyiṇuṭaiya cilampum inta cilampum iraṇṭum oṇṇu
      queen:GEN   anklet:and this anklet:and two:and one

      pōla tāṇ   iru-kk-u.   "Inta poṛkollaṇ colṛatu
      like EMPH be:KINR:3SG.N this goldsmith say:VN

      uṇmai" appaṭi ṇṇu maṇacilē namp-iṇ-āṇ.
      truth thus   QUOT mind:LOC believe:T:3SG.M

      Kāvalarkaḷai kūppiṭ-ṭ-āṇ. "Ivaṇ vīṭlē   cilampai
      guard:PL:ACC call:T:3SG.M his house:LOC anklet:ACC

      tiruṭiṇa   tiruṭaṇ irukkāṇ;   avaṇai niñkaḷ
      steal:T:AjP thief   be:KINR:3SG.M he:ACC you:pl

      koṇru vāruñkaḷ"   appaṭi ṇṇa mātari
      kill   come:IMP:PL thus   QUOT manner

      coll-iṭ-ṭ-āṇ.   Kāvalāḷi pō-ṇ-āṇ. Kōvalaṇai
      say:VITU:T:3SG.M guard   go:T:3SG.M Kovalan:ACC

      kolai kaḷattilē   koṇṭu pōy, kaḷuttai
      murder ground:LOC take:CP go:CP throat:ACC

      veṭṭ-iṭ-ṭ-āṇ.   Talaiyai veṭṭ-iṭ-ṭ-āṇ   Ivaṇ iñka
      cut:VITU:T:3SG.M head:ACC cut:VITU:T:3SG.M he   here

      kōvalaṇuṭaiya talai veṭṭuṇṭu... kōvalaṇ māṇṭāṇ   ñkiṛatu
      Kovalan:GEN head cut:CP   Kovalan die:T:3SG.M fact

      kaṇṇakikku teriy-aṛ-atu.
      Kannaki:DAT be:known:KINR:3SG.N

'The king took the anklet and **examined** (-T-) it. His queen's anklet and this anklet **are** (-KINR-) exactly the same. He **became convinced** (-T-) in his mind that the goldsmith was speaking the truth. He **summoned** (-T-) his guards. "The thief who stole the anklet is in [the goldsmith's] house; kill him and return", thus he **spoke** (-T-, -VITU-). The guard **went off** (-T-). He took Kovalan to the execution ground and **cut his throat** (-T-, -VITU-). He **cut off his head** (-T-, -VITU-). He cut off Kovalan's head here... and Kannaki **knows** (-KINR-) that Kovalan is dead.'

In both the modern and the original versions, the events of the sword entering Kovalan's body and then piercing through to the other side (i.e. severing his head) are foregrounded, presumably because of their inherent dramatic interest. The pivotal clause in which the king commands Kovalan's death is also foregrounded in the modern version.[17] Note also the systematic alternation between -T- for sequential events, and -KINR- for descriptive states in this passage (no ongoing activities are described, hence there are no -KONTIRU- forms).

The Old and Modern Tamil foregrounding forms are not only similar in function, but each appears with a similar frequency in the narrative samples. Table 2 shows that one out of 13 lines (7.6%) of the *Cilappatikāram* contains a finite -T- verb, as compared with 1:14 lines (7.2%) containing a finite verb marked with -VITU- in the modern oral sample. Similarly, while the functional correspondence between Old Tamil -P- and Modern Tamil -KONTIRU- is not exact (OT "imperfective" -P- includes the ModT "continuative" -KONTIRU-, but is broader in function), the overall frequency of the two forms is again remarkably similar: 1:50 lines (2.0%) of text in the *Cilappatikāram* have -P-, and 1:46 lines (2.2%) of text in the modern narratives have -KONTIRU-.

This statistical correspondence is, I would assert, not just simple coincidence. Rather, it suggests a preference on the part of the Tamil language to overtly signal the two poles of the grounding contrast sparingly, to signal foreground clauses more often than background clauses, and to encode certain kinds of contrasts (e.g. core events vs. secondary events) as opposed to others. Table 3 shows how the functions discussed here are preserved from one historical period to the next, even as the associated forms change.

Table 3: Discourse functions of verbal forms in Tamil narrative

		Old Tamil	Middle Tamil	Modern Tamil
FG	Secondary events	non-finite	-T-	-T-
	Primary events	-T-	-T-	-VITU-
BG	Situations in progress; persistent situations	-P- (vs. non-finite)	-KINR-	-KONTIRU-
	States/activities; introduces quotes	-P- (vs. non-finite)	-P-	-KINR-
	Habitual situations	-P- (vs. non-finite)	-P-	-P-

As table 3 shows, not only does the Tamil language encode a foreground/background distinction at each stage; it also preserves more idiosyncratic functional features. Although the means of signaling this distinction shifts from -T- to -VITU-, primary events are selectively distinguished from the overall event sequence in both Old and Modern Tamil (in contrast, for example, with languages such as French and Russian, which tend to "foreground" plot-line events categorically (Hopper 1979b, 1982)). In the background (BG) domain, the same form that describes ongoing states and activities is also used to introduce quoted material; this is true at all three stages, despite the fact that the form associated with the set of functions changes from -P- to -KINR-. Finally, the language is consistent in associating situations in progress at the time of some reference point with duration or persistence over time, even as the means of expressing this combination of meanings shifted from -P- to -KINR- to -KONTIRU-. In all, the language displays an impressive consistency on the functional level, despite fifteen centuries of evolution and surface change.

The underlying set of functional contrasts, when viewed as a more or less unified system, can be seen to have played an important role in shaping the evolution of the categories of tense and aspect in Tamil. The evidence presented here suggests that the so-called "tense" forms in Old Tamil were indeed aspectual in function, as Zvelebil claimed. With the generalization of -T- to signal past events — and eventually, past situations of all types — in the Middle Tamil period, however, the selective foregrounding impact of

the form was lost. The introduction of a new form, -KINR-, further undermined the original binary contrast. Middle Tamil found itself with an emergent three-way tense system, but with a weakened ability to signal grounding relationships in text, a functional need that was fulfilled by the creation of the modern aspectual auxiliaries. Moreover, the genesis of -KINR- itself can be seen as an attempt to contrast specifically progressive situations with other types of background information, i.e. as a subtype of imperfective aspect, rather than as a tense *per se*; this distinction is maintained in the modern language as well (by means of -KONTIRU-). The discourse-based analysis developed here thus sheds light on two of the most important current issues in Tamil historical grammar: the origins of aspectual auxiliaries (Herring, Forthcoming; Steever 1984), and the genesis of the present tense (Rajam 1985; Steever 1989; Zvelebil 1971).

It also raises important questions for the study of language change. Why do some languages prefer certain categories and contrasts, to the point of renewing them, sometimes again and again? What determines which categories are renewed? What are the mechanisms by means of which functional stability is maintained? This last question is an especially critical one, since we must also account for discontinuous encoding of a contrast, as in the distinction between primary and secondary events in Tamil, which appears to have been encoded weakly, at best, during the Middle Tamil period.

How is knowledge of an earlier functional system transmitted through time? Explanations can be adduced which evoke both cognitive and social factors. Slobin (1990) implies that the seed of a functional category is **inherent in the language** itself, waiting to be acquired by the child speaker; this view, however, begs the question of how the category arose in the language in the first place. Alternatively, we may imagine that the system of contrasts is **determined by the culture and experiences** of speakers, in line with Du Bois' claim that "languages code best what speakers do most" (1987: 851); it is not immediately evident, however, what kinds of culture-specific experiences correlate with functional distinctions such as those between primary and secondary events, etc. A third possibility is that grammatical distinctions from an earlier period may be **consciously reintroduced** into the language by literate speakers, as happened in the 17th century with verbal agreement and accusative case marking in Sinhala (De Silva 1974). The Sinhala situation differs from that for Tamil, however, in that the original linguistic markers were reintroduced in Sinhala as well, rather than

recreated to serve an older function. Finally, lapsed or weakened distinctions may be **unconsciously acquired** by the general population through repeated exposure to traditional discourse varieties that make use of archaic forms of the language. There is circumstantial support for this latter explanation in Tamil: traditional oral narrative performances have been a primary means of instruction and entertainment throughout the history of the language, and they conventionally preserve archaic linguistic usage (Herring 1991; Zvelebil 1990b). While it is beyond the scope of the present study to argue in depth for a particular cognitive or socio-historical explanation of the Tamil facts, it should be evident that the questions raised by functional stability call for further exploration, much of it into areas where the traditional methodology of historical linguistics does not allow us to venture.

Although it has proven fruitful to apply discourse analytic methods to the historical problem identified here, a word of caution is appropriate. For obvious reasons, only methodologies demonstrated through extensive cross-linguistic research to identify basic functional tendencies can reliably be applied to the analysis of diachronic change. Given that the systematic investigation of "discourse grammar" is a recent phenomenon, methods as well-demonstrated as those for narrative grounding are rare. Yet the fact that discourse-functional analysis may provide insight into problems of historical linguistics ought rightly to supply impetus for further work in this field. The study of underlying functional structures in discourse, in addition to being of interest in its own right, may ultimately prove crucial to an understanding of how languages change.

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NOTES

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1.   This phenomenon was first noted by Meillet (1958), who employed the term "renouvellement" to describe the grammaticalization of new forms to preserve old functions. Benveniste (1968) distinguishes between "innovating" and "conservative" mutations, citing as an example of the latter type the preservation of the category "future tense" in Romance, despite changes in the category's formal means of expression over time. More recently, Harris (1986) has argued for the stability of the underlying semantic domain of conditionality in Romance, and a number of studies have discussed the preservation of the proximal/distal deictic distinction in French demonstratives (Foulet 1954; Perret 1988, 1991; Price 1969, 1971; Smith 1988).

2.   The Old Tamil period ranges from the earliest attested documents in the Tamil script, around the 2nd century B.C., to the end of the Sangam (or Classical) period around the 6th century A.D.

3.   Herring (1991, Forthcoming); for a contrasting view, cf. Steever (1984).

4.   The principal allomorphs of the "past" -T- are -t-, -tt-, -nt-, -in-, and final consonant doubling; those for "future/non-past" -P- are -p, -pp-, -v-, -um.

5.   Zvelebil himself, in alluding to the problem in his recent writings (1990a: 30), is no more conclusive than in his original speculations nearly 30 years earlier.

6.   "Discourse analysis" in this sense is also known as "text linguistics" in the European tradition that includes scholars such as van Dijk (1977), Petöfi (1979), and de Beaugrande and Dressler (1981).

7.   The core narrative sequence of Cilappatikāram is contained in the first and second *kāṇṭams* ('books') of a three *kāṇṭam* sequence. The third *kāṇṭam* is more didactic than narrative in nature.

8.   The two episodes are the story of the hero Rama's childhood leading up to his marriage, and the awakening of the demon Kumpakarna.

9.   "Perfective aspect" in Modern Tamil encodes a view of a situation as a discrete, completed whole, while "perfect aspect" typically refers to a completed situation with continuing or current relevance. As the functions of the perfect are not associated with grounding, the category is not discussed further in this article; a detailed discussion of its functions can be found in Herring (1991, section 6.3).

10.   Finite verbal forms in directly quoted dialogue were excluded from this count.

11.   See Zvelebil (Zvelebil, Glasov, and Andronov 1967; Zvelebil 1990a) on the development in Old Tamil of finite verbs from "appellative" nouns, e.g. *vantāṉ* 'one (3SG.M) who came' > 'he came'.

12. The following abbreviations are used in the glosses:

3RESP	'3rd person respectful'		
AJP	'adjectival participle'	PN	'participial noun'
CP	'conjunctive participle'	QUOT	'quotative'
IRU	'perfect aspect'	T	'perfective/past'
KINR	'present tense' (see main text)		(see main text)
KONTIRU	'continuative aspect'	VITU	'perfective aspect'
N	'neuter'	VN	'verbal noun'
P	'imperfective/non-past/ future' (see main text)		

13. According to this interpretation, the focus of the passage is on the actions of the young woman, e.g. 'she put on great jewels in order to accompany him who was adorned with garlands, and as he mounted his mule, she climbed into her ox-cart'.

14. In the free English translations, I adopt the practice of translating -T- forms as past tense, and -P- and -KINR- forms as present tense, in an attempt to preserve the systematic flavor of the contrast between the Tamil forms. This practice should not be taken to imply that the Tamil forms and the English tenses are functionally equivalent.

15. KINR- is more frequent in dependent clauses, e.g. in adjectival participle (AJP) form (see example (6)).

16. In spoken Tamil, the form -KONTIRU- has, among others, the variants -kiṭṭiru-, -kiṭṭu iru, iṇṭiru, and iṇṭu iru (the last two in Brahmin dialects). Other modifications in informal speech include the deletion of the initial -V- of -VITU-, and the realization of -KINR- as -(k)kiṭ-, -(k)kr-, -kk-, or -ṭ-.

17. A well-known controversy surrounds the interpretation of the king's command. Did he say, "Kill him and return" (koṉṟu vā), or "Bring him" (koṇṭu vā)? If the latter, then the king's honor is less seriously compromised, since Kovalan's death would have been the result of a misunderstanding. The narrator is aware of the significance of the king's command, and foregrounds it by employing a perfective form.

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