



VERBAL INFLECTIONS IN TAMIL AND PROBLEMS FOR TAMIL LEARNERS OF ENGLISH IN TENSE USAGES

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Abstract:

The most important error frequently made by the second language learner’s deals with the indications of the tense aspects in the verbs and verbal phrases of the structures. The error often bewilders the learners as the structural patterns of the first language entirely differ from that of the new language. This error has been widely discussed by the grammarians but the remedial measures are very often futile. Many grammarians propound the view that emphasizing is the rules of the second language is the best method to overcome the popular error. This method, though powerful, is not effective as it seems to be violent in one way according to some grammarians. Some argue that this overemphasize leads to inter-lingual errors. However, it seems sensible to look into the perception of some others that a sensible shift is essential to learn the second language. The comprehending of the verbal aspects of the second language and their inflections is the best route to adopt the rules of the second language. Keeping this comprehension in mind the present paper deals with the errors made by the Tamil learners in the acquisition of English as their foreign language. The paper studies the English scripts of the Tamil learners and analyzes the errors in both the ways, the perspectives of the Tamil inflections and of the verbal aspects of English.

Key Words: Tamil Learners, Verbal Inflection & Tense Marker

Tense:

As in English, in Tamil also there is strict one-to-one correspondence between time and tense, even though the term ‘time’ is used in Tamil Grammar books to refer to ‘tense’. As Palmer points out there are only two tenses in English. These are mostly referred to as ‘present’ and ‘past’. Other verbal categories like the perfect and progressive aspects are achieved by the use of the auxiliaries *be* and *have*. English does not have any verbal inflection for future tense. The forms *shall* and *will* are used for indicating the future time but they are also used for functions other than future time reference, like willingness, probability and general truth. So it is right to say that English has no future tense.

In Tamil, there are three clearly marked tenses, the present, the past and the future. There are distinct inflectional verbal forms for the three tenses. For example,

Present Tense: Tense Marker		
<i>varukiraan</i>	<i>He is coming</i>	<i>kiru</i>
<i>varukintaan</i>	<i>He comes</i>	<i>kintu</i>
<i>vaaraanintaan</i>	<i>He comes</i>	<i>aanintu</i>
Past Tense		
<i>padithan</i>	<i>He studied</i>	<i>ith</i>
<i>kettaan</i>	<i>He asked</i>	<i>itt</i>
Future Tense		
<i>varuvaan</i>	<i>He will come</i>	<i>uv</i>
<i>kuthippan</i>	<i>He will jump</i>	<i>ipp</i>

Since the modal auxiliaries perform more than one function, the Tamil learners who are used to a specific future tense marker, often fail to see modality in the use of these auxiliaries. So the distinction between the use of *will* and *shall*, *may* and *might*, *can* and *could* etc. often poses a problem for a Tamil learner.

The use of present tense form in future time is something that the Tamil learner is familiar with. But unreal conditions as in *if he came, he would not see her* are very difficult for him to comprehend and use because Tamil does not have an equivalent form.

Aspects:

The following tables present the varying sentence equivalence for the two aspects of English structures in their combination with tense and voice.

Present Continuous	<i>He is eating (be+ing)</i>	<i>avan undu kondirukkiran</i>
Past Continuous	<i>He was eating (be+ing)</i>	<i>avan undu kondirunthan</i>
Present Perfect	<i>He has eaten (have/has+en)</i>	<i>avan undirukkiran</i>
Past Perfect	<i>He had eaten (had+en)</i>	<i>avan undirunthan</i>
Present Perfect Continuous	<i>He has been eating (have/has+been+ing)</i>	<i>avan undu konday irukkiran</i>
Past Perfect Continuous	<i>He had been eating</i>	<i>avan undu konday irunthaan</i>

(had+been+ing)

While there are Tamil equivalence of every one of the above sentence in the active voice, it is very difficult to find similar equivalence in the passive voice. Even in English the table cannot be complete.

Present Continuous	<i>ezhuthappattu kondirukkirathu</i>	<i>is being written</i>
Past Continuous	<i>ezhuthappattu kondirunthathu</i>	<i>was being written</i>
Present Perfect	<i>ezhuthappattirukirathu</i>	<i>has been written</i>
Past Perfect	<i>ezhuthappattirunthathu</i>	<i>had been written</i>
Present Perfect Continuous	<i>ezhuthappattuk kondyrukkirathu</i>	-----
Past Perfect Continuous	<i>ezhuthappattuk kondayrunthathu</i>	-----

For the passive voice the table is not complete. There are no passives for the perfect continuous in English, whereas we can force the Tamil language to produce sentences in the perfect continuous.

Modal Verbs:

In English, the verbs *can, could, may, might, will, would, shall, should, must and might* are called modal verbs or modals. They are used with main verbs to express various modalities like as permissions, possibility, certainty and necessity. But in Tamil there is no such grammatical category. Anyhow, some morphemes or words do the functions of the modal verbs. Nevertheless the different functions of the modal verbs in English cannot be expressed by such Tamil morphemes. For instance, *can* expresses usually ability or capacity.

I can solve the problem.

ennal intha prachinaiyai theerkkamudium.

The modal verb *can* is also used to express permission. The same function can be done by the modal verb *may*, but *may* is rather formal in this regard. The subtle difference cannot be expressed in Tamil.

Can I borrow your umbrella? unathu kudaiyai enakku iraval thara mutiyuma?

May I borrow your umbrella? unathu kudaiyai enakku iraval thara eyaluma?

May is used to express possibility. Though *might* is used as the past equivalent of *may* the possibility is higher in the case of *may*.

It might rain tomorrow (Less positive than 'It may rain')

nazhai mazhai paiyalaam

It may rain tomorrow (Less positive than 'It may rain')

nazhai mazhai paiyalaam

The subtle difference in using *may* and *might* can not be denoted in Tamil.

Actually *would* and *might* are used as less positive versions of *can* and *may* in English. But, Tamil has no such positive versions.

In English *must* and *ought to* are used to express obligation. However, *ought to* expresses moral obligation.

You must improve your spelling

nee unathu kaiyazhuthai chemmaipadutha vendum

You ought to help him.

nee avanukku uthaviyaga vendum

The above Tamil sentences cannot make the subtle difference that is found in English structures. Even *have to* is used instead of *must* in some situations, where the subject is asked to obey something. For instance,

I have to go now

naan ippothu poiyaaga vendum

There are various functions denoted by the modal verbs *shall, will, should* and *would* in English. All these functions and their subtle differences cannot be expressed in Tamil.

I shall be twenty five next birthday

adutha pirantha nazhil yanakku 25 vayathu irukkum

He shall not enter my house again

avan yanathu veettil nuzhayak kudathu (expressing a threat)

Shall I open the door

naan antha kathavai thirakkalaamaa? (expressing a willingness)

Should and *would* are more polite than *shall* and *will*. But this difference cannot be denoted by Tamil sentences.

In total, there are expressions of various attitudes in using the modal verbs in English. Because Tamil has no such grammatical categories, Tamil speakers find difficulty in using these modal verbs in English structures. And they must be taught the subtle difference in using different modal verbs for the same function.

The mentions of the progressive and perfect aspects of English are something new to the Tamil learners who are acquainted themselves with the inflectional verb forms of their mother tongue. This leads to different issues in dealing with the tense usages of Tamil learners of English. If the fundamental understanding of the verbal inflections of Tamil is made clear, most of the mistaken tense usages can be easily averted. Instead of forcing

the Tamil learners to gain knowledge on English, if they are taught clear the distinctive ways of how Tamil functions to indicate the different aspects of tense, they can come out of the most common mistakes amidst the second language learners, ie the mistakes in the usages of tense. Besides, the modal verbs should be introduced for the Tamil learners as their no such category. If they are taught why they are introduced and what is replacing the modal verbs in Tamil, then it brings them new attention to look at the functions of the modal verbs with a clear comprehension. Knowing about one self is to know about the difference, like cat is cat because cat is not dog. If the difference is taught, learning is made easy.

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