TOLKAAPPIYAM AND PHONETICS

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Tolkaappiyam, the oldest extant Tamil grammar (c. third century B.C.), is divided into three major divisions, which are Esuttatikaaram ‘phonology (sounds and junction)’, Collatikaaram ‘morphology and syntax’ and Porulatikaaram ‘poetic conventions relating to the way of life’. Each section has nine chapters.

Esuttatikaaram, the section on phonology, contains chapters on the different sounds, the distribution of sounds, the production of sounds and the junctional features.

Piṭappiyal, which deals with the production of sounds is the third chapter and contains twenty one verses.

The sounds are divided into ‘basic’ (though there is no specific term used for this in the text) — viz. vowels and consonants —, which are dealt with in the first eighteen verses, and ‘dependent’ which are dealt with in one verse. The last two verses deal with the treatment of sounds in poetry.

The first eighteen verses may conveniently be divided into three groups: (i) generalities (verse 1), (ii) vowels (verses 2 to 6) and (iii) consonants (verses 7 to 18).

PRODUCTION OF SOUNDS

The first verse deals with the articulatory organs — the places of articulation and the articulators.

‘The air which rises from the navel rests in the head, the throat and the chest. When the sounds are produced, with care, it would be noticed

1 Tolkaappiyam, commentary by Ilampuuranar (Madras, 1958), commentary by Naccinaarkkiniyar (Madras, 1923). The transliteration method used here is that set out in my paper ‘Transliteration of Tamil — A new system’, presented to the IATR Conference-Seminar, Kuala Lumpur in April 1966. — I am grateful to Dr. R. E. Asher for his valuable comments and suggestions.
that sounds are produced differently which involve the contact of the teeth, the lips, the tongue and the palate'. (verse 1).

The commentators interpret this verse to mean 'the air coming in contact with the teeth, the lips, the tongue, the nose and the palate, and with the three places where the air rests, thus bringing the number of places of contact to eight' and, 'the contact between the eight organs which include the teeth, the lips, the tongue, the nose and the palate (and the head, the chest and the throat)'.

Although Tolkaappiyam mentions the head, the chest and the throat as places where the air rests, references to the head and the chest do not occur anywhere else again. On the other hand, references to the throat may be found in subsequent verses. Hence it is possible to suppose that the reference to air resting in these three places was a poetic convention, or, as other scholars have stated an interpolation by a scholar who was well-versed in the Sanskrit works.

Having mentioned the organs of speech the author, Tolkaappiyar, goes on discuss the vowels and the consonants.

VOWELS

In verse one the author has pointed out that 'air' is essential for the production of sounds. In the five verses which deal with the vowels (verses 2 to 6) the characteristic of the vowel seems to be mitatup pitam valiyin icaittal, i.e. production of sounds with the help of the air produced at the throat. In discussing the consonants, in no place does Tolkaappiyar make any reference to the air except where he talks about the nasals (verse 18) and y (verse 17). Does this mean that the author implicitly contrasts the continuous flow of air from the throat in the production of vowels, the nasals and the semi-vowel with the obstruction at various points in the production of the consonants other than the nasals?

Another interesting point is the term used for the production of vowels

1 Commentary by Naccinaarkkiniyar, p. 91.
2 Commentary by Ilampuuranar, pp. 47-48: 'It will be evident on careful observation that all the sounds (in Tamil Language) are but the results of the modifications which the air undergoes in starting from navel and passing through the eight parts chest, neck, head, tongue, hard palate, teeth, lips and nose. Note: It may be interesting to note that the eight parts mentioned above exactly coincide with those mentioned in the Pāniniya Śiksā'. (Tolkaappiyam, translated by P. S. Subrahmanya Sastri, Vol. I, Madras, 1930, p. 12).