



Tamil Proverbs: A Structural Approach

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Abstract

Structuralism can be applied to any genre of folklore. There are a number of structural studies of such genres as proverb, riddle, superstition, ritual and so on. The influence of structuralism on folklore has been so enormous that many schools and methods have emerged explaining structural analyses. The main problem of structural analyses is the discovering of defining minimal structural unit and understanding how these units combined into traditional patterns.

In Tamil the Proverb is said to be “pazhamozhi” (ie. pazhamai + mozhi). The sentences which give the old concepts, advices and thoughts are called as proverbs. It is used to tell advices and to give commands and orders etc.

Proverbs have been used orally for ages and it has been well established in its daily usage. It has been confirmed that it reveals the people’s culture and their living conditions.

By speaking of structural matters, it is also important to mention that the thousands of proverbs of any language can be reduced to certain structures or patterns.

In this paper an attempt is made to discuss and analyze the structural approach of Milner and Alan Dundes to proverbs and how it is suitable for explaining the Tamil Proverbs. Moreover this paper deals with the structural pattern of Tamil proverbs based on language features to accommodate all types of Tamil proverbs.



Alan Dundes approach of Tamil Proverbs

Alan Dundes defines (1951) “the proverbs being a propositional statement consisting of at least a topic and a comment”. For example in English “**Money talks**”. This means that a proverb must at least consist of **two words**.

According to Alan Dundes proverbs which contain a single descriptive element are always **non oppositional**. But as far as Tamil is concerned, a single descriptive element functions as both **oppositional** and **non-oppositional**.

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Example for *Oppositional Proverbs*:

1. M-÷:ò£†´ M-ùò£°<.

viLaiya:TTu vinaiya:kum.

Originating in playfulness it ended seriously.

Example for *Non-Oppositional Proverbs*:

1. °ò£Á~î£~ Ìò£œò£~.

poRutta:r pu:miya:Lva:r.

The patient will rule the world.

He also says that proverbs with two or more descriptive elements may be either oppositional or non-oppositional. It is applicable to Tamil proverbs.

For example:

Oppositional

1. ð®,Aø¶ Þó£ñ£òí< Þ®,Aø¶ °ò¼ñ£œ «è£J™.

paTikkiRatu ira:ma:yaNam iTikkiRatu peruma:L ko:yil.

To read Ramayana and to break down the temple of Vishnu.

Non-oppositional



1. âOðð-ù òLðð; ò£†@ù£™ òOðð-ù †i£ð<
 ò£†<.
 eLivanai vaLiyavan va:TTina:l valiyavanai teyvam
 va:TTum.
*If the weak are terrorized by the strong, the strong will be
 terrorized by God.*

This approach is used to accommodate certain types of Tamil proverbs only.

Milner's approach of Tamil Proverbs

Milner (1962) observed that many proverbs in English are characterized by a quadripartite structure.

According to Milner's theory, the four quarters (minor segments) of a proverb are grouped into two "halves" (major segments) which "match and balance each other". The opening half is termed as "**head**" while the second half is labeled as "**tail**".

Milner then examines the word or words in each quarter and determines whether it or they have a plus (+) or minus (-) values.

For example in English proverb is,

"Soon ripe soon rotten"

+ +
 Soon ripe (which means that the head is +^{ve})
 + -
 Soon rotten (which means that the tail is -^{ve})

Within each half of a saying, Milner argues, the two quarters may both be plus (as in "Soon ripe") or both are minus, or they may be opposites (as in "soon rotten").

If both quarters are plus (+) or both quarters are minus, the meaning of the whole half is considered to be **positive**. If the quarters are opposites, the whole half is considered to be **negative**.

By this reasoning, any proverb consists of a positive or negative "**head**" followed by a positive or negative "**tail**".



Having established this general scheme, Milner can assign any individual proverb to one of 16 possible classes. These sixteen are reduced to four main classes (each consisting of four subclasses).

Class A: +head & +tail

Class B: -head & -tail

Class C: +head & -tail

Class D: -head & +tail

The above classes are common to bipartite, tripartite structure of proverbs.

In Quadripartite structure, within each main class, there are four different means of achieving the end.

Class A: (+ + + +; - - - -; + + - -; - - + +)

Class B: (+ - + -; - + - +; + - - +; - + + -)

Class C: (+ + + -; + + - +; - - + -; - - - +)

Class D: (+ - + +; + - - -; - + + +; - + - -)

The above said structural descriptions are applicable to accommodate many types of Tamil proverbs.

For example:

Quadripartite structure of Tamil Proverbs

Class A: + head & + tail

(+ + + +; - - - -; + + - -; - - + +)

i) + + + +



ð£^FónP%¶ / H,,-êJ' / «è£^FónP%¶ / ^ð‡^aí'.

+ + + +

pa:ttiramaRintu piccai iTu ko:ttiram aRintu peN koTu.
Give alms to the worthy, and your daughter to one of a good family.

ii) - - - -

ð†ì è£L«ò«ò / ð' < / ^è†ì °®«ò / ^è' <.

- - - -

paTTa ka:lile:ye: paTum keTTa kuTiye keTum.
It will hit the foot already injured, the decayed family will be ruined.

iii) + + - -

î%oî£™ / î£^î™ô£ < àø¾ / ð'^î£™ / ð£» < ð-è.

+ + - -

naTanta:l na:Tella:m uRavu paTutta:l pa:yum pakai.
The whole country is friendly to one who is active, his own mat is at enmity with the sluggard.

iv) - - + +

õ^¶,,ê£ < èœÀ / õø‡î£÷£ < ê£í£^F / áÁ,,ê£ < èœÀ /

- - + +

àF^î£÷£ < ê£í£^F.

-

vattuca:m kaLLu vaRaNTa:La:m ca:Na:tti, u:Rucca: kaLLu
 utucca:La:m ca:Na:tti.

When the toddy dries up, (in the hot season) the toddy-drawer's wife will shrivel up, when the toddy flows (in the cooler weather) she will become plump.

Class B: - head & - tail

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(+ - + - ; - + - + ; + - - + , - + + -)



i) + - + -

ð@,,êê; / ð£†-î, àè^^î£; / âç¶ùõ; /

+ - +
ã†-î, àè^^î£;
-

paTiccavan pa:TTaik keTutta:n elutunavan e:TTaik keTutta:n.
The reader spoilt the song, the scribe spoilt the book.

ii) - + - +

AN...ê£½< / ð†',«ê-ô / i...ê£½< / *iY«ê£Á.

- + - +

kilınca:lum paTTucce:lai nanca:lum neRco:Ru.
Even if it tears it is a silk saree, even if it decomposes it is rice.

iii) + - - +

õ£-õŠõö^-î, àè£†' õ%ôõœ / õ£êL™ / õ£-ò,

+ -
àè£†' õ%ôõ / i'it®™.

- +

va:laippalattaik koNTu vantava va:calil va:yaik koNTu vantava naTuvi:TTil
*She who brought a plantain (banana) sat at the entrance; she who brought her
mouth sat in the middle of the house.*

iv) - + + -

â¼i£À< CK, è£îõ; / F¼i£O™ CK^î£ù£< / F¼i£À</

- + +
aõÁi£÷£,,²¶.
-

oruna:Lum cirikka:tavan tiruna:Lil ciritta:na:m tiruna:Lum veRuna:La:ccutu.



One who had never smiled, smiled on a sacred day, and then the sacred day became a common day.

Class C: + head & - tail

(+ + + - ; + + - + ; - - + - ; - - - +)

i) + + + -

Ý-êJ¼, ° / ífC™ ð‡í / Ü<êI¼, ° / è¿-î «ñE, è.
+ + + -

a:saiyirukku ta:cil paNNa amcamirukku kalutai me:ykka.
There is desire to become a tahsildar. But luck favours only donkey grazing.

ii) + + - +

Þ÷-ñJ™ / °ðÝC, / °¶-ñJ™ / è£, °<.
+ + - +

iLamaiyil muyaRci mutumaiyil ka:kkum.
Exertion in youth will preserve you when old.

iii) - - + -

è¿ð‡< / ð‡®Q / è™ð£í< ð‡E»< / Hó<ñ,,ê£K.
- - + -

kaTanpaTTum paTTini kalya:Nam paNNiyum pirammacca:ri.
A celibate despite marriage and starving despite incurring debts.

iv) - - - +

ñ£Iò£~ à-î^í£™ / ñ‡°ì< / ñ¼ñèè à-î^í£™ /
- - - +

ªð£¿ °ì<.
+

ma:miya:r uTaitta:l maNkuTam marumakaL uTaitta:l pon kuTam.
When the mother-in-law breaks it is an earthen pot but if the daughter-in-law breaks it is a gold pot.

**Class D: -head & +tail**

(+ - + + ; + - - - ; - + + + ; - + - -)

i) + - + +

 $\text{a}\delta\ddot{\text{Y}}\emptyset \text{ i}\text{f}\text{CE} / \text{Í}\langle\text{iM}, / \text{1}^{\circ}\% \text{o}\hat{\text{i}} \text{ i}\text{f}\text{Ó}\langle / \text{Y}\langle\text{iM}.$

+ - + +

peRRa ta:y mu:te:vi pukunta ta:ram ci:te:vi.

He considers his mother the goddess of ill-luck and his wife the goddess of good-luck.

ii) + - - -

 $\text{P}1/4\% \text{o}\text{¶}\langle / \text{a}\text{e}^{\sim}\text{i}\text{f}; / \text{a}\text{e}^{\sim}\text{¶}\langle / \text{a}\text{e}^{\sim}\text{i}\text{f};.$

+ - - -

iruntum keTutta:n cettum keTutta:n.

He destroyed while alive, and also after his death.

iii) - + + +

 $\text{e}\delta\text{e}\langle / \text{H}\emptyset\% \text{o}\hat{\text{i}}\text{f}^{\text{TM}} / \text{G}\delta\text{f}\delta\langle / \text{H}\emptyset,^{\circ}\langle.$

- + + +

kalakam piRanta:l niya:yam piRakkum.

Popular agitation leads to justice.

iv) - + - -

 $\text{a}\ddot{\text{t}}\text{i}\text{f}\text{n}^{\text{TM}} / \text{a}\text{j}\delta\text{¶} \text{ i}' \langle \text{ð}\text{f}\text{e}\delta\text{e}\text{f}\langle / \text{a}^{\sim}\text{i}\text{f}\text{n}^{\text{TM}} /$

- + -

 $\text{a}1/4 \text{ i}' \langle \text{ð}\text{f}\text{e}\delta\text{e}\text{f}\text{e}\text{f}\text{¶}.$

-

uNNa:mal onpatu vi:Tu po:kala:m uTutta:mal oru vi:Tum



à-ìdòj / ðéóéŠ ðJ~ / à¼Šð'ñé?

+ - -
 ┌───────────┐
 -

uTaiyavan pa:ra:p payir uruppaTuma:?

Will a crop not look after by the owner flourish?

[[[[[

ii) - / + -

Ü;ðÿø ñéIðé¼, ° / °H'ð¶ / °ÿøâéj.

- + -
 ┌───────────┐
 -

anpaRRa ma:miya:rukku kumpiTuvatum kuRRamta:n.
*Even a bow to an unkind mother-in-law will be taken as
 an offence.*

iii) - / - +

¹®, èéî ñ¼ñèœ / ¼C, èéñ~îéj / ê-ñŠðéœ.

- - +
 ┌───────────┐
 -

puTikka:ta marumakaL rucikka:matta:n camaippa:L.
 A daughter –in-law who is disliked will not cook tastefully.

Class C: +head & -tail

i) + / +-

^aèé', Aøð-ù, è‡ìé™ / ðéj°AøðÂ, ° / Þ÷, èéó<.

+ + -
 ┌───────────┐
 -



II. Interrogative

a) 'Yes'/'No' type

ã†', 2-ó, è£œ èP, ° Ý°ñ£?

e:TTuccuraikka:y kaRikku a:kuma:?

Will the word suraikkai a gourd serve as a curry?

b) 'Wh' type

è¼<¹ è† <ì£ì Ð¼%ôî£ âÁ<¹ â;ù °êœ»<?

karumpu kaTTToTa irunta: eRumpu enna ceeyum?

What can the ants do if the sugarcane is as a whole?

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III. Imperative

a) Positive Imperative

Ý®Šđ†ì< <â® M-î.

a:Tippattam te:Ti vitai.

Provide seed-corn and sow in July.

b) Negative Imperative

Ýö< °îKò£ñ™ è£-ô Mî£<î.

a:lam teriya:mal ka:lai viTa:te:

Look before you leap.

IV. Negative

Ü® àî¾ô¶¶ «ð£™ Ü†í%ôî<H àîõ ñ£†ì£;.

aTi utavuvatu:po:l aNNantampi utava ma:TTa:n.

Beatings are more helpful than one's brothers.

V. Conditional

ÜF~wì¼%ôî£™ Üó² ð†íô£<.

atirstamirunta:l aracu paNNala:m.

When fortune smiles one may reign as a king.



VI. Comparison

êf†C, èfó; èfL™ Mçõ-î Mi ê†-î, èfó; èfL™
 Mçõ¶ «ñ™.
 ca:Tcikka:ran ka:lil viuvatai viTa caNTaikka:ran ka:lil viuvatu
 me:l.
 Better to fall at the feet of the opponent than to fall at the feet of
 the witness.

VII. Compounding

àœÛ~ ñ¼ñèÂ< àç¶M†ì èìf¾< êK.
 uLLu:r marumakanum ulukiRa keTa:vum cari.
*A son-in-law of the same village and a ploughing buffalo are
 Over-wrought.*

VIII. Truncated

β, ° Mi< î-ôJ™, «îÀ, ° Mi< °èf´, A™.
 i:kku viTam talaiyil te:Lukku viTam koTukkil.
 In a fly, the head is the seat of poison, in a scorpion the tail.

Based on stylistic features

In addition to that many proverbs also exhibit commonly certain stylistic features like alliteration, parallelism, rhyme etc. Those features help to gain and maintain proverbial status. Metaphor and simile are also abundantly used in Tamil proverbs.

For example:

IX. Metaphor

î; èfKð^F™ 1L.
 tan ka:riyattil puli.



In his own affairs resolute as a tiger.

X. Simile

âMî; èF«ô êf° áFù¶ «ð£ô.

ceviTan ka:tile: canku u:tinatu po:la.

Like blowing a conch in the ear of the deaf

Apart from this, we can classify the proverbs in the following ways:

XI. Explanatory

ðC ð%ôî£™ ð¶¶¶ ðø, °.

paci vanta:l pattum paRakkum.

When one is hungry, the ten fly away.

(The ten are ‘ñ£ù<’ self-respect, °ô< ‘caste’, ‘è™™’ learning, ‘ô‡-ñ’ good manners, ‘ÚP¾-î-ñ’ knowledge, ‘î£ù<’ charity, ‘îô<’ self-control, ‘°òŸC’ perseverance in the good, ‘î£÷£‡-ñ’ energy, ‘è£ñ<’ lust)

XII. Simultaneous

ê£‡ ãø °ö< êÁ, °Aø¶.

ca:N e:Ra mulam caRukkukiRatu.

To advance a span and slide back a cubit.

Some of the more common patterns of Proverbs

- | | | |
|------|-----------------------------|---------------|
| I. | X states Y | statement |
| II. | X states Y with ? | interrogative |
| III. | X commands Y | Imperative |
| IV. | X against Y with Neg.marker | Negative |
| V. | If X then Y | Conditional |



VI.	Better X than Y	Comparison
VII.	X equal to Y	Compounding
VIII.	X and Y without F.V	Truncated

Like this some other common patterns are also possible for Tamil proverbs.

For example:

IX.	X with descriptive element.	Explanatory
X.	Like X without marker “like”	Metaphor
XI.	Like X like Y	Simile
XII.	X Parallel with Y	Simultaneous

Conclusion

So far, the possible structural descriptions of Tamil proverbs have been discussed. In which the structural approach of Alan Dundes is useful to partially describe the Tamil proverbs. But Milner’s approach is quite helpful to assign value to the elements of Tamil proverbs. Based on language feature, if Tamil proverbs are analysed, it is easy to formulate certain common structural patterns to accommodate majority of the Tamil proverbs in it.

Reference:

1. Wolfgang Mieder, 2000. Proverbs: A Hand book. USA: Haugen.
2. Milner, 1951. On the structure of proverbs. Oxford: Green wood press.