Deriving Adjectives in Heritage Tamil: Stability and Change

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Heritage grammars tend to undergo structural change owing to their severely constrained input conditions and /or transfer effects from the L2 (Polinsky, 2018). This study uses adjectives in Tamil (Dravidian) to show that rule-governed processes, such as distinguishing between attributive and predicative domains, remain stable, while knowledge of how adjectives are derived, which requires case-by-case learning, undergoes changes in the context of heritage Tamil. The empirical domain of adjectives in Tamil is novel and particularly informative, as the derived nature of these adjectives helps us identify areas of grammatical stability and those of change, when the context of acquisition diverges from the norm, i.e, heritage grammars. The abstract has two major aims: **(i)** to provide an explanation of adjectives in standard Tamil **(ii)** to inquire into how the derivation of adjectives fares in the context of heritage Tamil.

To answer **(i),** Adjectives in Tamil are of the kind presented in (1). Existing accounts of adjectives in Tamil (Menon, 2013; Jayaseelan and Amritavalli, 2017) do not treat (1) as regular adjectives because they mostly consist of uncategorized roots that require some derivational process (1a, 1c), or nominal and verbal elements (1b, 1d). However, I show that, upon closer inspection, the modifiers in Tamil follow all the characteristics of adjectives seen cross-linguistically: they have a fixed prenominal position in the DP, they co-occur with other modifiers such as numerals and quantifiers, they can be qualified by intensifiers (1a, 1b), and they allow for degrees of comparison (1c, 1d). I use these diagnostic tests to establish that the modifiers in Tamil are indeed adjectives.

(1) a. *anda (anju) (romba)* **nall-a** *pasanga*
　　 that (five) (very) 　√**good-REL** boys
　　 'those (five/very) good boys'

　b. *anda (naalu) (romba)* <u>uyaram-aa-na</u> *pasanga*
　　 that (four (very) 　<u>height-V-REL</u> boys
　　 'those (four/ very) tall boys'

　c. *avan ellarayum vida* **nall-a**-*van*
　　 3MSg everyone than √**good-REL-3MSg**
　　 'He is better than everyone = best.'

　d. *ava ellarayum vida* <u>uyaram-aa-ga</u> *iru-k-aa*
　　 3FSg everyone than <u>height-V-REL</u> be-PRS-3FSg
　　 'She is taller than everyone = tallest.'

Adjectives in Tamil may not be an independent category in the lexicon, but the derivational component does recognise them as a distinct category. In order to provide an explanation of how these adjectives are derived, I take recourse to Cinque's (2010) framework, where adjectives can be derived with aid from relative clauses (RC). Essentially, I show that for a language like Tamil, adjectives do not head their own functional projection (AP). Instead, they are ushered into the derivation as complements of RCs. I posit that this can be done in two ways: **Strategy A**: there are some uncategorized roots in the lexicon, which must merge as complement to a relativiser in order to become a morphological word. The resultant RC is interpreted as an adjective (1a, 1c). <u>Strategy B</u>: There are nouns which are first verbalized and then attached as complement to a relativiser. The entire complex RC is then interpreted as an adjective in Tamil (1b, 1d). With respect to the structural position, both these strategies are found in the attributive as well as the predicative domains. In the attributive domain (1a, 1b) the adjective is an adjunct modifier of the head noun, and therefore present as an adjunct CP. The CP can be either a relativized root, as in Strategy A (2a), or a relativized denominal verb following Strategy B (2b).

(2) a. [DP[D][NP[**CP[√root][C]**][NP]]]   b.[DP[D][NP[<u>CP[VP[NP][V]][C]</u>][NP]]]

In the predicative domain, I use Baker's (2008, 2011) notion of PredP to establish an argument-predicate relation between the subject DP (in the specifier of PredP) and the derived adjective (in the complement of Pred). In Tamil, I propose that the element in the complement of Pred is either a root + relativiser (3a), or a denominal verb and relativiser (3b).

(3) a. [PredP[DP][Pred'**[CP[√root][C]]**[Pred]]]

    b. [PredP[DP][Pred'<u>[CP[VP[NP][V]][C]]</u>[Pred]]]

A crucial difference between the attributive and predicative instantiations of the Tamil adjective is that the former has no agreement relations(1a, 1b), while the latter exhibits subject verb agreement (1c, 1d). In the predicative domain, either Pred or an overt copula agrees with the subject. If the adjective was formed using Strategy A, then Pred agrees (3a), and if Strategy B was used, then the copula agrees (3b). Crucially, the domain of adjectives requires a Tamil speaker to know the two strategies to build adjectives, when to apply each, and to maintain the agreement distinction between the attributive and predicative versions.

We then proceed to question **(ii):** With heritage grammars, it is generally understood that domains which involve intensive learning tend to be affected, whereas regular, rule-governed derivations are unimpeded. For Tamil, identifying that the two strategies of adjective formation exist in complementary distribution comes about from case-by-case learning of adjectives. In contrast, the distinction between the attributive and the predicative domains is a rule-governed one: There is no probe in the former, whereas Pred facilitates agreement in the latter. This distinction does not require explicit learning.

Based on these stipulations, my central predictions for adjectives in heritage Tamil are **(a)** there will be an overlap between the two strategies of adjective formation. **(b)** the distinction between the attributive and predicative domains will be maintained. In order to test these predictions, a data elicitation task was conducted with 24 adult speakers of heritage Tamil in New Delhi, India. They were shown certain images on a screen and asked to describe them using adjectives (250 tokens). The results of the study are largely consistent with the predictions made. There is overlap between the two strategies in about 35% of the utterances collected. Speakers used the two interchangeably, as seen in (4a) where a noun+V complex is used with Strategy A instead of spelling out an overt copula. (4b) is an example where the speaker combined both the strategies to form a complex structure, instead of picking one strategy of the two. (4) tells us that the RC structure that underlies Tamil adjectives is intact in heritage Tamil; heritage speakers too use them to build adjectives. However, they diverge from the baseline in not knowing the exact domains of application of each RC.

(4) a. *inda paiyan romba* <u>*uyaram-aa*-**na-van**</u>   b. *inda paiyan* **kett-a-van**-<u>*aa iruk-aan*</u>

     this boy   very   <u>height-V-**REL-MSg**</u>   this boy √**bad-REL-MSg**-<u>V be-3MSg</u>

     Intended: 'This boy is very tall.'   Intended: 'This boy is bad.'

The second prediction is also attested— there were no instances with agreement in the attributive domain, and the predicative domain consistently had agreement. Speakers of heritage Tamil did not obviate the differences between the two in any way. The presence or absence of a probing head is part of core syntax, and thus, does not suffer in the face of restricted linguistic input.

To conclude, this study explains how adjectives are derived in Tamil, and identifies grammatical domains that are susceptible or resistant to change when the grammar develops in a constrained context.

Selected References: Polinsky, M. (2018). *Heritage languages and their speakers* (Vol. 159). Cambridge University Press. || Cinque, G. (2010). *The syntax of adjectives: A comparative study* (Vol. 57). MIT press. || Jayaseelan, K. A., & Amritavalli, R. (2017). *Dravidian syntax and universal grammar*. Oxford University Press.