

Vowel-Glide Sequences in Tamil

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OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 6

Issue: 2

Month: October

Year: 2018

ISSN: 2321-788X

Received: 28.07.2018

Accepted: 27.10.2018

Published: 29.10.2018

Citation:

Srinivas, S Ganesh Kumar, U. "Vowel-Glide Sequences in Tamil." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2018, pp. 8–11.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1472662>

Abstract

The vocalic sequences [ay], [āy], [ey], [ēy], [oy] and [ōy] are attested in the phonology of Tamil. While a case may be made to treat such sequences of vocoids as diphthongs, this paper argues that they are, in fact, vowel-glide sequences.

Two pieces of evidence are adduced in support of the argument. The first is supplied by the orthography of Tamil, wherein the first vocoid from any of the aforementioned vocalic sequences and the (onset) consonant preceding it, if any, are denoted by a single (composite) letter, with the second vocoid represented by a separate letter. This suggests that the spelling system of Tamil treats the first and second vocoids of a vocalic sequence as distinct entities.

The second piece of evidence is phonological. For any sequence of vocoids to be considered a unitary vowel, the vocoids must always be part of the same syllable, exhibiting Inseparability, and must not be split across syllables, displaying Integrity. In Tamil, however, the [y] in [ay], [ey] and [oy] undergoes gemination, failing the Integrity Test, and the [y] in [āy], [ēy] and [ōy] serves as the onset of the syllable following the long vocoid, failing the Inseparability Test (Sampath Kumar 55-6). This indicates, adding to the orthographic evidence, that the Tamil vocalic sequences studied in this paper are vowels followed by glides, rather than diphthongs.

Keywords: Tamil, vowels, glides, phonology, orthography, syllabification

Introduction

Tamil (Keane 111-5, Manoharan 93-5) has ten simple vowels, five of them short, [a, i, u, e, o], and five long, [ā, ī, ū, ē, ō] (Vijayakrishnan 42-3)¹. Along with these vowels, the vocalic sequences [ay], [āy], [ey], [ēy], [oy] and [ōy]² Are also occur in the language. These sequences of vocoids are phonologically interesting in that, depending on the evidence on encounters, they may be treated as diphthongs or as vowel-glide sequences.

This paper advances the claim that the sequenced vocoids³ Are vowel-glide sequences and not diphthongs, drawing support from two types of evidence. Section 1 shows how, in the spelling system of Tamil, the first vocoid in the above sequences and a preceding onset consonant (if any) are represented by a single letter, while the second vocoid is denoted by a separate letter. This indicates that the first and second vocoids in those sequences are orthographically distinct entities in Tamil.

1. See also Tolkappiyam (Ezhuttadigaaram: pp. 36-7).

2. The case of [aw] is different from the rest, for which reason it is not discussed in this paper.

3. The terms 'vocoids' and 'vocalic sequences' refer to both vowels and glides.

Section 2, where the syllabification of the sequenced vocoids is discussed, shows that (before vowels) the second vocoid [y] undergoes gemination if the first vocoid is short and serves as the onset of the following syllable if it is long.

Since this behavior of the second vocoid contradicts the general tendency of the vocoids in a diphthong to be part of the same syllable (Inseparability) and to span no more than one syllable (Integrity), the sequenced vocoids in Tamil may be better thought of as vowel-glide sequences. A short conclusion to the paper follows, in section 3.

Orthographic Vowel-Glide Sequences

The Tamil spelling system (Bhuvaneshwari and Padakannaya 192-3) is a kind of syllabary (Gnanadesikan 395-6) wherein the first (C)V in a syllable is represented by a composite letter and the following C (or Cs) is (are) represented by separate letters, as shown below.

CVC (C) in Tamil spelling⁴

Spelling and sound	syllabified form	gloss
மு[mu]ள்[L]	[mul]	'thron'
தே[te]ன்[n]	[ten]	'honey'
த[ta]ம்[m]பி[bi]	[tam.bi]	'brother'
நீ[ni]ல[la]ம்[m]	[ni.lam]	'blue'
அ[a]ப[pa]பா[pa]	[ap.pa]	'father'
தீ[ti]ர்[r]பு[pu]	[trip.pu]	'judgement'

It is clear from (1) that, in the Tamil spelling system, the onset of syllables and the following vowel are denoted by a single letter, regardless of the length of the vowel.

When an onset consonant is followed by a sequence of vocoids, however, the consonant and the first vocoid are represented by a single letter, with a separate letter denoting the second vocoid as in words below.

Sequence of vocoids (except [ay])

Spelling and sound	syllabified form	gloss
பா[pā]ய்[y]	[pāy]	'mat'
சி[si]ப[pa]ய்[y]	[sip.pāy]	'soldier'
நெ[ne]ய்[y]	[ney]	'clarified butter'
வெ[ve]ண்[n]ணெ[ne]ய்[y]	[ven.ney]	'butter'
பே[pe]ய்[y]	[pēy]	'ghost'
பொ[po]ய்[y]	[poy]	'falsehood, lie'
தொ[to]ய்[y]வு[vu]	[toy.vu]	'worn-out, chipped.'
நோ[nō]ய்[y]	[nōy]	'illness'
ஓ[ō]ய்[y]வு[vu]	[ōy.vu]	'rest.'

The data in (2) show that the second vocoid [y] in the vocalic sequences [āy], [ey], [ēy], [oy] and [ōy] is spelled out as 'ய்', and that this letter follows the composite letter denoting the first vocoid in the mentioned sequences and the preceding consonant (if any). In the case of [ay], too, [y] is denoted by a separate letter, but this letter precedes the composite letter that stands for [a] and the preceding consonant (if any), as in (3).

[ay] in Tamil

Spelling and sound	syllabified form	gloss
கை[y-ka]	[kay]	'hand'
பை[y-pa]	[pay]	'bag'
மை[y-ma]	[may]	'bag'
தைய[y-ta]ய்[yaல்[l]	[tay.yal]	'tailoring'
வை[y-va]க்[k]கோ[kō]ல்[l]	[vayk.kōl]	'straw'

Whether the letter denoting [y] succeeds (2) or precedes (3) the letter denoting the preceding vocoid, what is crucial is that vocalic sequences in Tamil are never jointly represented by single letters. This fact would be surprising if the vocalic sequences were treated as unitary vowels, i.e., diphthongs, because other vowels, both long and short, are invariably denoted by single letters in Tamil.

If they are assumed to be segmental sequences comprising a vowel and a [+high] glide, the

4. The phonetic transcriptions used in this paper follow the style recommended in the Madras Tamil Lexicon.

fact follows straightforwardly; and so does their syllabification, as seen in the next section.

Phonological Vowel-Glide Sequences

Syllabification provides interesting insights on whether a given sequence of vocoids must be treated as a diphthong or a vowel-glide (or in other cases, glide-vowel) sequences. One defining feature of diphthongs in this connection is that the vowels that make up a diphthong are generally not split across syllables (Inseparability). If they are so separated, nothing will distinguish them from vowel-consonant sequences which may be nucleus-coda sequences in one word and nucleus-onset sequences in another one. A second defining feature of diphthongs is that all of their vocalic parts are typically accommodated within the same syllable (Integrity). This feature is related to the fact that diphthongs are complex syllable nuclei and that even parts of nuclei do not straddle syllables, while margins (i.e., segments

in the onset and coda) may. The former feature of diphthongs is revealed by the Inseparability Test, the latter by the Integrity Test, and both tests, as the previous paragraph shows, have the empirical backing (Sampath Kumar 55). Interestingly, none of the Tamil vocoid-sequences discussed in this paper pass either test, suggesting that they are not diphthongs, but sequences involving a vowel and a glide.

Those vocalic sequences whose initial vocoid is long failed the Inseparability Test. Their failure is evidenced by the data in (4) where the long vocoid and [y] are part of the same syllable in words in the left-hand column and of different syllables in words in the right-hand column. More precisely, [y] serves as the onset of the syllable following the long vocoid in words in the right-hand column, so as to satisfy the obligatory onset requirement (Hooper 534-7, Kaye and Lownstamm 287-8, Prince & Smolensky 12, 17).

Vy sequences in Tamil⁵

tāy	‘mother’	tā.y-in ‘mother-possessive.’
kāy	‘vegetable’	kā.y-il ‘vegetable-locative (in)’
pēy	‘ghost’	pē.y-udan ‘with the ghost.’
tēy	‘rub’	tē.y-um ‘fade-3.N.SG’
nōy	‘illness’	nō.y-āli ‘sick person.’

5. Third person, neuter gender, singular.

Vocalic sequences with a short initial vocoid, on the other hand, fail the Integrity Test. This may be seen from the words in the right-hand column below,

where [y], occurring as a geminate, straddles the syllable it shares with the preceding vocoid and the following one.

Vy sequences in Tamil

kay	‘hand’	kay.y-op.pam ‘signature/thumbprint.’
Pay	‘bag’	pay.y-ō.du ‘with the bag.’
mej	‘truth’	mey.yap.pan ‘a name (proper noun)’
sej	‘do’	sey.yul ‘a form of poetry; written word.’
poj	‘lie, falsehood’	oy.yā.ram ‘fun and frolic.’
noj	‘rice-like cereal’	goj.jā ‘guava.’

Summing up, the Tamil vocalic sequences studied in this paper do not exhibit Inseparability or Integrity, which are characteristic features of diphthongs. It makes sense, therefore, to view them as simple vowels (i.e. [a, ā, e, ē, o, ō]) followed by a high glide (i.e. [y]).

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the vocalic sequences [ay], [āy], [ey], [ēy], [oy] and [ōy] in Tamil are vowel-glide sequences rather than diphthongs both from orthographic and phonological perspectives.

The orthographic evidence, discussed in section 1, showed that the vocoids in the above vocalic sequences are denoted by separate letters, even though other vowels are represented by single letters. The takeaway here is that the sequenced vocoids are not treated as unitary vowels by the spelling system of Tamil. The phonological evidence, presented in section 2, showed that the sequenced vocoids fail to exhibit either the Integrity or the Inseparability during syllabification that diphthongs generally exhibit. It is, therefore, reasonable to treat them as vowel-glide sequences rather than as diphthongs. Lastly, this paper has enunciated a bi-directional approach to the treatment of vocalic sequences in languages where, like in Tamil, both phonological and orthographic facts may shed light on their constitution (Padgett 1937-42).

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