

# THE NOTION OF SUBJECT IN TAMIL

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## 1.0 Introduction

Subject is used in the analysis of grammatical function to refer to a major constituent of sentence or clause structure. It is traditionally associated with the "doer" of an action expressed by a verb. Linguistic analyses have emphasized the complexity involved in this notion, distinguishing, for example, grammatical subject from the underlying or logical subject of a sentence, as in the example puli cinkattaal kollapparratu "the tiger was killed by lion", where puli "tiger" is the grammatical subject and cinkam "lion" is the logical subject. But it does not mean that any subject however, can be analyzed as doer of an action. For instance consider a sentence such as marakkari, nanRaaka viRRatu the vegetables sold well. The distinction of subjects in terms of surface grammatical features (using word order or inflectional criteria) is usually relatively straight forward, but the specification of their function is more complex, and has attracted much discussion recently. It is proposed to explore the notion of subject in Tamil in the light of recent theories in syntax.

The present paper tries to find answers for the following questions:

- i. Is there any notion called "subject" in Tamil? In other words, is there any necessity for establishing the notion called "subject" in Tamil?
- ii. If the answer for the above question is "yes", how is it realized in Tamil, morphologically, syntactically and

semantically? In other words, what are properties that characterize a NP in a sentence as subject?

## 1.1 Reasons for establishing the notion "Subject" in Tamil

The traditional grammarians of Tamil make a two fold distinction in sentence analysis between ezuvay "subject" and payanilai "predicate". The notion ceyappaTuporuL "object" also has been distinguished from the two notions already mentioned. The first case has been designated by the traditional grammarians as ezuvay veeRRumai "subject case". It has been also noted by the traditional grammarians that the subject is in agreement with the verb by inflection.

1. Kumaran vantaan  
Kumaran come - past - 3<sup>rd</sup> person - mas.Sing.  
Kumaran came.  
- aan is in agreement with the subject "Kumaran".

Many discussions on grammar have taken into account the notion of "subject". So there is a need to establish the notion of "subject" in Tamil.

## 2.0 Properties that qualify subject in Tamil

An attempt to arrive at universal characterization of "subject" is made in Keenan (1974). He has suggested sets of semantic, formal and behavioural properties that qualify subject. Different

languages select different subjects out of these properties. None of the individual properties in itself is a defining characteristic of subject. Semantic properties such as 'actor' or 'agent', formal properties such as verbal agreement, case marking, etc and behavioural properties such as the controller of the syntactic process of reflexivation, equi, conjunction, reduction etc are some of the properties suggested by him. His insights can be taken into consideration while qualifying subject in Tamil.

Subject can be realized in Tamil morphologically, syntactically and semantically. In other words, we have to take into consideration the morphological, syntactical and semantical features while establishing subject in Tamil.

## 2.1 Morphological considerations

Subject is realized morphologically by the nominative form as opposed to the other non-nominative forms in which the case is marked by certain suffixes.

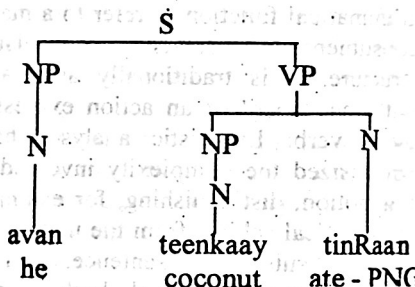
- avan celviyai paarttaan  
he celvi - acc see - past PNG  
"He saw chelvi"

There are cases in which the distinction between subject and object is not made as the object form is unmarked for accusative case. Here again the agreement marker helps us to identify the subject from the object.

- avan teenkady tinRaan  
he cocount eat - past - PNG  
he ate cocount.

## 2.2 Syntactic considerations

In generative grammar, subject is sometimes defined as the NP immediately dominated by S. This contention also will not stand if we propose a flat structure for Tamil.



As we noted already it is the agreement marker which can help us to identify the subject. The agreement in one form of the verb may give clue to the identification of subject as noted in the following pairs:

- celvi kumaranaai paarkkavillai  
chelvi kumaran - acc saw - not  
"chelvi did not see kumaran"
- chelvi kumaranaai paarttal  
chelvi kumaran - acc saw - PNG  
"chelvi saw kumaran"

### 2.2.1 Different agreement makers for the same subject

There are instances where different agreement markers are selected for the same subject. The subject in this context is distributive in nature.

- ovvoru maaNavanam aaciriyarai  
each student - emp teacher - acc  
matikkiraan  
respect - Pres - PNG  
"Every student respects the teacher"

7. ovvoru MaaNavanum aairiyarai  
 each student emp teacher – acc  
 matikkiRaarkaL  
 respect – PNG  
 Every students respect the teacher.

8. enKalil palar caNTaitai  
 among many persons fight – acc  
 VeRukkiRaarkal  
 hate – pres. PNG  
 Many persons among us hate fight.

9. enKalil palar caNTayai veRukki Room  
 among many persons fight – acc  
 hate – pres – PNG  
 Many persons among us hate fight.

The first pair (6,7) differ from each other in selecting the number in the agreement marking, the first one selects third person masculine singular number (-aan) and the second one third person human plural (-aarKaL). The second pair (8,9) differs from each other in selecting person marking, the first one selects third person human plural (-aarKaL) where as the second one selects first person exclusive plural (-oom). If we go by the case form, the subject of the first and the second sentences can be glossed as “each one of the student” and if we go by the agreement marker the subjects of the sentences vary according to the agreement markers. Similarly in the case of the third and fourth sentences, if we go by the case form, the subject can be glossed as “many among us”, but if we go by the agreement markers, the subjects of the sentences vary according to the agreement markers.

Apert from agreement there are certain other syntactical formulation that necessiates the notion of subject.

## 2.2.2 taan anaphora

The reflexive taan has its antecedent, the notion of subject.

10. Kumaran tannai viLankikkonTaan  
 Kumaran self – acc understand refle –  
 PNG  
 Kumaran understood himself.

## 2.3 Semantic Considerations

As far as the semantic properties are concerned, none of them, not even a cluster of them, is sufficient to characterize the notion of subject in Tamil. Note that not only actor / agent, but also victim / patient / goal / recipient / experiencer, range, etc can be the subject of a sentence.

Traditionally subject is identified with the doer of the action or agent.

11. Kumaran ratiyai paarttaan  
 Kumaran Rati – acc saw – PNG  
 “Kumaran saw Rathy”

In the above example the doer or agent of the action is identified with the subject. But in the case of passive construction the object is realized in the nominative form and the subject in the instrumental form.

12. Kumaran ratiyai KaTattinaan  
 Kumaran Rati – acc Kidnapped –  
 PNG  
 “Kumaran kidnapped Rathy”
13. rati kumaranaal KaTattappaTTaaL  
 Rati kumaran – inst kidnapped – PNG  
 “Rathy was kidnapped by Kumaran”

In such contexts subject can be identified by taking into account the semantic notion of “Agent”.

Subject is generally represented by the nominative form of a noun. In the absence of a nominative form, we may like to take a dative form or an instrumental form as subject as found in the following sentences.

14. enakku KaLailliRatu  
I - dat tired - pres  
"I feel tired"

15. ennaal camaaLikka muTiyum  
I - inst to manage capable - pres  
I can manage

Here in these contexts though the nominative subject and the agreement marker fail to give us a clue to identify the subject, we can take into consideration the semantic factor. enakku is an "experiencer" realized in dative form and ennaal is a "potential Agent" realized in instrumental form. In the absence of the proper Agent, the other arguments in the following sentences tan co-refers to the dative/instrumental subject.

16. Kumaranukku tan tankayai  
Kumaran - dat self sister - acc  
piTikkum like  
"Kumaran likes his sister"

17. Kumaranaal tan taattaavai  
Kumaran-inst self grandfather-acc  
paarkka muTiyum  
look after  
"Kumaran can look after his grand father"

Even reflexive pronoun taan co-refers to the dative subject.

18. Kumaranukku tannai viLankum  
Kumaran - dat self - acc knows  
"Kumaran knows himself"

The semantic criteria of selection of subject based on the hierarchical ordering of case relations may be put into test in the sentences like the following where the decision is not easy.

19. Kumaranukku toNTai nookinRatu  
Kumaran - dat throat pain - pres - PNG  
"Kumaran's throat is paining".

Here the agreement marker with the verb co-refers to toNTai 'throat' which is in nominative form. The morphological criteria has to be given precedence over the semantic criteria, and so toNTai "throat" has to be considered as subject.

Note that the following sentences we are tempted to take the accusative form (object) as the subject.

20. Kumaranaik kaaNavillai  
kumaran - acc found - not  
"Kumaran is not found"

But in the following sentence there is no problem in deciding the subject as the subject is explicit.

21. naan kumaranaik kaaNavillai  
I Kumaran - acc found not  
"I did not find kumaran"

Note that the following sets of semantically related sentences differ in the selection of the case forms of the arguments and in the agreement markers.

22. Kumaran pala mozikaLait  
Kumaran many languages - acc  
terintiruntaan  
know - past - aspect - PNG  
"Kumaran had known many languages"

23. Kumaranukku pala mozikaLait  
Kumaran-dat many languages-acc  
teriyum  
know  
"Kumaran knows many languages"
24. Kumaranukku pala mozikaLait  
Kumaran - dat many languages acc  
terintiruntatu  
know - past - aspect  
Kumaran knows many languages.
25. Kumaranukku pala mozikal  
Kumaran - dat many languages  
terintiruntana  
know - past - aspect - PNG  
Kumaran knows many languages.

Nominative form and agreement marker selects kumaran as subject in the case of first (22) sentence and mozikal 'Languages' as subject in the case of fourth (25) sentence. The semantic criteria selects kumaranukku as subject in the case of second (23) and third (24) sentences.

### 3.0 Conclusion

The traditional grammarians talk about the notions such as ezuvaay, payanilai and ceyappaTuporuL which can be roughly glossed as "subject" "predicate" and "object: The notion of subject in Tamil is not discrete one. It appears that some noun phrases are more subject - like than others. If we are to rank the candidates on a scale of subjecthood, nominative subjects must be placed first because of their versatility, and dative subjects must take second place, because of the restriction on their subject like behaviour.

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