

Arunakirinathan, T.  
PAPER

### **Variations in Dialect and Usage of Specific Vocabulary among Different Castes in the Jaffna Peninsula**

T. Arunakirinathan, ELTC, University of Jaffna

Jaffna Peninsula, the northern most part of Sri Lanka, has a population of around 632 thousand and is predominantly Tamil speaking. Tamil is “Diglossic” in nature. The highly codified variety is considered “standard” and used for writing, while there are various dialects spoken in India and in Srilanka. Sociolects within a dialect could be observed in India where the social segregation on the basis of caste is rigid but it is not so in Sri Lanka where the social segregation is not strictly followed. However, specific vocabulary and usage patterns unique to each caste could be identified in the Sri Lankan context. This paper illustrates this with examples found in a study which is currently underway in Jaffna Peninsula which has its own dialect/s.

Even though there are various social changes taking place, the unique vocabulary and usage patterns still exist and each caste preserves its uniqueness.

This study is descriptive and participatory in nature. Direct participation, observation, interviews and focus group discussions were used to obtain information. Further, secondary sources such as journals, books and web resources were also used.

Sri Lanka has three major Tamil dialects: namely, Jaffna, Batticaloa and Hill Country dialects. Jaffna Tamil is considered the oldest, most archaic, and claimed to be closest to old Tamil. It preserves many archaic features that predate *Tolkappiam*, the grammatical treatise of Tamil. Further, there are a number of Prakrit loan words too. A sociolect of “Paraiyar” of Kayts still has a number of archaic words and Prakrit loans not found in any other dialect or sociolect of Tamil. A similar phenomenon could be observed in the language of other castes in Jaffna. Even though there are 17 identifiable castes in Jaffna now, this presentation will focus only on the Velalar (Farmers), Paraiyar (Drum beaters), Sakiliyar (Leather workers) and Kusavar (Clay workers/Potters).