English-Tamil Blends in a Film Song

S. Srinivas
Assistant Professor, SSN College of Engineering, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

Siddhartha Raju
Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning, Puttaparthi, India

Abstract

The song 'macho ennaacho' from the Tamil film Mersal became an instant hit among the film-going audience in Tamil Nadu when it was released in 2017. Written by Mr. Vivek, the song has quite a few 'words' wherein the first part is English and second Tamil. While the blending of English and Tamil in this fashion might seem random at first blush, this paper shows that it is systematic in that the first/English part of the blends supplies 'meaning' and the second/Tamil part 'grammatical information'. Put another way, English 'roots' with semantic content are skillfully combined in the song with Tamil 'suffixes' which carry grammatical load (e.g. Number, Gender, Case-marking etc.), illustrating the sort of word-level code-mixing that is common among users of Tamil (Pirahanayagi 91-93, 102-3; Annamalai 20-7; Geetha and Kamatchi 235-7) even in everyday speech.

Keywords: English-Tamil blends, Code-mixing, meaning, function, stems, affixes

Introduction

There is a song which begins with the words 'macho *ennaacho*' in the 2017 Tamil film *Mersal*, directed by Mr. Atlee. The brainchild of the lyricist Mr. Vivek, the song has some words such as 'match-*aachoo*', 'love-*it-een*' and *'dream-il'*, where the unitalicised part belongs to English and the italicised part to Tamil. Such blending of English and Tamil within words is argued to be systematic, rather than random, in this paper.

The argument is supported by the simple fact that, in all the blends in question, the first part is an English 'root' with meaning and the second a Tamil 'suffix' (or suffixes) carrying grammatical information. In the word 'love-*iTT-een*', for example, 'love' is the root, '*iTT-*' is the past tense suffix and '-*een*' the first person singular marker. The other blends display a similar pattern, a meaningful English root combining with one or more grammatical suffixes, as seen in section 1.

Section 2 shows that at least some of the blends in the song are truncated forms of how they appear in the everyday speech of Tamils, with the Tamil part always undergoing the truncation. This section also shows how word-level code-mixing between English and Tamil is a common affair (Pirahanayagi 91-93, 102-3; Annamalai 20-7, Geetha and Kamatchi 235-7).

Section 3 argues that in the context of a Tamil conversation English verbs may be treated as 'nouns', prompting the use of verbal elements from Tamil alongside them.

Section 4 provides a short conclusion of the paper.

1. English-Tamil Blends in the Song

The song 'macho *ennaacho*' has the following 'words' where Tamil and English come together. In this context, the term 'word' may be taken to mean a minimal grammatical and semantic unit.

1. **English-Tamil blends[1]**

Word	Detailed gloss[2]	Meaning
a. huge-*iTT-een*[3]	hug-PAST-1SG'	*I hugged*
b. miss-*iTT-een*	'miss-PAST-1.SG'	*I missed*
c. love-*iTT-een*	love-PAST-1.SG'	*I loved*
d. tweet-*ur-een*	'tweet-PRES-1SG'	*I tweeted*
e. hop-i-*poo-v-een*	'hop-i-go-FUT-1.SG'	*I will hop*
f. whistle-*u-dh-aDi*	'whistle-PRES-3.N.SG-2.F.SG (clitic)'	*it whistled*
g. float *aa-n-een*	'float become-PAST-1.SG'	*I floated*
h. into-*two-aa-ch-oo*	'into two-become-PAST-interrogative'	*became two?*
i. match-*aa-ch-oo*	'match-become-PAST-interrogative'	*matched?*
j. snooze-*aa-ch-oo*	'snooze-become-PAST-interrogative'	*snoozed?*
k. touch-*iTT-aa*	'touch-PAST-conjunction (because)'	*because (she) touched*
l. speak-*iTT-aa*	'speak-PAST-conjunction (because)'	*because (she) spoke*
m. take-*iTT-aa*	'take-PAST-conjunction (because)'	*took*
n. smell-*um*	'smell-INCLUSIVE'	*all smells*
o. dream-*il*	'dream-LOCATIVE'	*in the dream*
p memory-*aa*	'memory-ACCUSATIVE'	*memory*
q. sweet-*aa*	'sweet-adv'	*sweetly*

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1. The examples and the glosses given in this paper pertain to Spoken Tamil, and not the variety used in formal contexts.

2 Abbreviations in the gloss: SG – singular, PRES – present tense, FUT – future tense, F – feminine (gender), N - neuter (gender), M – masculine gender, adv – adverbial (marker).

3. Word-final nasal consonants often undergo deletion in Spoken Tamil and the preceding vowel ends up surfacing with the nasality of the deleted vowel (Srinivas and Kudva n.pag). For the sake of convenience, however, and since phonology is not the focus of this paper, word-final nasal consonants are not deleted and vowels remain oral in the transcriptions used herein.

The blends in (1a-f) all have an English root followed by Tamil suffixes denoting Tense and Number/Gender, with (1f) also having a second person feminine clitic. Moving down the list, one notices that the examples in (1g-j) have an English root -- or in the case of 'into two', a phrase treated like a nominal root -- followed by a (helping) verb marker, which in turn is followed by markers of Tense and interrogation in (1h-j), and by markers of Tense and Number/Gender in (1g) . The cases in (1k-m) introduce a Tamil conjunction ('because'), and the -um in (1n) may also be construed as a conjunction 'and'. In (1o, p), there are Case markers (Schiffman 301), and, finally, the suffix -aa in(1q) makes the word 'sweet' an adverb. The blends taken from the song thus bear out the pattern mentioned in the introduction -- an English root with semantic content, combining with Tamil suffixes, which generally encode some grammatical information. The next section, however, shows how some of the blends above are just truncated forms of full 'English-Tamil' expressions, which occur in the everyday speech of Tamil speakers who also use English. The section seeks to show therefore that English-Tamil blending at the word-level is a common type of code-mixing among Tamils.

2. Blends Expanded

The following blends from the song are truncated variants of full expressions, which may be observed among Tamils who also speak English in code-mixing contexts. The truncate are given in the left-most column below, with the full forms following them. On the extreme right, a glossary is given only for the full forms, due to considerations of space.

2. Truncated and full blends[4]

	Truncated	Full	Detailed gloss
a.	hugg-*iTT-een*	hug *paNN-iTT-een*	'hug do-PAST-1.SG'
b.	miss-iTT-een	miss *paNN-iTT-een*	'miss do-PAST-1.SG'
c.	love-*iTT-een*	love *paNN-iTT-een*	'love do-PAST-1.SG'
d.	tweet-*ur-een*	tweet *paNN-ur-een*	'tweet do-PRES-1.SG'
e.	hop-i-*poo-v-een*	hop *paNNi poo-v-een*	'hop do (non-finite) go-FUT-1.SG'
f.	whistle-*udh-aDi*	whistle *paNN-u-dh-aDi*	'whistle do-PRES-3.N.SG-2.F.SG (clitic)'
g.	touch-*iTT-aa*	touch *paNN-iTT-aa*	'touch do-PAST-interrogative'
h.	speak-*iTT-aa*	*speak *paNN-iTT-aa*	'speak do-PAST-interrogative'
i.	take-*iTT-aa*	*take *paNN-iTT-aa*	'take do-PAST-interrogative'

4   The full forms in (2h, i) seem to me, intuitively, to be less acceptable than the others.

All the blends in (2a) have English roots which are verbs, and yet these roots are not directly used as verbs in conversational contexts by Tamil speakers. Usually, in such contexts, an auxiliary verb (*paNNu* 'do' in this case) from Tamil and the appropriate suffixes from the verbal paradigm are used along with the English verbs, as observed in the middle column above. By severing the auxiliary verb in his song, however, the poet Mr. Vivek directly marries the English roots with the Tamil suffixes. Such a marriage, besides making the resultant blends appear both English and Tamil simultaneously, serves a more practical grammatical purpose, refurbishing English verbs, which have an impoverished agreement system, with Number, Gender and other markers that typically accompany Tamil verbs.

While the blends in (2) are truncated in the song, but occur only as their full variants in the code-mixed speech of Tamils, the other blends in (1), reproduced as (3), are not truncated even in the song, and reflect the usual word-internal 'mix' of English and Tamil therein.

Full blends

	Blends	Glossary
a.	float *aa-n-een*	'float-become-PAST-1.SG'
b.	into-two-*aa-ch-oo*	'into two-become-PAST-interrogative'
c.	match-*aa-ch-oo*	'match-become-PAST-interrogative'
d.	snooze-*aa-ch-oo*	'snooze-become-PAST-interrogative'
e.	dream-*il*	'dream-LOCATIVE' '
f.	smell-*um*	'smell-INCLUSIVE.'
g.	memory-*aa*	'memory-ACCUSATIVE.'
h.	sweet-*aa*	'sweet-adv.'

The question that remains to be addressed is why a Tamil verb is required in the full blends in (2) and those in (3a-d), though the English roots therein are verbs themselves. The next section answers the question with the argument that the roots in question, though verbal in English, are treated as 'nouns' in contexts where the preeminent language of conversation is Tamil. With English verbs being treated as nouns, sentences require a verb to be complete, and that verb is provided by Tamil.

3. English Verbs as Nouns in Tamil Contexts

Tamils who also speak English tend to mix both languages, even within words, in their conversations, as indicated in the previous sections. When using English verbs in their conversations, however,

Tamils also employ a Tamil verb as seen in the full forms in (2), and in (4), where the relevant English verbs and the following Tamil verbs (along with suffixes) are underlined.

English-Tamil verbs

a. *smoke   paNN-ur-aan*
    smoke   do-PRES-3.M.SG
    He smokes.

b. *saappaaDu   waste   seyy-ir-aa.*
    Food   waste   do-PRES-3.F.SG
    She wastes food.

c. *Nalla   play   pann-uv-a.*
    well   play   ndo-FUT-2.SG
    You will play well.

d. *inda sattaj-um veshti-um   match aaga-la.*
    This shirt-and   dhoti-and   match become-NEG
    This short and (this) dhoti do not match.

e. *idu   work   aa-g-um.*
    This   work   become-FUT-3.N.SG.
    This will work.

If English verbs are treated as verbs in conversational contexts in Tamil, grammatical suffixes may be directly appended to them, like in the song (see (2)), making the appearance of the Tamil auxiliary verbs -- meaning 'do' (4a-c) and 'become' (d-e) -- redundant. If English verbs are regarded as nouns in those contexts, however, those auxiliary verbs from Tamil become necessary to host the Person/Number/Gender suffixes (and others, if any), for without them a sentence in a Pro-drop language like Tamil (Savio n. pag) would be incomplete.

There is some rationale for assuming that English verbs are nouns when they occur in Tamil conversations. First of all, from the standpoint of linguistic logic, it makes sense to think of a word from Language$_L$ (English, in this case) in the context of a conversation in Language$_M$ (Tamil) as a noun, because it can then combine freely with the verbal paradigms of Language$_M$. Treating it as a verb, on the other hand, might spawn confusion as to whether the affixes should also be from Language$_L$, or whether they can be from Language$_M$.

Moreover, speakers of other languages, including Hindi (Kumar 111, 139-45), Kannada (Sridhar 110), Marathi (Ahire 192) and Pashto (Khan and Muysken 129) also tend to use an auxiliary (or a light) verb from their own language along with English verbs.

This point is consistent with the idea that, at least in those code-mixing contexts where one language predominates another, verbs from the latter may be regarded as nouns, while the verbal (and therefore the sentence) control rests with the former.

Conclusion

This paper has shown how the English-Tamil blends from the song 'Macho *ennaacho*' from the movie *Mersal* are made up of an English root, with semantic content or meaning, and Tamil suffixes, which supply various kinds of grammatical information. While some of the blends from the song were seen to be truncated variants of how they occur in the code-mixed speech of Tamils, others were seen to reflect, as they were, the kind of English-Tamil blends that Tamils use in normal conversations. The paper has also advanced the claim that verb roots in English are arguably considered by speakers of Tamil to be nouns, which justifies why, in conversational contexts, English verbs are invariably accompanied by an auxiliary verb from Tamil. The claim was found to be sound from a linguistic-philosophical perspective and to be consistent with evidence found in other languages.

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Abbreviations in the gloss: SG – singular, PRES – present tense, FUT – future tense, F – feminine (gender), N - neuter (gender), M – masculine gender, adv – adverbial (marker)

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