

***Sunya Sambashanai* – Lingua Franca of the Tamil Siddhas: An Insight into the Intuitive Linguistic Model of the Tamil Siddhas**

Prof. M. Rajantheran¹ and Raja Viknarasah^{2*}

¹Professor, Department of Indian Studies, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

²Research Student, Sydney, Australia.

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This paper presents studies of the complexity and uniqueness of *Sunya Sambashanai*, the ancient linguistic model of the Tamil Siddhas. By shedding light on the context of the Tamil Siddhas, whose tradition and works remain shrouded in mystery, the authors of this paper provide the basis for their cryptic linguistic model as an alternative to the other popular models of human communication.

In the last 40 years, the non-traditional inferential linguistic model popularised from the intuition of Paul Grice, according to whom, communicating something by an utterance involves the attribution or recognition of the speaker's intentions, challenged the traditional code model based on coding-decoding of a conveyed message. Thus contrasting from these linguistic models by employing stanzas from *Tirumanthiram*, one of the most advanced and ancient works by the Tamil Siddha saint – *Tirumular*, as examples, this paper elucidates the uniqueness of *Sunya Sambashanai* - the linguistic model of the Tamil Siddhas.

The authors conclude this paper hoping sincerely that it serves not only to shed the well-deserved light on the advanced and unique linguistic model employed by the ancient Tamil Siddhas, but also to provide a basis for future research in this fertile field of study.

Keywords: Tamil Siddhas, *Sunya Sambashanai*, Inferential linguistic model, intent, *Tirumanthiram*.

INTRODUCTION

The most powerful mechanism of human relationship is communication. As such, language with varying linguistic models constitutes the fundamental mode of communication serving as a primary mode for sharing our ideas and experiences with one another.

Every linguistic model comes with its own set of limitations. The fundamental challenge that confronts these models is their inherent inability to holistically capture the message and intentions of the conveyor and to ensure that it is received fully by the receiver with its original intent [1]. Be it syntactic, semantic limitations or the inability to accommodate other non-linguistic or extralinguistic elements of the conveyor's original intent, for example, emotions, intuition etc., the linguistic models are faced with an inherent gap between the intent of the

conveyor and what the receiver finally comprehends [2]. This challenge gets compounded when the subject that is conveyed involves complex intuitive insights in areas such as spirituality, arts etc.

This paper discusses an alternate linguistic model that existed as a communication mechanism in the ancient times amongst the Tamil *Siddha* cult of South India. This model of communication used by the Tamil *Siddhas* was aimed at sharing their intuitive and experiential spiritual insights with their disciples and followers.

It is our expectation that upon reading this paper, the reader will not only get a better appreciation of, *Sunya Sambashanai*, the Tamil *Siddha* linguistic model, but also the context of their spiritual traditions. Supported by stanzas from the *Tirumanthiram*, a prominent spiritual scripture by one of the foremost Tamil *Siddha* saints, *Tirumular*, this paper will elucidate the manner in which this alternate communication mechanism was employed by the Tamil *Siddhas* to share their advanced spiritual

insights. Perhaps it is for this reason that this alternate communication model is appropriately termed by the *Siddhas* themselves as, *Sunya Sambashanai* or the "Language of the Void".

Who are the *Siddhas*?

Before exploring the Tamil *Siddha* linguistic mechanism, it is important to understand who the ancient Tamil *Siddhas* were and what their tradition was. Etymologically, the word "*Siddha*" means, "perfected, accomplished or realised one" [3]. *Siddhas*, *Siddhars*, and *Chittar* are the terms variously used in English by the scholars both, Western and Indian, in association with the *Siddhas* [4]. Even though, each of these terms is associated with a specific connotation in Tamil, they are commonly used to refer to fundamentally the same group of spiritually evolved human beings [5].

Broadly speaking these terms have come from two root words in Tamil, namely (1) *siddhi*, meaning miracle, alchemy, supernatural performance and (2) *chittu*, connected with mind and mental powers [5]. From the perspective of the *Siddhas*, both the above aspects are quite interrelated to each other in the sense that, the *Siddhas* are said to have attained their perfection by employing a number of advanced spiritual techniques of which advanced practice of yoga and secretive alchemical techniques are included. For example, the *Siddhas* as yogis are said to have the "triple point control", namely, (i) the control of breath, (ii) the control of the seminal fluid, and (iii) the control of mind – an outcome of advanced tantric yogic practices [6].

The term "*Siddhayana*", is used to describe self-realisation - the aim of the *Siddhas* [7]. Their enlightened, liberated state is said to be taintless and limitless transcending all empirical knowledge. Several ancient literature evidences show that *Siddhas* are those who have attained this state. For example, *Gnanakkovai*, *Kalluli Siddha*, Song 22, *Akappei Siddha*, Song 72, *Tirumanthiram* highlight this point.

Siddhas firmly believed in the body-mind-spirit continuum that could be preserved unbroken with special techniques [8]. To them, the word "*Sarira*" or body, is a web of interconnected entanglements of various facets of worldly existence – physical, mental, spiritual, emotional etc. [9]. And according to the *Siddha* mindset, the physical body is a key vehicle or an enabler for higher spiritual practices which ultimately leads to freedom of will or *mukthi* – removal of the worldly entanglements. The *Siddhas* were also advanced practitioners of *Siddha maruttuvam*, ancient south Indian medical science through which, they treated their bodies as temples for realising the "*Divine within*" [10]. With this premise, the Tamil *Siddhas* are said to have developed some of the most complex systems of Ayurvedic techniques to achieve super natural longevity – *Kaya Sadhana* [8].

As a result of leading such lifestyle of advanced yogic

and spiritual endeavours – *sadhana*, the *Siddhas* are said to have possessed many supernatural powers called, *Siddhis*. Of these most prominent *Siddhis* are called the *Ashtamaa Siddhis* [11] or the 8 Super-human attainments including the following:

- anima, the ability to become minute;
- mahima, the ability to become vast;
- laghima, the ability to become very light;
- garima, the ability to become very heavy;
- prakamyā, ability to transmigrate into another body;
- isatva, the ability to create or control;
- vasitva, the ability to gain domination over creation; and
- kamavasayitva, the ability to pervade.

According to the available scriptures, on the *Siddhas*, there have been innumerable Tamil *Siddhas* during the ancient past. Of them, 18 most prominent Tamil *Siddhas* include, Agastyar, Tirumular, Bogar, Korakkar, Kalanginathar, Sattamuni, Nandi, Therayar, Konganar, Machchamuni, Karuvurar, Patanjaliyar, Edaikaadar, Kamalamuni, Punakkesar, Sundaranadar, Romarishi and Pulippani [12].

The *Siddha* Tradition

Lives of ancient sages and saints of India are replete with the tendency of wandering from place to place. For the *Siddhas*, the entire world is their home and wandering across the world is a tradition to emphasise their connectedness with that home. They go anywhere and do anything [13]. They live in the moment and experience the "now". To a *Siddha*, his tradition is simply a scheme of life as it progresses and dissolves in harmony with nature, allowing him to joyously live his part in the "greater design of the Lord", happily and just being.

The Tamil *Siddhas* were advanced spiritual practitioners to whom God was a universal energy, a cosmic awareness or a final destination of each worldly being, in order to ultimately merge with (*Tirumanthiram*, *Tanthiram* 9). The concept of God in *Siddha* tradition was not dealt with as being a separate entity confined to a religious practice. To emphasise this point one would note that no Tamil *Siddha* including Tirumular, has sung in praise of any personal God. For the Tamil *Siddha*, everything is *Siva*, i.e. God, and a source of all awareness of the vast cosmos – "*Para Vell*" – empty space or "*Atu*" – "That" [14].

An important facet of the Tamil *Siddhas* is that they were free thinkers unbounded by mental or social limitations [15]. They were, rather controversially, rebellious in expressing their spiritual insights and opposing religious or scriptural rules and rituals. Tirumular refers to the *Siddhas* as those who do not follow a "*samayam*" – religion (*Tirumanthiram*, *Tanthiram* 7). The term "*samayam*" in Tamil means, convention or rule. Pambatticcittar another of the 18 key Tamil *Siddhas*,

drives home this point in a rather un-conventional manner by saying that those who have built temples for local gods are those “who do not merge with the real Lord” [16]. According to the writings of Pambatticcittar “a *Siddha* is one who has burnt the scriptures”, meaning, a *Siddha* is one who has attained a stage of enlightenment without being bound by the injunctions of the religions [16].

The *Siddha* philosophies were taught directly in the traditional manner by the *Siddhas* to their disciples. Their works were also written on palm leaf manuscripts and handed down through the generations [17]. *Siddhas* have over the centuries developed a vast knowledge system in many fields including spirituality, yoga, medicine, alchemy etc. [18]. It is in this context that their unique linguistic model – *Sunya Sambashanai* stands out as an alternate to our contemporary models. The following section deals with two commonly accepted linguistic models.

Two Linguistic Models

Amongst various forms and modes of human communication, there are primarily two categories of linguistic models of communication that have emerged and has been popularised by the studies of the last few decades [19]. They are namely;

- (a) the *code* model; and
- (b) the *inferential* model of communication.

The conventional *code* model is based on the principle of treating human communication as consisting of a “set of codes” (i.e. symbols) consisting of a set of observable and/ or unobservable messages transmitted by the communicator that requires to be *decoded* by the receiver for a successful understanding [2].

Natural languages have primarily been seen as operating like codes. This simplistic view of human communication assumes that successful code-based communication as only being possible when there is mirrored duplication between the messages that are sent and received [20]. In other words, the message encoded will have to be identical to the message received for communication to be successful implying a simple two-step (i.e. coding and decoding) process devoid of any other contextual factors.

Inferential Linguistic Model

Herbert Paul Grice (1913 - 1988) provided and popularised the impetus for the concept of the inferential model of communication making a central claim that an essential feature of most human communication, both verbal and non-verbal, is expression and recognition of intentions [1].

From Grice’s intuition emerged a non-conventional alternative to the classical code model - the inferential

model of linguistics. The inferential model has been popularised by many including Sperber and Wilson and others according to whom, human communication is more than just the process of coding and decoding. Their central claim is that one and the same sentence can be used to convey an infinite number of different thoughts depending on the elements making up the extralinguistic situation [21]. For example, the statement, “*Clara is Sleeping*” may be taken as:

- A merely an assertion of fact;
- A request for confirmation with an increased intonation; or
- An expression of frustration that Clara is sleeping at a time when she is supposed to do something else etc.

In each of the above instances and the conveyor’s intentions is different despite the linguistic expression used remains the same in all cases. Arriving at the true intended meaning of the conveyor’s message involves a process of *inference* – hence, the inferential linguistic model [1]. Similar to the two steps of the code linguistic model (i.e. coding and de-coding), the inferential linguistic model has two steps too. These steps are:

- (a) Ostension – a productive process carried out by the conveyor; and
- (b) Inference – an interpretative process performed by the addressee.

The inferential linguistic model bases these two stages on the principle where the conveyor of the message firstly produces a set of assumptions in order to make the recipients believe in something and then make his intention manifest mutually between himself and the recipients, i.e. share his intention that he wants to communicate something [22].

For a successful communication in an inferential communication model, the conveyor’s communicative intention has to be known to the receiver. In the example given above we saw that unless the conveyor’s communicative intention is fully understood by the receiver, it could be misunderstood and hence, resulting in a *failed* communication [23].

The inferential linguistic communication model, despite broadening the scope of communication to the conveyor’s intention, has its own limitations in having to contextualising of the extralinguistic situation of the intended message.

In the *ostensive-inferential* communication the communicator produces a stimuli in order to fulfil two intentions [22]:

- the informative intention to mutually manifest to the

communicator and the audience, a set of assumptions, or in other words, to make the audience believe something.

- The communicative intention to make his informative intention mutually manifest. That is, the intention to make the audience recognise that he has an informative intention, i.e. he wants to communicate something.

For example, take the situation where a young girl goes up to her father and hands out her hair-drier to him (a bald man!), who is very good at mending things and is used to the daughter asking him to fix things for her. This ostensive stimulus of handing out the hair-drier is used to make manifest the assumptions 'that there's something wrong with the hair drier and that the girl wanted her father (i.e. the addressee) to mend it'.

Here, the *informative intention* is the assumption that the girl (i.e. the addressor) wanted to make manifest that she wanted her father to entertain in his mind: "There's something wrong with her hair-drier and that she wanted him to mend it". The girl's *communicative intention* is the intention is that her father recognises the fact that she has an informative intention i.e. that he realises that she wants to communicate something to him. The communicative intention has to be fulfilled for communication both to be considered ostensive and to take place successfully.

Human communication has many obvious limitations relating to linguistic rigidity including, syntactic, semantic and phonetic constraints, limited number of words that are available in modern languages to express a thought [2]. Whilst the code linguistic model presented itself with a simplistic framework of code-decode framework, the inferential linguistic model based on Grice's intuitive case for human communication expanded the model to the need for contextualising.

This "inferential" approach has always left a gap between the "transmitter" of a message and the "receiver" leaving the "true" message never un-delivered in its original form forever. Especially when we deal with complex and intuitive experiences such as, spiritualism, arts etc. [1] that require "realisation" than "mere knowledge", the limitations of our modern linguistic framework become very apparent.

In Tamil, it is called, "*anubhavam*" (*anubhava* in Sanskrit), which would loosely translate as "experience". But could there be another form of a linguistic framework which could "transfer" from the conveyor to the receiver, an experience in a manner that most of or even all of that which was experienced could be felt by the recipient? [24].

Answer to this lies in what Tamil *Siddhas* referred to as "*vetta veli rahasyam*" – secrets of the empty space, the *twilight language*, or "unexpressed expression" [18]. This answer refers to the Tamil *Siddha* language. This linguistic model of the Tamil *Siddhas* presents itself as an

alternative to the afore-mentioned two models. .

Sunya Sambashanai – The Alternative Linguistic Model of the Tamil Siddhas

In the preceding section we saw that the Tamil *Siddhas* were in fact, unique a category of evolved human beings with spiritual advancements that would be hard for ordinary human beings to even comprehend, let alone experiencing it [10]. According to a *Siddha* saying, to seek spiritual realisation in simple words is rather equivalent to looking at a picture of a bowl of rice and expecting the sight of the picture to satisfy the hunger [25]. The common linguistic construct with their inherent limitations can never realise the experience.

According to TN Ganapathy, an eminent *Siddha* scholar, "The symbolic, twilight language of the Siddhas has the advantage of precision, secrecy, mystery, and esoteric significance in that, at the hands of the *Siddhas* it become a form of artistic expression of the inexpressible [14]. In other words, the *sunya sambashanai* of the *Siddhas* is, in essence profoundly mystical in nature and contains a "numinous aura" and existential revelations for the man who deciphers their meaning. The essential difficulty is that in order to understand this linguistic model and language, one requires a total hermeneutic of reading and awareness of the total spiritual and philosophical structures that infuse it. It also requires one to enter deep states of meditation wherein, the essence of the message conveyed serves as a key that reveals a higher meaning to the initiate [14].

Successful *Sunya Sambashanai* i.e. 'the language of the void', also called as the "*Vettaveli Rahasyam*" i.e. 'the secrets of the vast space', consists of the following key elements:

1. Symbolic: the communication framework of the Tamil Siddhas consists of conscious use of analogy. For example, puravi or horses, used by Siddha Tirumular in his Tirumanthiram to mean life breathe;
2. Poetic: almost all of the Sunya Sambashanai of the Tamil Siddhas are in poetic form;
3. Contextualisation: as in the case of the inferential communication framework, successful use of Sunya Sambashanai requires the recipient to understand the context in which the subject is communicated.

Syntactic simplicity: even though in many instances the Tamil Siddhas have used Sunya Sambashanai to convey complex concepts in spirituality (e.g. association between man and God), psychology (e.g. levels of consciousness), sociology (e.g. social order) etc., the words used in Sunya Sambashanai are from the language of the common man.

On the first appearance, the linguistic framework of

Sunya Sambashanai may seem to be a cryptic language used by a cult to share their insights with secrecy. However, when exploring into its employment by the Tamil *Siddhas*, one comes to understand that the works of these *Siddhas* were not meant for another *Siddha*. Rather, their works were meant for the laymen with interest in knowing what is said. However, as with the previous two linguistic models, successful communication using *Sunya Sambashanai* any requires the conveyor and the receiver to share a common interest on the subject that is conveyed, despite their differing levels of understanding of the subject. In other words, for the transmission of a message to be successful, the recipient will invariably have to be attuned to receiving it too [26]. Hence unless the prospective recipient of a subject spoken is at the least, interested in it, the linguistic framework of the *Sunya Sambashanai* of the *Siddhas* will be nothing more than a string of words in a complex poem [24].

Examples from the *Tirumanthiram*

Sunya Sambashanai of the Tamil *Siddhas* was poetic in form, cryptic (“*Sutra*” style) in nature, intuitive in essence and woven with worldly examples to drive the “experience” home to the reader [3]. The meaning of the poems written in this language operates at (a) exoteric and the linguistic, (b) esoteric and the codified and symbolical and with (c) an underlying approach of couching the inner mystical experiences through worldly examples of animals, situations, relationships etc. For example, in *Tirumanthiram*, Tamil *Siddha* Tirumular highlights the association of the five elements of nature with that of the five *chakras* of the Tantric yoga practice through the following poem:

**பாரது பொன்மை பசுமை யுடையது
நீரது வெண்மை செம்மை நெருப்பது
காரது மாருதங் கருப்பை யுடையது
வானகந் தூம மறைந்துநின் றாரே**

Earth is of colour, gold pure; Water is white; Fire red; Wind dark; Space smoky; Thus the five elements concealed stand within (Tirumanthiram: Tanthiram 8: Manthiram 2145) (trans. Natarajan, B., 2003. Tirumandiram - A Classic of Yoga and Tantra)

Clearly, it could be seen from the above example that the “esoteric” meaning could only be understood by the tested and worthy. This paradox of language is the special difficulty, which a reader confronts in understanding and deciphering Tamil *Siddha* thought [14]. Due to the lack of systematic and coordinated study, some works on the interpretations of the Tamil *Siddhas* have resulted in challenges with researching on the *Siddha* language.

A major part of the use of *Sunya Sambashanai* centres on a series of internal transformations which take place within the subtle body during the spiritual journey. In expressing this transformation, the Tamil *Siddhas* have used a unique style of layering of meanings within their linguistic model. The kind of descriptive layering itself serves to impart inner meaning, as it sets up a series of equivalences that are implicitly stated [3].

As a purely compositional aspect of the text it is not the word or its referent that is establishing these equivalences but merely the layering and presentation of those words or images [25]. For example, in *Tirumandiram*, its author explains the advanced Kundalini yoga practice through the following poem:

**ஆறு தெருவில் அகப்பட்ட சந்தியிற்
சாறு படுவன நான்கு பனையுள்
ஏறற் கரியதோர் ஏணியிட் டப்பனை
ஏறலுற் றேன்கடல் ஏழுங்கண் டேனே**

Six are the streets in their junction are juicy palm trees four; With ladder difficult to climb, I ascended the palm's heights; And there I saw the seas seven (Tirumanthiram: Tanthiram 9: Manthiram 2868) (trans. Natarajan, B., 2003. Tirumandiram - A Classic of Yoga and Tantra)

The concepts of the Tamil *Siddhas* are entrenched in the sphere of philosophy. In expressing these insights to the aspirant, often the “free thinking” Tamil *Siddhas* used their linguistic model, *sunya sambashanai* with certain looseness in construction and seemingly paradoxical, with emphasis on the same subject dealt with, in various places [25]. Furthermore, in order to facilitate the transmission of their insights to the spiritually immature aspirant, the Tamil *Siddhas* heavily relied on common words spoken by ordinary people – direct, unvarnished, and at times appearing indecent.

However, a sincere student of the *Siddha* scriptures will note that the seeming directness and vulgarity of the Tamil *Siddhas* in their obscure and secret language was intentional to make the enthusiastic reader appreciate the *Siddha* insights than to getting bogged down with the literary “formality” [24].

The above aspect of *Sunya Sambashanai* is brought out in the following example. In explaining the impossibility of sharing his profound experience of being in union with God - *Siva*, Tamil *Siddha* Tirumular puts his dilemma in a rather direct language through a common worldly example, thereby giving the reader with an immediate “aha” moment, as follows:

**முகத்திற் கண்கொண்டு காண்கின்ற மூடர்காள்
அகத்திற் கண்கொண்டு காண்பதே ஆனந்தம்
மகட்குத் தாய்தன் மணாளனோ டாடிய
சுகத்தைச் சொல்லென்றாற்**

சொல்லுமாறெங்கனே

Thou fool who see with fleshly (physical) eyes know! To see with inner eye is bliss true; How can mother describe (in words) to the (nervous) daughter (on the eve of her first night) of the true joy of the union with her husband? In what terms will she that describe? (Tirumanthiram: Tanthiram 9: Manthiram 2944) (trans. Natarajan, B., 2003. Tirumandiram - A Classic of Yoga and Tantra)

Sunya Sambashanai of the Tamil *Siddhas* is a linguistic model for sharing both, mystical and spiritual insights. Most of the Tamil *Siddha* poems are written in veiled language constructs, sometimes employing Tamil alphabets and numerals to signify spiritual or philosophical aspects [24]. These poems tend to be significantly deprived of any naturalistic meaning and they are couched with a much wider and spiritually richer, intuitive, mystical significance. Researchers have well established that the monosyllables in Tamil *Siddha* poetry are no longer gibberish [3]. Use of alphabet symbolism to denote spiritual insights are a favourite device of the Tamil *Siddhas*. Below is one such example which ties the highly revered pentad mantra of lord *Siva*:

**தராதல மூலைக்குத் தற்பர மாபரன்
தராதலம் வெப்பு நமசி வாயவாந்
தராதலஞ் சொல்லிற் றான்வா சியவாகுந்
தராதல யோகந் தயாவாசி யாமே**

He is the Supreme Lord: He is the locus of all loci in the Sphere of Fire He stands as Na-Ma-Si-Va-Ya In the Sphere beyond (Sun) He stands as Va-Si-Ya in the Sphere of yoga (Moon) He stands as Va-Si (Tirumandiram: Tantra 4: #890) (Tirumanthiram: Tanthiram 4: Manthiram 890) (trans. Natarajan, B., 2003. Tirumandiram - A Classic of Yoga and Tantra)

CONCLUSION

Sunya Sambashanai is neither the code-decode method of communication, nor the inferential framework. It is a third alternate linguistic mechanism that employs a unique poetic style combined with the unique components of communication as highlighted in the previous section.

The Tamil *Siddha* scriptures in *Sunya Sambashanai* are spiritual, complex and mystical aimed at transferring advanced states of spiritual states of beings that the *Siddhas* are said to have reached [5]. Yet, according to the researchers, the Tamil *Siddhas* used the alternate linguistic model of *Sunya Sambashanai* as a mode of communication for a number of reasons including, providing in a direct way of transferring their intuitive

insights to the enthusiastic yet laymen recipient [24].

As stated before, the obvious challenge to the learner is that, in order to understand the Tamil *Siddhas'* *Sunya Sambashanai*, developing an interest on the subject matter becomes pre-requisite [24]. It is only then that this model of the Tamil *Siddhas* will be a successful framework of communication. It is our sincere wish that this paper, apart from providing an insightful journey into the complex intuitive linguistic model used by the Tamil *Siddhas*, also serves to strengthen the emerging interest in this field of Tamil *Siddhas*.

It is also a hope that this paper serves as a "pointing finger" to the fertile field of future studies on the Tamil *Siddhas* and their unique linguistic model - *Sunya Sambashanai* that is an alternative to the other existing models of communication.

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