

Research article

The Language of Ancestral Wisdom: A Study on Interpretive Strategies in *Thirukkural* Commentaries

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Abstract

Commentaries play a crucial role in understanding ancient texts. They connect contemporary readers with texts from diverse temporal contexts. It is commonly acknowledged that comprehending many classical works would be nearly impossible without the support of the commentaries. At the same time, it is equally important to recognize that commentaries themselves do not always succeed in fully comprehending the meaning of the original text. Despite presenting meticulous, word-by-word renderings, commentators sometimes fall short of grasping and transmitting the 'actual' meaning of the text. This study examines one instance in which medieval commentators appear to struggle with the interpretation of a *Kural*. It analyzes five medieval commentaries on the *Thirukkural*, dating from the 10th to the 13th centuries, and explores the diverse strategies employed by commentators to 'fix' the meaning of a particular couplet. In doing so, the paper argues that commentaries do not merely disclose the meaning of the text, but actively participate in constituting that meaning. Thus, the study uncovers the dynamic and, at times, ideological processes of meaning-making practices within the tradition of Tamil literary commentary.

Keywords: *Thirukkural*, Commentaries, Meaning of text, Ancestral wisdom, Interpretation, Medieval commentary

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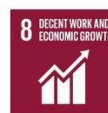
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1. Introduction

In the long-standing Tamil literary tradition, commentaries constitute one of the most prominent and enduring literary genres, practised over centuries. There is little evidence to establish the existence of such practices in ancient times; however, it is well established that many scholars have produced commentaries on classical Tamil texts during the medieval age and in modern times. These commentaries have played a vital role in preserving the meaning and accessibility of ancient works. The commentaries primarily locate themselves between the two temporal orders—the actual time of the text and the present audience. They chiefly determine the old ‘inaccessible’ text comprehensible and meaningful to the contemporary audience. The very need for such commentaries actually arises from the significant temporal distance between the actual time of the text's composition and the period in which it is being interpreted. Thus, commentary becomes not only a tool for comprehension but also a critical medium through which the relevance and continuity of ancient texts are carried over generations.

The practice of composing commentaries to the ancient texts in the Tamil literary tradition is believed to have originated during the medieval period, particularly after the 10th century CE, and gradually evolved thereafter (Sheeba & Sam, 2021, p.83). The commentary on the Iraiyanar Kalaviyal is widely regarded as the earliest known commentary in the Tamil literary tradition (Rajesh, 2006, p.155). Scholars consider it a first prose commentary on a poetic composition. However, this commentary was believed to be transmitted orally for many generations and was written down in manuscript around the 8th century CE (Rajesh, 2006). This practice of ‘writing down’ in manuscript indeed marked a foundational moment in the development of Tamil exegetical practice, which flourished between the 10th and 14th centuries (Vignesh, 2022). Initially, the Tamil commentaries were predominantly glossaries (Rajesh, 2006). They offered explanations to the difficult words and expressions found in the texts composed in poetic forms. Later, historical and contextual details were also inserted into these glossaries. Such commentaries were known as *Arumpadha urai* (glossary commentary). The first known commentary on the *Silappathikaram* is a typical example of this kind. Over time, short explanatory notes began to appear as a supplement to the glossaries. This type of short explanatory commentary was called as *Kurippurai* (notes commentary). Early commentaries on Sangam texts mostly fall under this category. Through successive generations of scholarly engagement, these commentarial styles further developed into detailed elaborations, including illustrative examples and interpretive analysis, known as *Vilakka urai* (explanatory commentary). Further, *Vilakka urai* commentaries are regarded as the most comprehensive and enduring form, as they successfully integrate the strengths of both *Arumpadha urai* and *Kurippurai* traditions (Cutler, 1992).

Although different kinds of commentaries are in practice, they are generally perceived as a reliable and accurate extension of the original, offering exposition that preserves the source's intended meaning but in a different gloss. In other words, though commentaries can potentially function as independent texts, they are usually identified as a faithful ‘explanation’ of the source. They are typically perceived as mere extensions or ‘duplications’ of the original text, rendered in a different linguistic or explanatory gloss. In this conventional view, commentaries are often read as straightforward interpretations—transparent explanations that remain entirely faithful to the source without introducing anything external. This sense of ‘inseparableness’ between the source

and its commentary fosters a sense of sameness. This 'sameness' between the original and its commentary hides the space where the commentator's own ideological, cultural, or philosophical perspectives can subtly intrude.

The commentaries often ensure that they meticulously preserve and faithfully transmit the 'actual' meaning of the source text, but they also subtly allow variations that create a 'new order' of meaning/s. In other words, these variations not only extend the meaning of the source but also generate new layers of meaning, thereby opening up new interpretive possibilities. Further, the variations among the commentaries upon a word or sense at times create the interpretive 'circles'. The commentaries can also be influenced not only by the ideological affiliations of the commentators, but also by factors such as religion, region, social class, and others. Such ideologically influenced commentaries would inevitably generate differences in interpretation. These interpretations tend not to be uniform in tone, but sometimes conflict with one another. In this way, commentaries are not merely a transparent vehicle that reflects the source's meaning/s, but become a site of negotiation where meanings are constructed, challenged, and reconstituted. Rather than mere passive duplication of the source, commentaries can thus be seen as an active rewriting - an interpretive act informed by the ideological inclinations of the commentator.

2. *Thirukkural* and its Exegesis

Thirukural is one of the early Tamil texts, believed to have been written between the 3rd century BC and the 5th century AD. It contains 1330 couplets that address a wide variety of issues ranging from human virtues to pleasure. These 1330 couplets are grouped into 133 chapters each containing 10 couplets. The text is divided into three major sections: Pal, respectively designated virtuous conduct (Aram), prosperity (Porul), and pleasure (Inbam). All three of these sections widely address the fundamental aspects of human life. The commentaries over the centuries made diverse attempts to attribute a 'religious' tone, but the text in itself is silent about its religious orientation. Furthermore, it is regarded as a secular text that explores human wisdom. The significance of the text resides in its secular and universal approach to ethics and morality. Its enduring popularity stems from its strong focus on pragmatic morality, which has led to its regular reference by academics, reformers, and international leaders as well as its inclusion in educational courses (Hart, 2000, pp. 486-487). More than any other texts, Thirukural is one of the highly regarded and well-studied texts in the Tamil language. Not less than two hundred commentaries written on the text in the Tamil language alone suffice to substantiate its popularity. However, to avoid the lengthiness, this study limits its focus only to the medieval commentaries of Thirukural. According to the literary history of Tamil, ten commentaries were composed on the text during the medieval age, out of which five commentaries are extinct and five alone are extant at present. Therefore, the scope of this study is limited to those five extant commentaries written during the medieval age. The commentaries written by a distinguished group of ten medieval scholars are considered exceptional literary and scholarly works. These commentators lived between the 10th and 13th centuries CE, and an old Tamil verse lists their names. The ten renowned medieval commentators are: 1) Manakkudavar (c. 10th century CE); 2) Dhamatthar (c. 11th century CE); 3) Nacchar (c. 11th century CE); 4) Paridhi (c. 11th century CE); 5) Pariperumal, also known as Kaliperumal (c. 11th century CE); 6) Thirumalaiyar (c. 11th to 13th century CE); 7) Mallar (c. 11th to

13th century CE); 8) Kaalingar (c. late 12th century CE); 9) Dharumar (c. 13th century CE); 10) Parimelalhagar (c. 13th century CE). (Markandan, 2021)

Manakkudavar's commentary on *Thirukkural* written in the 10th century CE is identified as the very earliest known commentary. Of the ten medieval commentaries on the *Thirukkural*, only those by Manakkudavar, Paridhi, Pariperumal, Kaalingar, and Parimelazhagar have survived in complete or near-complete form. There are a few commentaries like works by Dharumar, Dhamatthar and Nacchar, which are only partially available, whereas works of Thirumalaiyar and Mallar are extinct. Manakkudavar's commentary is the earliest and ancient work available.

Commentators have followed various methods to interpret or 'reach' the meaning of couplets. A few commentators interpreted couplets as they were in the source format, whereas others used various textual practises to interpret them. For example, the commentary by Manakkudavar was praised for its simple and precise language. It is mostly in the form of paraphrase and short explanations wherever necessary. It meticulously follows the word order found in the source and offers interpretation accordingly (Mohan & Sokkalingam, 2019). On the other hand, the commentary written by Parimelazhagar is very extensive and known for its minute and detailed explanations (Pillai, 1971). Parimelazhagar's strategies are different from that of the other commentators of the medieval times. When all other commentators considered couplet as an independent entity with a full-fledged meaning, Parimelazhagar treated it differently and considered each couplet is an integral part of the larger segment called 'chapter' and the chapters are the part of *iyal* (Section). Therefore, for Parimelazhagar, the couplet is not an independent unity, but a smaller unit of the larger structure. As stated earlier, Manakkudavar followed the sequence of word order as found in the 'source' couplet and interpreted it in the same order, whereas Parimelazhagar not only displaced the word order within the couplet but also moved sometimes to another couplet/s to 'derive' the meaning. This act of displacement of words within and moving away from one couplet to another is expanding the interpretative possibilities of the text in general and the couplet in particular.

Another notable strategy of interpretation is related to the chapter arrangements followed by different commentators. The arrangements of the chapters in the particular sequence actually helped commentators to suit the text to their own 'intended' meaning. A comparison of the chapter sequence of Manakkudavar with that of Parimelazhagar would clearly explain how the 'intended' meaning of commentators is internalized and becomes the 'actual' meaning of the 'source'. To illustrate it, a chapter 'not killing (any living being)' from the first part of the book is taken into consideration. The first part of the book, *Virtuous Conduct* (*Aram*), is further divided into three sections (*Iyal*), *Payeraviyal* (preface), *Illaraviyal* (Domestic virtue), and *Thuravaraviyal* (Ascetic virtue) respectively. Manakkudavar, the oldest commentator, kept the chapter 'not killing' as a part of Domestic virtue, whereas Parimelazhagar found a place for it in the section Ascetic virtue. The placement of this chapter into two different sections helped commentators to interpret the text as they wished (Rubavathanan, 2021). The commentary of Manakkudavar explicitly explains its inclination towards the Jain religion. As a commentary by a Jain scholar, Manakkudavar locates the chapter 'not killing' in Domestic virtue, because it is their belief and life practice that the Jain people (both domestic and Ascetic) totally avoid any meat in their food. Therefore, he represented it as a domestic virtue of humans. But, contrarily, by locating the chapter in the Ascetic virtue, Parimelazhagar argued that only the ascetics, but not the domestic, avoid meat as practised

in Hindu religious beliefs. Thus, the place of the chapter creates a religious undertone to the text and meaning.

3. Analysis and Interpretation

In the act of interpreting the source, commentaries do not merely duplicate the original text; rather, they actively participate in constituting the very source they claim to explain. This study challenges the conventional belief that the source text exists as a fixed, unalterable entity and that commentaries offer faithful expansions or clarifications of this immutable original. Instead, it argues that the perceived stability of the source is, in part, an effect of the commentarial process itself. In this way, it aims to deconstruct the binary between the 'original' text and its 'interpretation', revealing how commentaries contribute to the production of the text they interpret. The study foregrounds the constructive role of commentary.

To illustrate how commentaries 'create' the meaning of the text, one couplet from Thirukural is chosen for in-depth analysis. The couplet is in the chapter titled 'Amaichu', the essentials of the Ministers. The transliteration of the couplet goes as follows:

Vaṅkaṇ kuṭikāttal karrarital āḷvinaiyōṭu

Aintuṭaṇ māṇṭatu amaiccu (632)ⁱⁱ

It actually discusses the essential qualities of a minister. The first line of the couplet has four words and they discuss the four qualities of a minister. The literal meaning of the words goes as follows:

- Vankan – fearlessness
- kuṭikāttal - protection of subjects
- karrarital – knowing by learning
- āḷvina – perseverance

The next line expresses that 'the one who possesses these five becomes the minister'. Therefore, the peripheral reading of the couplet clearly exposes that the substance of it is related to the five basic qualities a minister should possess.

However, the inconsistency exists between these two lines of the couplet sets the base for differences of opinion among the commentators. The first line expresses four qualities of a minister and the following line counts them as five. The numerical mismatch creates challenges for the commentators. If the word 'five' is considered as an indicator of the qualities of a minister, as mentioned in the first line, then the fifth quality needs to be 'discovered'. As noted above, we find only the four qualities of a minister in the first line. Contrarily, can it be argued that the word 'five' indicates something else that lies outside the couplet?

All the commentators invariably accept that the word 'ainthu' (five) refers to number five, and indicates five essential qualities of a minister. However, the commentators differ only in their approach to identifying or addressing the fifth quality of a minister. To establish the meaning of 'five', they have adopted multiple strategies, various attempts and come up with multiple interpretations. Some derived the meaning of 'five' by altering the words found in the first line, whereas the others get the meaning outside the couplet.

Maṇakkuṭavar,ⁱⁱⁱ the oldest commentator of Thirukkural, reaches the meaning of the word 'five' by additionally bringing 'a new' meaning. He reads the word 'ainthu' as a metonymy and expresses the meaning of one's self-control over 'the five sensual organs'. But his short commentary fails to provide the logical inferences to substantiate his interpretation that the word 'ainthu' also means 'control over the sensual organs'. It is beyond any doubt that the 'control upon the sensual organs' as mentioned by Maṇakkuṭavar is indeed one of the essential qualities of a minister. But the source couplet provides no 'space' to derive such meaning from within. The literal meaning of the word 'ainthu' is five, a number. It provides possibilities that it could be anything and not necessarily 'control over the sensual organs'. Therefore, the interpretation of Maṇakkuṭavar seems, in a strict sense, inappropriate, mainly due to the fact that the word seems to be extended to convey the meaning. The equation of 'ainthu' with 'the control upon the sensual organs' has the traces of the commentator's visibility. Although this extension of meaning appears appropriate to the context, it violates the textual fidelity between the source and the commentary. Pariperumal, another commentator believed to have lived during the 11th century, has also expressed the same views as Maṇakkuṭavar. Thus, even for Pariperumal, the fifth quality of a minister is 'to control the sensual organs'.

Unlike Maṇakkuṭavar, the other commentators of the medieval age, such as Kalingar and Parithiyariv, make attempts to establish their stand by rearranging the words found in the first line. The four words in the first line, as stated above, are rearranged into five words to convey the meaning of the word 'five'. Although the rearrangement of words seems to be reasonable peripherally, it also, to some extent, lacks the logical flow in the interpretations. Parithiyar derives the meaning of the word 'five' by splitting the third word of the first line, *karṛarital*, into two separate words as *Karṛl*+*Arithal*. The literal meaning of the words goes as follows:

Karṛl – Learning and *Arithal* – to know

The expression *karṛarital* is split into two words as *Karṛu*+*Arithal*, the second word *Arithal* expresses the complete action. But, the first word *Karṛu* is an incomplete action, and the completeness of it is solely dependent on the word that follows it. Further, these two words and their meaning/s are like the cause and effect manner. One should know things by learning. Therefore, knowing is invariably connected to the act of learning. Subsequently, in this way, the split made by Parithiyar looks a little ambiguous.

Like Parithiyar, Kalingar also argues his point by separating the second word of the first line into two different expressions. According to him, the word *kudikatthal* is a compound expression, comprised of two separate words *kudi*+*katthal*. The literal meaning of the word *kudi* is clan; subjects and *katthal* means protection. While explaining the word 'kudi', he observes that a minister must understand the subjects of his country and their customs and traditions. Along with this, a minister should protect the subjects and the woods (natural resources) of his country.

Kalaingar's interpretation, though, seems to be reasonable, lacks a logical flow. His explanation to the word *katthal* is indeed a direct rendering/explanation of the word *kudikatthal*. Moreover, it is interesting to note that when the expression *kudikatthal* is split into two words, *kudi*+*katthal*, the second word, *Katthal*, which refers to protection, inevitably raises the further clarification 'what is to be protected?'. Thus, the word *kudikatthal* seems to express one unified meaning. Further, the nature of the other words, such as *Vankan*, *karṛarital* and *ālvinaṭai*, appears to be representing a

quality of a person. Even when the expression kudikatthal is considered as a single expression, it represents the quality. However, the same word is divided into two expressions as kudi+katthal; the word 'kudi' appears to represent the subjects of the country, not signifying 'the potent' or any quality.

The commentators go even beyond the text to reach the meaning. Parimelazhagar is a typical example of this kind. He is regarded as a very great and popular commentator of Kural and his work is highly praised for its clarity and richness. However, his method of interpretation, particularly the way/s he relates various couplets to reach the 'meaning' has been criticised by many scholars.

Many Tamil scholars have vigorously condemned Parimelazhagar for his new way/s of interpretation. Thirukural couplets are generally considered as autonomous/independent verses. Each kural is said to be a unified and full-fledged idea or expression. Most medieval and modern commentators have composed their commentaries based on the pattern that each couplet explains an independent idea. But, Parimezhalar as a commentator bypasses the common pattern followed till then and constitutes a 'fresh' way of interpretation by combining various couplets to reach the meaning. However, the tradition of Thirukural commentary is concerned it is altogether a new method of interpretation. Above all, Parimezhalar's affiliation towards the Sanskrit textual tradition is also criticised by many scholars.^{vi}

Parimezhalar has established the fifth quality of a minister by identifying a connection between this couplet and the previous one in the same chapter. In other words, he combines two couplets to derive the meaning of the word 'five'. While arguing upon the fifth quality of a minister, he comes up with an argument that the word 'ainthu' here is not actually referring the qualities mentioned in the first line of the couplet. Rather, it indicates 'the five' other qualities disused in the previous couplet. Nevertheless, this argument initiated by him also lacks logical sequence. Therefore, the meaning of the couplet, according to Parimezhalar goes as follows:

- The first line of the couplet explains the four qualities of a minister.
- The expression 'five' in the following line is the indication of not the previous line but the previous couplet.

Therefore, the meaning of the couplet lies partly in the previous couplet as well.

It is worth noting that Parimezhalar's detailed commentary on the previous Kural also fails to fulfill the meaning of the word 'five'. The previous Kural (631) in transliteration goes as follows:

Karuvium kalamum ceykaiyum ceyyum

aruvinaiyum māṇṭatu amaiccu^{vii}

Like the Kural 632, it demonstrates the qualities of a minister, and interestingly, it also refers to only four qualities. They are

- Karuvi - weapon
- Kālam - time
- Ceykai - manner of execution
- aruvinai – task to be executed

All other commentators except Parimezhalagar accept that the couplet has referred only to the four qualities of a minister. Parimezhalagar, by extending the meaning of the word Karuvi, establishes the fifth quality of a minister in his commentary. He adds one more new meaning, 'an army', to the word Karuvi, along with the existing meaning 'weapon'. Thus, Parimezhalagar, by externally supplying meaning to the word, establishes the meaning of 'five' in his argument. At last, these 'five' qualities are argued as the meaning of the word 'ainthu' found in the next couplet.

4. Conclusion

By explaining how commentators derived the meaning of the word 'Ainthu' (five) in the couplet, the various interpretative strategies followed by commentators are discussed. As explained, the medieval commentators adopted three schemes for explaining 'the fifth' quality of a minister. 1) The commentators have established the meaning by rearranging/splitting the word order in the source like Parithiyar, Kalingar; 2) The commentators, by extending the word/s and their meaning/s, constitute their argument, like Maṇakkuṭavar and at last 3) The commentators combine more than one couplet to create the meaning. The strategies used by commentators are actually expanding the 'meaning-making' possibilities of the text. The techniques and strategies adopted by medieval commentators have a profound impact on the modern commentaries. They are still used as an effective method/s to interpret the text. Moreover, the strategies of medieval commentators are effectively imbibed by the modern commentators. By skillfully adopting techniques like rearranging the words within the couplet and deriving meaning by combining more couplets, modern commentators have taken and are taking the text into various levels of interpretation. The commentaries written from a religious standpoint interpret it as a seminal text of their respective religious philosophy. The ancient Indian religions, such as Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism, made attempts to 'own' the text. Contrarily, modern interpretations produce commentaries that attribute a secular status to the text. However, every attempt at 'writing commentaries' is strategically an act of 'constituting' a 'source' that suits its argument.

References and Notes

Notes:

- i. Tirukkural Urai Accērrap Paṭṭiyal" Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 26 October 2023, <https://ta.wikipedia.org/s/34rb> (In Tamil)
- ii. வன்கண் குடிகாத்தல் கற்றறிதல் ஆள்வினையோடு
ஐந்துடன் மாண்டது அமைச்சு
- iii. His commentary is known for its style. It is believed to be written during the 10th century.
- iv. Both are believed to be lived between 11th and 13th century..
- v. Belongs to 13th century. Of all the old commentaries of kural, his commentary is considered as the best both in textual and literary aspects.
- vi. See. Devaneya Pavannar's commentary on Thirukural

- vii. கருவியும் காலமும் செய்கையும் செய்யும்
அருவினையும் மாண்டது அமைச்சு

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