The Problem of Vagueness: Tirumūlar's Attempts for Precision and Tryst with Vagueness

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Abstract:

The issue of vagueness occurs when the speaker's meanings are not as clear or specific as the listener would prefer. Tirumūlar, the author of the Tamil Saiva classic Tirumandiram, at places wilfully uses vague language to convey mystical experiences. Some scholars construe that Tirumūlar's tryst with vagueness as an attempt to keep higher truths hidden from the uninitiated. This paper explores Tirumūlar's attempt for clarity and the unavoidability of vagueness in the light of Wittgensteinian idea of context sensitivity, drawing guidelines from Tamil sources on paradoxical statements, riddles, allusions, indirect suggestion, etc.

Key words: Wittgenstein, Tirumūlar, *Tirumandiram*, language, vagueness, precision, hidden meanings, Tamil tradition.

Vagueness … is … a quicksand: step into it and you will find yourself gripped. Moreover, once gripped, there is no escape.[1]

Prologue

Subramania Bharati aka Mahakavi Bharatiyar (1882-1921), was a great Tamil poet and a freedom fighter. He wrote a short epic entitled *Pañjali Cabatam* (Panchali's vow). The epic retells the events of the game of dice from the *Mahābhāratha*. In this revisionist poem, Bharati depicts Panchali as a woman seeking empowerment, crusading against the injustices inflicted on her. Also, Bharati tries to draw parallels between Panchali with Mother India and the Kurukṣetra war with the Indian war of Independence.

The game of dice begins in the second part of the epic, during which the emotions peak. Even a slightest slip-up can distract and blunt the intended message. Therefore, at the beginning of this part of the epic, Bharati invokes Vāṇī, the goddess of knowledge, and prays to her to help him use his words carefully and precisely.[2]

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தெளிவுஉறவே அறிந்திடுதல், தெளிவுதர மொழிந்திடுதல், சிந்திப் பார்க்கே
களிவளர உள்ளத்தில் ஆநந்தக் கனவுபல காட்டல், கண்ணீர்த்
துளிவரஉள் உருக்குதல்,இங்கு இவைஎல்லாம் நீஅருளும் தொழில்கள் அன்றோ?
ஒளிவளரும் தமிழ்வாணீ, அடியனேற்கு இவைஅனைத்தும் உதவு வாயே!

Teḷivu uṟavē aṟindiḍudal, teḷivu tara moḻindiḍudal, cindippārkkē
Kaḷi vaḷara uḷḷattil āṉanda-k kaṉavu pala kāṭṭal, kaṇṇīr-t
Tuḷi vara uḷ urukkudal, iṅgu ivai ellām nī aruḷum toḻilgaḷ aṉṟō?
Oḷi vaḷarum tamiḻ vāṇi, aḍiyaṉēṟkku ivai aṉaittum udavuvāyē!

The essence of the verse could be summarised as follows: on the one hand, one should clearly understand what is being conveyed and on the other, one should try to convey what is to be conveyed precisely and unambiguously. If both these—the understanding and the conveyance—ensure clarity, then the intellectual activity will be pleasing and blissful. Vani, the goddess of knowledge, be responsible for this clarity of knowledge and the language and bestow the same.

This theory of knowledge insisting on the clarity of language was passed on to Bharati by Tiruvaḷḷuvar, the author of the classical Tamil text on ethics, *Tirukkuṟaḷ*. A couplet in the chapter on knowledge in the *Tirukkuṟaḷ* reads:

எண்பொருள வாகச் செலச்சொல்லித் தான்பிறர்வாய்
நுண்பொருள் காண்பது அறிவு.

Eṇporuḷa vāga-c cela-c-colli-t tāṉpiṟar vāi
Nuṇporuḷ kāṇbadu aṟivu.

Wisdom hath use of lucid speech, words that acceptance win
And subtle sense of other men's discourse takes in.[3]

The said couplet of the *Tirukkuṟaḷ* could be explained as follows: Knowledge consists in our competence of conveying a message to others precisely, unambiguously, making it easier to understand and when others convey us a message even though vaguely, ambiguously, our capability of understanding the crux of the matter.

The problem that Tiruvaḷḷuvar and Bharati were trying to address and to do away with is known as the 'problem of vagueness'.

The problem of Vagueness

The problem of vagueness arises when the meanings expressed by the speaker are not as explicit or precise as the listener would like it to be.

Vagueness is generally considered bad. Particularly the philosophy of law considers vagueness its arch enemy. "If a law contains vague terms, the question whether it applies to a particular case often lacks a clear answer. This places the law at odds with rule-of-law values. One of the fundamental pillars of the rule of law is legal certainty."[4] Antonin Scalia, an American Jurist who served as an associate justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, advocated 'textualism' as against vagueness and interpretations. Textualism is a legal philosophy that emphasises the importance of the text; when interpreting the legal statutes,

judges should focus solely on the text's plain meaning, rather than considering the legislative intent or the broader purpose behind the law.[5]

Gottlob Frege too was of the same opinion on the problem of vagueness in language and he considered that everyday language lacks the precision needed for logical and mathematical clarity. He argued that logic can recognise only well-defined, demarcated, precise concepts. In his book on logic, *Begriffschrift* ('Concept Writing') he attempted a perfect conceptual notation to create a language with mathematical precision.

On the other hand, the (later) Wittgensteinian idea of vagueness departed from the Fregean idea proposing a contextual theory of vagueness. Bo Allesoe Christensen in his paper "On Vagueness: A Wittgensteinian Discussion" tracing Wittgenstein's scarce comments on vagueness in *Philosophical Grammar,* states that vague concepts cannot be treated as if they can be made precise like non-vague concepts. Instead, vagueness requires context sensitivity and understanding the purposefulness. He proposes that understanding vague terms involves recognizing their use in different contexts and the relationships between these uses and that there are no hidden meanings. He explains this by giving an example of a heap. He questions how many grains it takes to make a heap. Whether three hundred grains make a heap or if two hundred and ninety-nine grains also count as a heap shows the challenge in defining a precise boundary for vague terms. Therefore, the vague concepts do not have clear-cut boundaries and their meanings often depend on the context and purpose of their use.[6] To Wittgenstein

> These language-games were dependent not on simples but on samples, whose existence was necessary to the language-game in which they played a role but which did not exist 'necessarily' in any absolute sense. If the samples of a given language-game were ever destroyed or ceased to be, then the relevant language-game would simply break down.[7]

In the light of the Wittgenstenian idea on vagueness, let us turn to Tirumūlar, the author of the Tamil classic *Tirumandiram*, seeking clarity on vagueness. Why Tirumūlar? Because Tirumūlar was trying to express some mystical experiences. To call an experience mystical itself is vague, lacking clarity. D.T. Suzuki attempts to define mystical experience as 'a state of absolute emptiness, which is absolute fullness' which is again, vague.[8] Whereas in the language of Tirumūlar we could find conscious attempts of precision and vagueness. On the one hand he is defining terms to clear off vagueness and ambiguity for the sake of precision and on the other he is extraordinarily vague. This deliberate two-pronged approach of clarity and vagueness is couched in the poetic language by Tirumūlar.

Before reviewing this, it would be appropriate to have an introduction for the text, the *Tirumandiram*.

The *Tirumandiram*: A Brief Introduction

The Tamil Saiva or the Siddhanta Saiva literature is classified into two types: *tōttiram* and *cāttiram* (the *stotras* and the *sastras*). The *Tōtttirams* are devotional or bhakti literature, which are twelve in number and the *cāttirams* are philosophical treatises, which are fourteen in number. The *Tirumandiram*, though traditionally classified as a devotional text, it is a philosophical text too, a rare privilege that no other Tamil Saiva devotional literature enjoys.[9] Tirumūlar, the author of the text, is venerated as a *nāyaṉmār*[10] by the Tamil Saiva tradition. As for the period of Tirumūlar, scholars like Vellaivaranan fix it around fifth to sixth century CE.[11]

Tirumular's Attempts for Clarity

During the age of Tirumūlar, several sects of Saivism existed such as Pāśupata, Mahāvrata, Kāḷāmukha, Kāpālika, Bhairava and Vāma to name a few. With so many sects practicing different rituals, following various philosophical doctrines and insisting on their originality, the term Saivism itself has become undetermined and Tirumūlar was compelled to define what Saivism is. In such an attempt Tirumūlar says: *caivam civaṉuḍaṉ cambandam āgudal* – To be into Saivism means to forge a kindred tie with Siva.

When the core doctrines of Saivism were lost in mythology, Tirumūlar eagerly revisits the Saiva mythology to reinterpret and redefine them for clearer understanding and practice. The following may illustrate that.

அப்பு அணி செஞ்சடை ஆதி புராதனன்
முப்புரம் செற்றனன் என்பர்கள் மூடர்கள்
முப்புரம் ஆவது மும்மல காரியம்
அப்புறம் எய்தமை யார்அறி வாரே.

Appu aṇi ceñcaṭai āti purātaṉaṉ
Muppuram cerraṉaṉ eṉbargaḷ mūḍargaḷ
Muppuram āvadu mummala kāriyam
Appuram eydamai yār aṛivārē.

Fools are they who behold that the Primal One
Who wears water on his crimson matted locks destroyed the three fortresses
The three fortresses are the three impurities
Who knows it is these that He destroyed?[12]

The above verse of the *Tirumandiram* attempts to clear off the mist around a mythological account of Saivism. Before getting into the reinterpretation, let us understand the mythology behind. Siva burning the three flying fortresses to ashes is an age-old story. Three asuras (demons) by name Tārakākṣa, Kamalākṣa and Vidyunmāli were blessed by Brahma to be unconquerable provided with three flying fortresses. By virtue of the boon, they can be destroyed with one single arrow in one single attempt. Siva making Mount Meru as His bow, the king of snakes Vāsuki as the string and Viṣṇu as the arrow, destroyed the three flying fortresses and killed the three demons. On revisiting the said story, Tirumūlar brings clarity by defining the three fortresses as three impurities or fetters—*āṇava*, *karma* and *māyā*. The three impurities are impediments that restrain and bind the souls. To be liberated, the souls have to get rid of these three bondages.

In the same vein, Tirumūlar goes on revisiting and reinterpreting obscure mythological stories to reestablish the religio-philosophical core of Saivism.[13]

Tirumūlar's Tryst with Vagueness

Though Tirumūlar stood for clarity on the religio-philosophical issues, he had a tryst with vagueness when it came to praxis. Consider the following verse:

உழவன் உழஉழ வானம் வழங்க
உழவன் உழவினில் பூத்த குவளை
உழவன் உழத்தியர் கண்ஒக்கும் என்றிட்டு
உழவன் அதனை உழஒழிந் தானே.

Uḻavaṉ uḻa uḻa vāṉam vaḻaṅga
Uḻavaṉ uḻaviṉil pūtta kuvaḷai
Uḻavaṉ uḻattiyar kaṇ okkum eṉṟiṭṭu
Uḻavaṉ adaṉai uḻa oḻindāṉē.

The ploughman ploughed; the heavens poured;
By the ploughing lily blossomed;
Comparing the lily with his wife's eye
The ploughman ceased ploughing further.[14]

The ploughman ploughs his field to cultivate a particular crop and removes all weeds. The lily is very beautiful and likeable, nevertheless a weed. Instead of weeding it out, the ploughman compares it with his wife's eye and leaves it to grow. Thus, he made a mistake of losing his purpose.

In this verse, Tirumūlar is completely vague. Unless we understand the meaning of the terms contextually, say the ploughman for the soul, ploughing for the soul's efforts to get rid of its bondages, lily flower and wife's eye for the worldly pleasures and pouring of the heavens for the divine grace, we will end up perplexed.

The Saiva Siddhanta works expound with another example to explain this: A prince, ignorant of his parentage, joins some gypsies, loses his independence and dignity and allows himself to be brought up in gypsy ways, unbecoming of a prince. Similarly, the soul forgets its essential nature, gets lost in the whirl of the senses, loses its intelligence and suffers on account of not knowing itself and God.

The following is the example given by Tirumūlar to explain this:

குயில்குஞ்சு முட்டையைக் காக்கைக் கூட்டிட்டால்
அயிர்ப்புஇன்றிக் காக்கை வளர்க்கின்றது போல்
இயக்கில்லைப் போக்கில்லை ஏன்என்பது இல்லை
மயக்கத்தால் காக்கை வளர்க்கின்ற வாறே.

Kuyil kuñju muṭṭaiyai-k kākkai-k kūṭṭiṭṭāl
Ayirppu iṉṟi-k kākkai valarkkiṉṟadu pōl
Iyakkillai-p pōkkillai ēṉ eṉbadu illai
Mayakkattāl kākkai vaḷarkkiṉṟa vāṟē.

Cuckoo lays egg in crow's nest
The naive crow hatches and nurses it. The young cuckoo
Suspecting nothing, neither dissociates nor asks why
Allows the crow to nurse it in ignorance.[15]

In this verse, cuckoo is the soul; the crow is *māyā*.

In some verses, Tirumūlar uses paradoxical expressions. For instance, in a verse he says *palli udaiyar pambu arindu unginrar* (பல்லி உடையார் பாம்பு அறிந்து உண்கின்றார்)[16] which could be literally understood as 'those who possess a lizard cut the snake and eat it too.' If one who understand the lizard symbolises steadfastness and the snake symbolises the *kuṇḍalinī* energy in the Tantra-Yoga context, the same line would render the following meaning: those who are steadfast, unwavering and firm can have the fruits of Kuṇḍalinī-Yoga.

The following is a highly paradoxical and oft-quoted verse of Tirumular:

வழுதலை வித்துஇடப் பாகல் முளைத்தது
புழுதியைத் தோண்டினேன் பூசணி பூத்தது
தொழுதுகொண்டு ஓடினர் தோட்டக் குடிகள்
முழுதும் பழுத்தது வாழைக் கனியே.

Vaḻudalai vittu iḍa-p pāgal muḻaittadu
Puḻidiyai-t tōṇḍiṉēṉ pūcaṇi pūttadu
Toḻudukoṇḍu ōḍinar tōṭṭa-k kuḍigaḷ
Muḻudum paḻuttadu vāḻai-k kaṉiyē.

I sowed the seed of brinjal
And the shoot of balsam-pear arose;
I dug up the dust
And the pumpkin blossomed;
The gardener-gang prayed and ran;
Full well ripened the fruit of plantain.[17]

The implied meaning of this verse is explained by T.N. Ganapathy as follows:

I sowed the seed of brinjal – I undertook the practice of Kuṇḍalinī-Yoga; the shoot of balsam-pear arose – (because of it) I got the *vairāgya* (bitter-gourd), i.e., balsam-pear; I dug up the dust – I examined the tattvas of the self (or I had philosophical speculation); the pumpkin blossomed – (because of it) I found the Siva-tattva in me (Siva manifesting itself); the gardener-gang prayed and ran – once Siva-tattva was discovered in me, all my *indriyas*, sense organs, kept quiet. Full well ripened the fruit of plantain – then I enjoyed the fruit of *Śivānubhava*.[18]

Vagueness: Some Reflections in the Tamil Tradition

Tamil linguistic tradition recognizes vagueness and the following are some reasons for the same:

- *Kuṉṟa-k-kūṟal* (குன்றக்கூறல்)[19] understatement
- *Migaipaḍa-k-kūṟal* (மிகைபடக்கூறல்)[20] overstatement or hyperbole
- *Māṟukola-k-kūṟal* (மாறுகொளக்கூறல்)[21] Paradoxical statement or inconsistency in statements
- *Mayaṅga-k-kūṟal* (மயங்கக்கூறல்)[22] obscurity / ambiguity
- *Pici* (பிசி)[23] is riddle or puzzle—a kind of enigma in which an object is indicated by the description of something resembling

- *Māṭṭeṟidal* (மாட்டெறிதல்)[24] is allusion or metonymy—a reference to something supposed to be known, but not explicitly mentioned; a covert indication; the application of the principle of something to another when their subjects are similar. The purpose of an allusion is to enrich the text by bringing in additional meaning and context without having to explain it in detail.
- *Kuḻūu-k-kuṟi* (குழூஉக்குறி)[25] is conventional term peculiar to a society or profession.
- *Uḷḷuṟai uvaman* (உள்ளுறை உவமம்)[26] Indirect suggestion by which an author who does not propose to explicitly state his idea, endeavours, however, to present it through the skilful employment of such telling comparisons as would help people to infer therefrom what he actually intended to convey.
- *Iṟaicci-p-poruḷ* (இறைச்சிப் பொருள்)[27] Suggestive meaning, conveyed indirectly by reference to the distinctive features of the tract of land.

Of these, paradoxical statements, obscurity, riddle, allusion, indirect suggestion and suggestive meaning are the ones mostly used in Tirumūlar's language. As already pointed out Tirumūlar deliberately uses these, knowing very well that they will result in vagueness, because he wants to make the unfamiliar familiar and to reconsider the familiar.

Conclusion

We find two types of context sensitivity in Tirumūlar's language, the external and the internal. The external context which includes comparison classes or standards, falls under the category of *Iṟaicci-p-poruḷ* (இறைச்சிப் பொருள்) and the internal context could involve the psychological state of the speaker or the specific conversation context which falls under the category of *Uḷḷuṟai uvaman* (உள்ளுறை உவமம்) of the Tamil tradition.

There is a section entitled 'Śūnya Sambhāṣaṇai' in the *Tirumandiram*. T.N. Ganapathy translates it as twilight language. He elaborates that it is a language concealing the experiential aspects from the uninitiated and the esoteric meaning can be understood only by the initiated and in which the highest truths are hidden purposefully.[28] That cannot be the purpose of an author. The author cannot decide who, of the readers, are the initiated and the uninitiated. The author's intention should be to keep his text open and not hidden. However, nothing is hidden in the language of Tirumūlar. It carries intentional vagueness. His usage of words may mean different things to different people from different contexts and paying attention to the differences in context mostly diffuses the vagueness. Therefore, all that is needed is context sensitivity understanding the purposefulness.

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19. *Tolkāppiyam*, Poruḷiyal, 664

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