Tamil Verb Pattern

About Tamil and its Morphology

Tamil is a Dravidian language spoken primarily in southern India and northern Sri Lanka. Over seventy million people spread across the world claim it as their mother tongue. A language not only taught in schools in these two countries, as well as in Singapore, Malaysia and Mauritius, but also voluntarily learnt within the school systems of many more countries, Tamil has an unbroken history of literary production for more than two millennia. It is a diglossic language, whose high variety or formal style differs conspicuously from its low variety or informal style. The difference is substantially exhibited in phonology and, consequently, in morphology with regard to morphological forms rather than the morphological system. The diglossic division extends to the lexicon in that the formal style has additional or alternative words, which are historical retentions or motivated by the ideology of language purism. This is also reflected in the verbs and in the inflected verb forms that are less frequently used in modern Tamil.

Tamil is a morphologically rich language, syntagmatically as well as paradigmatically. Verbs have a long string of morphemes that express a range of meanings including time of the event or the state (tense), speaker perception (mood), and calibrations of the event (aspect), as well as negation, interrogation, and emphasis. There is some flexibility in the status of the morphemes as to their boundedness or fusion with the adjacent morphemes and in their sequential order. This flexibility allows the insertion of a morpheme, say an interrogative marker, at different places in the string and the scrambling of morphemes for pragmatic effects. The morphological richness of Tamil increases the number of possible verb forms phenomenally. It is in the realm of hundreds for each verb. The structural flexibility adds alternate verb forms and in addition, there are distinctive verb forms that are attributable to the diglossic difference and historical variability. The verb chart in this volume necessarily presents only a selection of verb forms used in the language. The maximum number of forms given for a verb is 252.

Exclusion of verb forms

The primary selection is the formal style of Tamil, which is used in text books, fictional narrative, and non-fictional expositive prose in essays, media stories, and government documents, as well as in public lectures. The verb forms in the chart represent the style and spelling of modern Tamil used formally. The chart does not include forms exclusively found in a pedantic style (‘he did (it)’, ‘they (neuter) will not do (it)’, ‘you (please) do (it)’, ‘those (neuter) which will do’, etc.), used in colloquial speech (‘it’s done’, ‘he is’, ‘he played’, even if found used in creative literature, ‘it flows’), nor used in the style reflecting a dialect speech (‘you are doing (it)’, ‘you are doing (it)’). Among the forms whose variation is merely phonological, only the form that is frequently used is given: ‘he sits’, ‘he will roll’, ‘he will eat’. Variations in the verb form are listed only if the variants are frequently used in modern Tamil. The variant forms are given on two sides of a slash (‘he is doing (it)’, ‘he is doing (it)’). Variant forms that are infrequent are not listed. For example, the verbal noun form ‘doing’ is listed, but not ‘running’, that which ran, it ran. The variants may also be found in different boxes following the classificatory scheme of the verb forms (‘which does’; ‘doer’; ‘doing’). The variants with a slash are not given in longer verb forms which typically have an auxiliary verb. The reason is that it saves space and the variation is predictable from their corresponding simple verb forms: ‘he is doing (it)’. Absence of a variant form may, however, indicate its non-occurrence; while the neuter plural ‘which does’ is possible, the putative ‘is not. The variants may also be found in different boxes following the classificatory scheme of the verb forms (‘which does’). The variants with a slash are not given in longer verb forms which typically have an auxiliary verb. The reason is that it saves space and the variation is predictable from their corresponding simple verb forms: ‘he is doing (it)’.
There could be three interrogative forms for each verb form (other than the imperative and optative) and they are not included because they are formed by simple addition at the end of the verb form [he wrote (for) himself], and they may be treated as phrasal forms without a boundary between their components. Though verb forms of an infinitive are not included even in the finite verb forms, as they go beyond a strictly grammatical system of verbs.

Verb forms with an auxiliary verb whose sense is more than purely grammatical and is therefore more than an auxiliary are not given in the chart.

A verb form can be defined by the string of a verb followed by grammatical markers, which occurs between word boundaries (space in writing). Word boundary rules in Tamil, however, are not universally followed. Therefore, word boundary cannot be used as the defining criterion to identify verb forms. One may find in the verb chart structurally similar verb forms with or without spaces: he wrote (for) himself which means 'he sent out the word'; he did (it), didn't he? which means 'he has done (it)?', etc. This is the case when the emphatic forms -ôñ áë, -ôñ áë and the conjunctive suffix -ôñ áë are added to the verb forms. The emphatic -ôñ áë can be added to any verb form other than the optative, finite verb and relative participle. This suffix adds a special meaning with some forms: ˆóñáë (‘do (as in an instruction)’), ˆóñáë (‘even though done’), ˆóñáë (‘as soon as done’). These forms are not listed. -ôñ áë, which means that the proposition is hearsay or has been reported by another person, can be added to finite verbs at the end of the sentence. Finite verbs with this form are not given in the chart.

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Tamil verb morphology makes extensive use of auxiliary verbs, which are reflected in all ways that main verbs are. Each verb can be said to have a set with auxiliary verbs added to it. For reasons of their universality and the need to keep the number of verb forms within manageable limits, verb forms other than finite verbs are not given with auxiliary verbs. The set with auxiliary verbs constituting imperative forms (ˆóñáë, ˆóñáë, ˆóñáë) and the infinitive base in the negative and modal forms (ˆóñáë, ˆóñáë, ˆóñáë, ˆóñáë, ˆóñáë, ˆóñáë) are added to the verb forms. The emphatic -ôñ áë can be added to any verb form other than the optative, finite verb and relative participle. This suffix adds a special meaning with some forms: ˆóñáë (‘do (as in an instruction)’), ˆóñáë (‘even though done’), ˆóñáë (‘as soon as done’). These forms are not listed. -ôñ áë, which means that the proposition is hearsay or has been reported by another person, can be added to finite verbs at the end of the sentence. Finite verbs with this form are not given in the chart.

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The possibility of inserting a floating morpheme such as -ôñ áë òñ at some morphemic junctures of the verb form and the possibility of expanding morphemes, for example, by combining two modal forms and auxiliary verb forms, with attendant semantic shifts, multiply manifold the number of verb forms that can be generated. ˆóñáë (‘did not do (it)’) is given, but not ˆóñáë ˆóñáë (‘did not do (it) at all’ nor ˆóñáë ˆóñáë (‘did not indeed do (it)’). ˆóñáë (‘should not do (it)’) is given, but not ˆóñáë ˆóñáë (‘should not do (it) at all’ nor ˆóñáë ˆóñáë (‘should not indeed do (it)’). These are examples of insertion of a floating morpheme. ˆóñáë (‘may do’ and ˆóñáë (‘can do’) are given, but not ˆóñáë ˆóñáë (‘may be possible to do’). ˆóñáë (‘he certainly did (it)’) and ˆóñáë (‘he has done (it)’) are given, but not ˆóñáë ˆóñáë (‘he has definitely done (it)’) and ˆóñáë (‘he definitely did (it) (for) himself’) and ˆóñáë (‘he certainly did (it)’) are given, but not ˆóñáë ˆóñáë (‘he definitely did (it) (for) himself’). These are examples of expansion of one morpheme with the addition of another from the set of modal or auxiliary forms. The chart does not have forms that have floating morphemes or that have more than one morpheme of the same category.

Verb forms with an auxiliary verb whose sense is more than purely grammatical and is therefore more than an auxiliary are not included even in the finite verb forms, as they go beyond a strictly grammatical system of verbs. ˆóñáë (‘he certainly said (it)’) is given, but not the same form with another ˆóñáë which means ‘he sent out the word’; ˆóñáë (‘he wrote (for) himself’) is given, but not it in ˆóñáë (‘he wrote for (the benefit of) someone’). Similar auxiliary verbs like ˆóñáë (‘try’), ˆóñáë (‘cry’), ˆóñáë (‘get lost’), etc., with finite verb forms are not given. Verb forms with a grammatical
auxiliary verb that is an alternant are not included. கல் கூடி குறா 'it is certainly spoiled' is given, but not கல் கூடி குறா துறாதல் in the same meaning with an extra nuance of indicating the process of change of state.

Thus, the list of verb forms in the chart is not exhaustive of all possible forms, but a basic list from which all other verb forms in Tamil can be recognized and produced by extension or application of the given pattern.

**Non-existent Verb Forms**

The verb forms in the chart were generated by native speakers of Tamil and randomly checked for their occurrence with a database of 7.5 million words from various texts representing fiction, non-fiction, government publications, writings for children, e-journals, etc. Some forms were not attested in the database, but this is not an indication of their absence in the language. Such gaps are accidental, giving information on frequency of use and not on the structural possibility of the form. The verb forms that fall into these accidental gaps in the database are still included in the chart. Some forms are not possible structurally and, as could be expected, they cannot be attested in the database. These verb forms are excluded from the chart; empty boxes in the chart indicate such structural gaps. There are, however, some empty boxes which do not indicate structural gaps because the reason for the absence is not semantic. These gaps are indicators of change taking place in the language. The empty boxes in the verb forms of participial nouns in future tense are an example of this. For example, கல்லுற்று/கல்லுற்றுமின் are not attested in the database and native speaker intuition attests to their oddity. The reason for the non-existence of such forms is probably phonological.

Semantically motivated non-existent verb forms include the following. Verbs expressing a mental or physical state, and not an action, are not used in the imperative and optative. Some examples are அடுத் 'know', புத் 'understand', புத் 'like', புத் 'be hungry', புத் 'be in pain', புத் 'be hot', புத் 'be cold', புத் 'be sweet'. Such verbs in Tamil do not have a subject in the nominative, with which finite verbs agree, or have only the neuter subject. Hence the finite verb forms of these verbs have only the neuter gender forms and not the human gender forms: அடுத் குறா/குறாமை அடுத் குறாமை அடுத் குறாமை அடுத் குறாமை அடுத் 'the secret/s is/are known to him', புத் குறாமை 'hand is cold'. The forms with human endings such as * குறாமை 'she is cold', * குறாமை 'she understood', * குறாமை 'she was hungry' are non-existent. Verb forms with human endings such as (தடுத்துண்டு) குறாமை 'he appears (to be good)', (வழியாகும்) குறாமை 'he is visible (to the eye)', புத் குறாமை 'she catches', குறாமை 'she fires, fries' exist, but in a different sense, as glossed. These verbs, which could be polysemous or homonymous, are not listed twice in the verb chart, although they have different meanings, they conjugate in the same way. This means that verb forms like these given in the chart are well formed for some senses of a given verb but not for other senses. The fuller set of verb forms is given for such polysemous or homonymous verbs. A given form like புத் குறாமை is well formed for the sense 'catch' but ill formed for the sense 'like'. The verb chart is about the grammatical forms of verbs, and so their semantic specifications are not made explicit.

Some of the verbs which do not take a human subject are used figuratively with human subjects. In குறாமை குறாமை 'she was (found to be) sweet until yesterday, today she is (found to be) bitter', புத் and புத் are used figuratively. The figurative use of verbs is open-ended and chances of such use coming up in the language are unpredictable. The verb chart is liberal in admitting verb forms with a figurative sense.

The neuter subject verbs, as would be expected, do not have finite verbs with human number and gender agreement markers. They could, however, have finite verb forms in first person singular, when their neuter subject is used anthropomorphically. Intransitive verbs like அடுத் 'get loosened' take only neuter subjects, but finite verb forms in first person singular like துருக்கு அடுத்துண்டு/அடுத்துண்டு 'I get loose', which literally means 'the knot says, won’t I get loose/won’t get loose', is glossed to express the subjunctive sense as 'the knot wouldn’t get loose'.

Some neuter subjects have a human subject when they occur with the auxiliary verb கவுரதி, which adds volition to the verb. Then they have verb forms agreeing with all persons, genders, and numbers. For example, குறாமை குறாமை 'he came to know, learnt', குறாமை குறாமை 'he came to understand, realized' are well formed. The auxiliary verb குறாமை 'be' added to the verbal participle is stative and it conveys the sense of end of an action staying on. Being stative, there is no verb form with this auxiliary verb that is imperative or optative in meaning, as in the finite verb குறாமை குறாமை 'he has done (it)': * குறாமை குறாமை 'be in the state of after-sleep', * குறாமை 'be torn' are ill formed. Exceptions are verbs of body posture, which have the
imperative form with the auxiliary य, where it is possible to take the sense of य literally: य ‘be seated’, य ‘be lying down’, य ‘be leaning’, य ‘be awake’. Similar forms in the imperative are possible if य after the verbal participle has its literal sense ‘be’: य ‘read and stay (read)’.

The chart of verb forms does not mark all non-existent verb forms, as the explanation of their absence requires semantic facts. Anyone seeking such an explanation should go to a comprehensive grammar of modern Tamil. This reference tool of forms of verbs takes into account only generic semantic facts.

There are lexicalized compound verbs with an auxiliary verb added to a noun or to a verb form such as य ‘wink’, य ‘spin’ which are not counted as verbs for the purpose of this chart. The auxiliary verbs like य ‘hit’ and, य ‘let go’ have corresponding independent verbs and their verb forms will extend to the auxiliary verbs also. There are, however, verbs that occur only with an auxiliary verb. Consequently, these verbs in their simple form do not have imperative and optative forms. The imperative and optative forms of non-existent bare verb† forms are not given in the chart. य is the base in य ‘she sold’, but it does not occur in the imperative or optative; the imperative form occurs with the auxiliary verb य, य ‘sell’; य is the base of the verb in य ‘he died’, but its imperative form is with the auxiliary verb य, य ‘die’. Some complex verb forms are not used in the imperative even with an auxiliary verb: य, which is the base in य ‘she welcomed’ and य which is the base of the verb in य ‘he guarded’ are not used in the imperative with or without an auxiliary verb. Some verbs are not used in the imperative form and they have only a few of the possible verb forms: ल as in ल ‘she was scared’ does not have the imperative or optative form, the present and future finite verb forms, nor the infinitive form, as the non-existence of ल ‘be scared’, ल ‘he is scared’ and ल ‘he will be scared’, and ल ‘need not be scared’ shows. Absence of forms like these is probably a result of historical developments in the language. Boxes for the verb forms above are empty in the chart, though the reason for their non-existence is not semantic.

Selection of Verbs

Cre-A: Dictionary of Contemporary Tamil (2008) has 4,042 verbs including compound verbs and idiomatic verb phrases. This is not the total number of verbs in modern Tamil because only auxiliary verbs are included in this dictionary with regard to productive compound verbs of the form noun plus auxiliary. य, य, य are given in the dictionary (and in this verb chart) in place of य, य ‘get angry’ य ‘make one angry’, etc. A productive compound verb formation is adding य ‘do’ to nouns (and to foreign verbs that are mixed into speech) as in य ‘be martyred’, य ‘be beautified’. These auxiliary verbs in compound verbs are also independent main verbs and only the main verbs are included in the chart. All the verb forms for a main verb are possible when they are auxiliary verbs.

The verb chart contains a total of 369 verbs arrived at through a process of selection. The following methods were used to select verbs that a learner of Tamil is most likely to encounter.

a. Recall: Five informants were asked to recall 250 verbs without any external aid. These were persons of different levels of exposure to Tamil: a high school graduate, a college graduate, one with a Master's degree in English, a doctoral student in Tamil, and a trained linguist with a post-graduate research degree. The five lists were collated and a list of verbs common to the lists of at least three persons was made.

b. Children’s vocabulary: A list of verbs was compiled from one hundred stories specifically written for children.

c. Basic vocabulary: A list was prepared from David W. McAlpin’s A Core Vocabulary for Tamil (http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/mcalpin/) compiled in the context of teaching Tamil as a second language.

† Bare verb is used here to refer to the form of a verb with no inflection. This could be, in Tamil, the form of the singular imperative, such as य ‘come’ or a phonological variant of it, which is not the imperative, such as य and य. Either of these forms could be called a stem in that they are the base to which suffixes are added. These are inflected forms of verbs to which additional suffixes are also added, such as य ‘let (one) come’ from the infinitive य ‘to come’. य ‘come definitely’ from the verbal participle य ‘having come’. य, य, य could be called verb bases or stems at different points in the progression of creating specific categories of verb forms.
All three lists were compared and a final list was compiled. This list was reviewed by the project team and advisors to the project. Some verbs were dropped and some, which were thought to be useful in the context of learning Tamil, were added during this reviewing process.

The final number of verbs in Tamil is larger than the number of verbs in the verb charts of many other languages in the series. The main reasons for this are the diglossic nature of Tamil with lexical doublets such as போனது, போன் 'go' and the nature of expressing transitivity in homophonous verbs (செய்தல் and செய்தல் in the traditional Tamil grammar) through different conjugations. In addition, Tamil is a verbal language. This manifests, among other things, in the fact that verbs perform non-verbal grammatical functions, for instance, being noun modifiers while remaining verbs in their grammatical properties (சுருக்கல்). and in the fact that verbs are the base from which nouns of action (verbal nouns) and nouns of actors (participial nouns), which retain the grammatical properties of a verb as seen in their tense markers, verbal modifiers and in their governing cases, are produced. As a good knowledge of verbs helps learners of Tamil, more verbs and more verb forms become necessary.

**Structure of Verb Forms**

Verbs in Tamil are divided into two types: weak verbs and strong verbs. Strong verbs have மூல் added to their base, which is transparent in the verb form infinitives மூடத்தையது 'to lie down', மூடத்தையது 'to hide (sth.)'. Weak verbs, do not add மூல்: மீது 'to sing', மீது 'to disappear'. This division also plays a role in the conjugation of verbs, though an explicit recognition of this division in grammatical descriptions of Tamil begins only during the colonial period. The verb forms in Tamil are traditionally divided into two broad categories: finite (முன்னொட்டு) and non-finite (சுருக்கல்). This division begins from the earliest grammatical description of Tamil over 2,000 years ago. The verb forms of the latter category are dependant grammatical forms in the sense that they are governed by another form, verbal or nominal. The imperative, optative, and finite verbs (the verb forms marked for person–number–gender, i.e. the agreement marker) belong to the finite category and the rest (other than the verb-based nouns) in the chart belong to the non-finite category.

There are basically three kinds of bases from which other verb forms are constructed: bare verb (a few verbs have a different form as a stem to take suffixes), infinitive (bare verb + மூल்), and verbal participle (bare verb + past tense suffix). The imperative, optative, infinitive, finite verb and verbal participle are formed from the bare verb. Except in the non-polite positive imperative, these forms take suffixes, which, in the case of positive finite verbs, are tense suffixes and agreement suffixes and, in the case of positive verbal participles, are past tense suffixes. (The suggestive form with மூத்து - 'why' has the imperative as its base to which மூத்து is added, as in மூத்து்னு 'why don’t (you) do (it)’; மூத்து்னு 'why don’t (you) not do (it)’. These forms are not included in the chart, as mentioned earlier).

The modals (the forms that indicate speaker perspective such as desirable, obligatory, permissible, probable, able (to perform) nature of action or state) are formed from the infinitive [மூத்து்னு 'let (him) do (it)’; மூத்து்னு 'one must do it’, மூத்து்னு 'one must not do (it)’] as are the negatives [மூத்து்னு 'did not do (it)’, மூத்து்னு 'don’t do (it)’, மூத்து்னு 'without doing']. (It is possible to take the bare verb as the base rather than the infinitive in the last two negative verb forms.) The infinitive is the base in the temporal verb form, மூத்து்னு 'as/while one does (sth.)’, and in the verb form of instruction, மூத்து்னையேயே 'you do this’. These are not included in the chart, as mentioned earlier. The counter-factual suggestive form, which is made from an archaic infinitive form (verb + மூத்து்னு/verb + மூத்து்னு) as in மூத்து்னு ‘why should (you) do (it)/why should (you) tear (it), is not a productive process and this form is not included in the chart.

The verbs of subordinate clauses are formed from the verbal participle, as in மூத்து்னையே 'if (one) does’, மூத்து்னையே 'even if (one) does’, மூத்து்னையே 'do it’. As mentioned earlier, forms with மூத்து are not included in the chart. Extended verb forms with auxiliary verbs are also formed from the verbal participle.

There are two other bases to make verb forms. The noun derived from a verb is the base for the verb form in some subordinate clauses (மூத்து்னையே 'as soon (s.o.) does’, மூத்து்னையே 'because (sth.) was done’) and in some periphrastic verb forms (மூத்து்னையே 'have the habit of doing’, மூத்து்னையே 'never did’), which are not included in the chart, except for the causal form above. The temporal clauses have the relative participle as the base to which post-positions, most of which are nouns, are added as their head (மூத்து்னையே 'when doing’, மூத்து்னையே 'after doing’, மூத்து்னையே 'before doing’).
A defining property of verbs is that they are the forms that indicate time. Not every sentence in Tamil indicates time; some sentences with the noun as predicate do not bear time. Verbs in Tamil indicate time by tense suffixes, added to the bare verb. There are three sets of tense suffixes for the past, present, and future tenses. Tense suffixes have two variant forms each for the present and future tense and many variants for the past tense.

There are basically four past tense suffixes: -£iu, -£ir, -£iù, -£ix (litt: இவ்வுன்னாள் ‘he sang’, இவ்விட்டு இவ்விட்டு ‘he cried’, இவ்வாறாக இவ்வுட்டு ‘he read’ இவ்வுட்டு ‘he fell down’, இவ்வாறாக இவ்வுட்டு ‘she walked’ respectively). They have phonological variants conditioned by the final consonant of the bare verb. -£iù- and -£i- go with weak verbs; -£ir- with strong verbs; -£ix- with weak verbs and strong verbs. Beyond this, there is no way to predict which verb takes which past tense suffix. There are some cues based on the phonology of verbs, such as the final vowel - 2 after the stop consonant in verbs that are not mono-syllabic with a short vowel (the suffix of verbs of this phonological form is -£iù-; litt: இவ்விட்டு ‘he sang’), or the final vowel is - 2 (the suffix is -£ir-; இவ்வாறாக ‘he read’), etc., but they are neither sufficient (litt: இவ்வாறாக இவ்விட்டு ‘he dropped’, not *litt: இவ்வாறாக ‘he was’, not *litt: இவ்வாறாக ‘he read’). The phonological variant in weak verbs of -£ir- is -£ir- with verbs ending in பிக (பிகோ: பிகோட்டாக ‘he got spoiled’), -£ir- with verbs ending in பு (புகோ: புகோட்டாக ‘he got’), -£ir- with verbs ending in பொ (பொகோ: பொகோட்டாக ‘he ate’), and -£iù- in verbs ending in -ொ (ொகோ: ஒகோட்டாக ‘he ate’). Variants in weak verbs of -£iù- are -£iù- with verbs ending in -ொ (ொகோ: ஒகோட்டாக ‘he rolled’), and -£iù- with verbs ending in -ொ (ொகோ: ஒகோட்டாக ‘he killed’). Variants in strong verbs of -£ir- are -£ir- with verbs ending in -ொ (ொகோ: ஒகோட்டாக ‘he asked’) and -£ir- with verbs ending in -ொ (ொகோ: ஒகோட்டாக ‘he sold’). The particular verbs inflected for these past tense markers can be seen in the verb chart.

The present tense suffixes are -£iù/-£iù (litt: இவ்வுட்டு ‘he does it’) and -£ir/-£ir (litt: இவ்வாறாக ‘he reads’); the future tense suffixes are -£ir (litt: இவ்வாறாக ‘he will do’) (which becomes -£ir- in weak verbs ending in a nasal consonant: இவ்வாறாக ‘he will eat’) and -£ir (litt: இவ்வாறாக ‘he will read’). The present and future tense suffixes do not differentiate present and future time in relative participles, participial nouns and verbal nouns. இவ்வென்பொய் and இவ்வொய் ‘which does’, இவ்வொய்பொய் and இவ்வொய் ‘doer’, இவ்வென்பொய் and இவ்வொய் ‘doing’ are variants of the same verb form, which relate to stylistic preference and not semantic difference.

The finite verb agrees with the person (first, second and third person), gender (masculine, feminine, polite and neuter in third person alone) and number (singular and plural for all the preceding except for the masculine, feminine and polite forms in the third person, which merge into one plural form in the pronoun and in the finite verb ஆங்கீகாரம் ஆங்கீகாரம் ‘they did’), as do the two plural pronouns in first person finite verb ஆங்கீகாரம் ஆங்கீகாரம் ‘we (incl./excl.) did’). The plural in the second person doubles as the polite singular. There are six singular forms and four plural forms in each finite verb. The finite verb in the negative does not differentiate between singular and plural in the neuter in modern Tamil. The participial nouns derived from verbs do not differentiate person.

The order of morphemes in the finite verb in the positive is bare verb + tense + agreement or bare verb + past tense + (one or more) auxiliary verb + tense + agreement or infinitive + auxiliary verb + tense + agreement. The syntagmatic pattern adds suffixes to the right in a fixed order in an isomorphic way for each added grammatical meaning. Bare verbs, except a handful of them (e.g. ஆ: ஆ/ஆ/ஆ ‘come’, ஆ: ஆ ‘die’), remain constant in all verb forms without any phonologically unpredictable change. The morphological structure of the verb is linear and transparent. Some of the morphemes, like the negative, modal, and auxiliary verb, have a higher-than-suffix status and so the floating morphemes, interrogative and emphatic, can be inserted between them and their base or the morpheme following them.

There are a few verbs that do not have the full set of verb forms. Examples in finite verb form are ஆ: ஆ/ஆ/ஆ ‘come’, ஆ: ஆ ‘die’. There are relative participles derived from verbs, but they have lost their verbal property. Some examples are ஆ: ஆ/ஆ/ஆ. These opaque verbs are not included in the chart.

**Meaning of verb forms**

To use the well-formed verb forms appropriately, one should know their meaning or the communicative intent of their use. The imperative form is used to make a request or issue a command to the listener. The optative form is used to enjoin the speaker’s wish for something to happen, positive (like blessing) or negative (like cursing), to the listener or a third party. It comes close
to the imperative (see எடுக்கு vs எடுத்துக்கொள்ள ‘come’, நான்/நீ வாழ்க்கையும் நானுடன் vs நானுடன் ‘live well wherever you are’) when said to a listener, but the difference is that the optative is not directive.

The optative is not a typical use of the infinitive, used mostly to convey a negative wish (அன்று என்று என்று ‘let the thunder fall on his head’, இருவரும் என்று ‘let wealth increase’); it is used like the imperative to give instruction, in which case இல்லை is added to the infinitive form (அன்று என்று என்று ‘come immediately’). The typical use of the infinitive is to refer to an action to be done (இருவரும் என்று ‘come to study’, இவ்வளவு என்று ‘time to study’). It is also used for referring to the doing of an action, like a verbal noun (இவ்வளவு என்று ‘like to read/reading’), to the effect of an action (ஒவ்வரும் என்று வாழ்க்கையும் ‘she cried to such extent that her eyes became red’), to the simultaneous or immediately preceding action (ஒவ்வரும் என்று வாழ்க்கையும் ‘as I said that, she got angry’). This last use is more common with -ல் added to the infinitive (சோஜோபையும் in the above example).

As mentioned earlier, the infinitive is structurally the base for the verbal forms of mood and negation. The modal form இல்லை expresses the desire or need to do an action. The desire ordinarily is that of the speaker (அன்று என்று என்று ‘I wish he reads/he needs to read’; it commonly translates into English as ‘should/must read’). -ல் expresses the possibility/possibility or permissibility of doing an action (இருவரும் என்று ‘likely to read/permittled to read, ஒவ்வரும் என்று ‘likely to rain’; it commonly translates into English as ‘may/can read, may rain’). (It is possible to segment this verb form into an archaic verbal noun இருவரும் + நல் and treat it as a periphrastic form.) -ல் expresses possibility or wishful thought specific to the speaker as the agent (இவ்வளவு என்று ‘permitted (by the speaker) to read’, ஒவ்வரும் என்று ‘wish it to rain’; it commonly translates into English as ‘let (him) read/let it rain’). இல்லை expresses the capability or entitlement of the subject (இருவரும் என்று ‘be able to read’, ஒவ்வரும் என்று வாழ்க்கையும்/அன்று வாழ்க்கையும் ‘is possible to go to heaven/to drive a car’; it commonly translates into English as ‘can’).

There are three tenses in the finite verb: two in the relative participle and tensed nouns (verbal nouns and participial nouns) derived from verbs and one in the verbal participle. The verbal participle refers to an earlier action in a sequence of actions and so is expressed in the past tense. But it also refers to a simultaneous or descriptive action. The relative participle and the tensed noun differentiate past and non-past, as mentioned above. The non-past is expressed by the future tense suffix in formal Tamil and by the present tense suffix in informal Tamil. The present tense form, however, is used in formal Tamil, but less frequently. The finite verb expresses three tenses: past, the time prior to the time of the speech, present, the time of the speech, and future, the time after the time of the speech. But tense is not coterminous with time. The present tense could be used to describe a past event, as in historical present, or it could be used to describe a future event, as in definite future. Like in any language, tense suffixes express more than time in Tamil. Past and present tenses, besides times, add specificity to propositions. Future tense, on the other hand, can add timelessness, generalization, secondary knowledge and probability. A statement in future tense like ஆங்கிலத்தில் என்று ‘he drinks’ is true of all times; a statement like இந்தைவை என்று ‘this fruit is sweet’ is generalized based on previous experience or second-hand information as opposed to the statement in the present tense இந்தைவை என்று ‘this fruit is sweet’, which describes a personal, real-time observation. This is also true of the statement இந்தைவை என்று போக்குவிக்க என்று ‘there are probably twenty people there’ as opposed to இந்தைவை என்று போக்குவிக்க என்று ‘there are twenty people there, I know’.

Simple verbs in Tamil are unmarked in the sense that they are neutral as to accomplishment of the act, the effect of the act on the subject, relevance of the act to the time of the speech or to another act, observed or extrapolated status of the act, etc. These specifications are expressed by auxiliary verbs attached to the verbal participle form of simple verbs. There are three auxiliary verbs given in the verb chart and they are grammaticalized in the sense that they are equated with grammatical notions like completive aspect, reflexive mood, and stative aspect. என்று ‘let’go’ expresses the sense that the act was or will be accomplished; that is, the event incorporating the act did or will take place. This may be called completive aspect: இவ்வளவு என்று ‘she read (it)’ vs இவ்வளவு என்று ‘she has read (it)’.

அன்று ‘have’ expresses the sense that the act in some way affects the subject, the doer. This may be called affective mood, the reflexive mood being only one part of it when the subject and the object are same: இவ்வளவு என்று ‘he hit (someone)’ vs இவ்வளவு என்று ‘he hit himself’. Other examples of the affective mood include transitive verbs as in இவ்வளவு என்று ‘she bought (it)’ vs இவ்வளவு என்று ‘she bought (it) (for) her’ and intransitive verbs as in இவ்வளவு என்று ‘he climbed on to the tree’ vs இவ்வளவு என்று ‘he climbed onto the tree (for his safety)’.
`be` is used to signify being in a specified state after the act is over. This may be called the aspect of resultive state:  இழுவ்புக்குறி `she has read (for the exam)`, இழுவ்பின்புக்குறி `it is torn`, இழுவ்புண்ணுக்குறி `it has rained`. The resultive state could refer to an act performed some time in the past, but the fact remains true at the present time. The first verb form with `be` above could be used to mean `he has read (this novel some time in the past)`; it could also refer to a past act inferred from a state/condition in the present. The third verb form with `be` above, for example, could be used to mean that the act of raining earlier is inferred from the state or condition of the wet ground now. The verb form with `be` in the future tense may have counter factual meaning:  இழுவ்புகுறி `he would have read, (but)`.

Two auxiliary verbs can combine, but the combination of `be` and `be` has a special grammatical meaning to indicate the duration of an action or state:  இழுவ்புநிலையுடன் `she is reading`. This is the fourth complex verb form with an auxiliary verb included in the chart. The grammatical meanings of the auxiliary verbs remain constant in finite as well as non-finite verb forms. The auxiliary verb `be` is an exception, which indicates a simultaneity of action (besides its affective sense) with another verb in the verbal participle form:  இழுவ்பு கையுடன் `he took the book (for) himself as he sat down`;  இழுவ்பு போல் `she was reading while eating`.

When some other auxiliary verbs are added to the verbal participle they add specifics to the performance of the act including whether it was done as a trial or to help someone, or to be useful in future or to indicate a change from one state to another, or to specify whether the act was done in disgust, etc. They are not given in the verb chart because they are more semantic in nature than grammatical and they are not added to all verbs across the board like the four aspectual and modal auxiliary verbs above.

The verb forms—relative participle, conditional, causal, etc.—that are the heads of subordinate clauses, such as relative, temporal, conditional, and causal clauses, etc., do not, in their grammatical meanings in Tamil, differ significantly from their standard meanings in other languages. A point must be noted, however, about the grammatical meaning of the relative participle and conditional in Tamil. The head noun of the relative clause may have a case relationship (though the case suffix is absent) with its verb (ைைல் என்னும் `the boy who came walking`, என்னும் வாழும் `the boy to whom I gave money, etc.`) or may have no case relationship (ைைல் என்னும் `noise of walking on foot`). The conditional may have the temporal sense of `when` (என்னும் வாழும் `marriage will take place when it dawns`).

**Endnote**

The verb chart assumes a theory of grammar that is semantically motivated, as shown by the attention given to identifying non-existent verb forms. Nevertheless, it must be made clear that the verb chart does not explain minutely the semantic properties of forms, nor does it exhaust all possible verb forms in Tamil. It is meant to be a step towards getting there in both respects.

This introduction is longer than usual for handbooks as it draws attention to non-occurring verb forms and their complexities, keeping in mind researchers on Tamil verbs in addition to learners of Tamil. The analysis of verb forms given in the introduction is biased towards a semantically motivated grammar and a view that the grammar of verbs in modern Tamil has significant differences from the description of verbs in the traditional grammar of Tamil. It admits more verb forms than recognized in traditional grammars. Not every Tamil grammarian or linguist will agree with these two views of grammar. Any difference in viewpoints should encourage more empirical and theoretical studies of the grammar of verbs in Tamil, preferably using a database of actual use of verb forms in modern Tamil.

Any question on the information given or not given on verb forms is welcome from Tamil learners using this chart. Also welcome is any alternative analysis of verb forms, which meets the minimum empirical and descriptive adequacies.

E.Annamalai
Reading List


Abbreviations

esp.  especially
excl.  exclusive
fem.  feminine
hon.  honorific
hum.  human
incl.  inclusive
mas.  masculine
neu.  neuter
pl.  plural
sg.  singular
s.o.  someone
sth.  something
 değildir.