

Rendering the lower-mid front vowel /æ/ in Old and Modern Tamil Herman Tieken

In my contribution to the *Festschrift* for Alexander (Sasha) Dubyanskiy (2016) I demonstrated that *cāru* in Caṅkam poetry does not mean “festival” but is the same word spelled differently as *cēru*, “mud, slush”. For another instance of the interchange of *ā* and *ē* in Caṅkam poetry I referred to the instrumental/conditional suffixes *-āl* and *-ēl*. The same type of variation is also found in Modern Tamil, where the lower-mid front vowel /æ/ is rendered by *ē* or *ā* in words like *pack*, written *pēk* (Figure 1), *lab*, written *lēp* (Figure 2), and *bank*, written *pēṅk* (Figure 3) as well as *pāṅku* (Figure 4). The use of long *ā* and *ē* shows that in Tamil pronunciation the short vowel /æ/ in these words is lengthened into the direction of /æ̃/.

Figure 1: *hpritj pēk* = fridge pack



Figure 2: *maikrō lēp* = Micro Lab



Figure 3: *yunaiṭeṭ pēṅk āp intiyā* = *United Bank of India*



Figure 4: *pārata sṭēṭ pāṅku* = *State Bank of India*



Leaving out the variation between \bar{a} and \bar{e} in the instrumental/conditional suffix $-\bar{a}l/\bar{e}l$, the variation in $c\bar{a}ru$ and $c\bar{e}ru$ in Old Tamil may be due to the raised and fronted pronunciation of \bar{a} after palatal c , that is, realized as $/\bar{æ}/$. As the Tamil alphabet, like that, for instance, of Telugu, does not have a character for non-phonemic $/\bar{æ}/$, a choice had to be made between \bar{a} and \bar{e} . Consequently, we are indeed most likely dealing with two spelling forms of the same word here.

Interestingly, in *Kalittokai* 6, 41–42 *cāru* and *cēru* are found side by side in a list of fragrant substances produced by, or floating in, the river Vaiyai (*cāruñ cēru neyyu malarum/nārupu nikaḷum yāruvaralāru/*). It is not unlikely, however, that we are dealing with an imitation of the so-called echo compounds (*māṭu kītu*, “cattle and the like”), using the two forms as if they refer to similar, but different, substances. As seen in the pictures above, in Modern Tamil there is no consensus as yet on which vowel, *ā* or *ē*, to use for /*æ*/. Hindi *baṁk* in Figure 3 (and *baik* in Figure 4, in which the Anusvāra seems to have been accidentally omitted) shows that, as in Tamil, *a* in *bank* is perceived to be long.

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Reference

Herman Tieken, ‘*Cāru*, “Festival”, in Caṅkam Poety’, in *Tamiḷ tanta paricu. The Collection of articles in honor of Alexander M. Dubyanskiy*, ed. O. Vecherina, N. Gordiychuk, T. Dubyanskaya, *Orientalia et Classica. Papers of the Institute of Oriental and Classical Studies* LXIII, Moscow, 2016, pp. 101–123