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 demonstated that $c\bar{a}\underline{r}u$ in Caṅkam poetry does not mean "festival" but is the same word spelled differently as $c\bar{e}\underline{r}u$, "mud, slush". For another instance of the interchange of \bar{a} and \bar{e} in Caṅkam poetry I referred to the instrumental/conditional suffixes $-\bar{a}l$ and $-\bar{e}l$. The same type of variation is also found in Modern Tamil, where the lower-mid front vowel $/\bar{e}e$ / is rendered by \bar{e} or \bar{a} in words like pack, written $p\bar{e}k$ (Figure 1), lab, written $l\bar{e}p$ (Figure 2), and bank, written $p\bar{e}nk$ (Figure 3) as well as $p\bar{a}nku$ (Figure 4). The use of long \bar{a} and \bar{e} shows that in Tamil pronunciation the short vowel $/\bar{e}e$ / in these words is lengthened into the direction of $/\bar{e}e$ /.

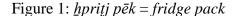




Figure 2: $maikr\bar{o} l\bar{e}p = Micro Lab$



Figure 3: yunaițeț pēnk āp intiyā = United Bank of India



Figure 4: *pārata sṭēṭ pānku* = *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 $c\bar{a}\underline{r}u$ and $c\bar{e}\underline{r}u$ in Old Tamil may be due to the raised and fronted pronunciation of \bar{a} after palatal c, that is, realized as $/\bar{e}/$. As the Tamil alphabet, like that, for instance, of Telugu, does not have a character for non-phonemic $/\bar{e}/$, 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 $c\bar{a}\underline{r}u$ and $c\bar{e}\underline{r}u$ are found side by side in a list of fragrant substances produced by, or floating in, the river Vaiyai ($c\bar{a}\underline{r}u\tilde{n}$ $c\bar{e}\underline{r}u$ neyyu $malarum/n\bar{a}\underline{r}upu$ $nika\underline{l}um$ $y\bar{a}\underline{r}uvaral\bar{a}\underline{r}u//$). It is not unlikely, however, that we are dealing with an imitation of the so-called echo compounds ($m\bar{a}\underline{t}u$ $k\bar{t}\underline{t}u$, "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, \bar{a} or \bar{e} , to use for $/\bar{a}e$ /. Hindi baimk 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.

January 2022

Reference

Herman Tieken, '*Cāru*, "Festival", in Caṅkam Poety', in *Tamil 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