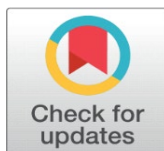


# CONTEXTUAL SENSITIVITY IN TRANSLATING TAMIL HONORIFIC PREFIX 'TIRU': A COMPARATIVE STUDY WITH REFERENCE TO KALKI'S SIVAKAMIYIN SABADHAM

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## ABSTRACT

It is widely recognized that languages reflect the worldview of their speakers, and the use of honorific forms among individuals exemplifies this reality. Honorifics, found in all languages, are conventional expressions used to signal social status and convey politeness and respect. Tamil adds another dimension to this phenomenon, where reverence and sacredness are key attributes that shape both the forms and meanings of honorific expressions, particularly the honorific prefix Tiru.

This study focuses exclusively on the translation of the Tamil honorific prefix Tiru as found in the historical novel Sivakamiyin Sabatham. Selected extracts from the source text and its English translations by P. S. Sri (Sivakami's Vow) and Pavithra Srinivasan (Sivakamiyin Sabadham) are analyzed. The primary aim is to demonstrate that the effective translation of honorific prefixes like Tiru is deeply context-dependent. By comparing the two translation approaches, the study identifies which technique better retains the sacred and reverential meaning conveyed in the original

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### Contextual Sensitivity in Translating Tamil Honorific Prefix 'Tiru' : A Comparative Study Honorific Prefix

An honorific prefix is a linguistic device positioned before a proper noun to denote respect, social rank, or professional standing. It plays an essential role in elevating reverence, maintaining politeness and reinforcing societal structures. Honorific prefixes are prevalent across a wide range of languages and cultures, often mirroring cultural attitudes toward hierarchy and interpersonal conduct. In English, titles such as Mr., Mrs., Dr., and Sir serve to reflect gender, marital status, or professional achievement. Languages like Korean and Japanese exhibit even more

sophisticated honorific systems, where prefixes and associated grammatical forms carefully communicate social relationships and hierarchy. In a similar manner, Tamil employs honorific prefixes as an integral feature of formal address. For analysis, the Tamil historical novel சிவகாமியின் சபதம் Civakāmiyin capatam (SS) by Kalki and its translations by P.S. Sri named Sivakami’s Vow (SV) and Pavithra Srinivasan in the name Sivakamiyin Sabadham (Siv) are taken for the study.

## 2. TIRU-HONORIFIC PREFIX

In Tamil, Tiru serves as a titular prefix for addressing adult men, much like Mr. in English. However, it carries a deeper layer of meaning: when attached to proper nouns, it conveys a sense of “reverence, sacredness or divinity”.

In the source text, when portraying the revered Tamil Saivaitic saint திருநாவுக்கரசர் (Tirunavukkarasar), the author repeatedly applies the prefix Tiru to various body parts. The words come as, திருமேனி (Tirumeni), திருமுகம் (Tirumugam), திருக்கரம் (Tirukaram), திருப்பாதங்கள் (Tirupādhām), and திருத்தோள் (Tiruthōl).

This deliberate and sustained use of the honorific prefix goes beyond customary address; it enhances the sanctity and spiritual aura of the saint’s physical form. Each expression infused with Tiru carries profound religious and cultural symbolism. The prefix Tiru is notably polysemous, encompassing meanings such as wealth, beauty, holiness, divinity, and reverence. Although Tiru possesses multiple potential interpretations, its exact meaning in any given context is shaped by surrounding linguistic cues. Thus, Tiru emerges as a highly context-dependent honorific, its significance shifting based on the nuances of the accompanying words. “Context is the most important and effective factor in creating, using, and interpreting the implied meaning of honorifics”. (Sabah Sleibi, 24)

In Tamil, the honorific prefix Tiru is frequently employed when describing divine figures such as gods and saints. In this context, Tiru serves not merely as a marker of respect, but as a transformative element that sanctifies the physical attributes of the subject. The saint’s or deity’s body is thus not perceived as merely corporeal, but as a vessel embodying divine presence. The use of Tiru in compound expressions such as Tirumeni, Tirumugam, Tirukaram, Tirupādhām, and Tiruthōl elevates the physical descriptions into realms of veneration and spiritual significance. From a translation standpoint, this usage poses unique challenges. Although Tiru is inherently polysemous, encompassing notions of beauty, sanctity, divinity, and reverence, its specific interpretation in each occurrence is determined by the contextual cues within the surrounding sentence. Thus, Tiru functions as a context-sensitive honorific, requiring careful attention to nuance when rendered into another language.

## 3. திருமேனி - TIRUMENI

In the source text, the sentence திருமேனி முழுவதும் தூய வெண்ணீறு பூசி இருந்தது (SS 204). (Tirumeni muzhudhum thuya vennīru poosi irundhadhu) “His entire sacred body was smeared with pure sacred ash,” my trans 1) uses the honorific prefix Tiru to elevate the body (meni) into a sacred entity. Here, the term vennīru refers specifically to Tirunīru, the sacred ash traditionally associated with Lord Shiva. Since the ash itself symbolizes divinity, the body anointed with Tirunīru is perceived as sanctified and is thus addressed as Tirumeni. In this context, the prefix Tiru conveys not only holiness but also divine beauty and veneration.

In Pavithra Srinivasan’s translation, the term Tirumeni is omitted entirely. Conversely, in P.S. Sri’s translation, Tirumeni is rendered as “torso” (SV 159). At a superficial level, the English term “torso” may evoke an image of a headless trunk, which fails to capture the reverent and sacred quality embedded in the original. Consequently, in both translations, the spiritual aura and honorific nuance conveyed by the prefix Tiru are lost, diminishing the intended tone of sanctity present in the Tamil source.

#### 4. திருமுகம் - TIRUMUGAM

In the SL sentence, திருமுகத்தில் ஞான ஒளி வீசிற்று. (SS 204) (Tirumugaththil gnāna oḷi veesitru), “The sacred face radiated spiritual wisdom,” my trans 2), the honorific prefix Tiru attached to mugam (face) serves to exalt the saint’s visage beyond its physical appearance. The phrase gnāna oḷi (light of wisdom) refers to the spiritual brilliance emanating from the face of Tirunavukkarasar, further reinforcing the sanctity associated with Tirumugam. Here, Tiru elevates the divine beauty and spiritual significance of the saint’s countenance, presenting it as a symbol of enlightenment.

In Pavithra Srinivasan’s translation, Tirumugam is rendered simply as “face” (Siv 191) which diminishes the divine association and reduces the description to a purely physical portrayal, thereby losing the saint’s radiance implied in the original. In contrast, P.S. Sri translates Tirumugam as “saintly face” (SV 159) a choice that retains a sense of reverence and captures the spiritual wisdom and enlightened aura attributed to the saint in the source text.

#### 5. திருத்தோள் - TIRUTHŌL

In another example, the sentence கோவில் பிரகாரங்களில் புல் செதுக்குவதற்கான உழவாரப்படை அந்த தொண்டர் சிகாமணியின் திருத்தோள்களில் சாத்தப்பட்டிருந்தது. (SS 204). (Kōyil pragāraṅgaḷil pul sedhukuvadharkaana uzhavārapṇadai andha thondar sigāmaṇiyin Tiruthōlgaḷil saaththappattirundhadhu), “The uzhavārapṇadai used for weeding temple courtyards was placed on the sacred shoulders of the saint,” my trans 3) offers another illustration of the honorific prefix Tiru in use. The term uzhavārapṇadai refers to a traditional tool employed in voluntary temple maintenance work. Here, the prefix Tiru attached to thōl (shoulders) performs a dual function: it highlights both the sanctity of the service (the divine task of temple maintenance) and the exalted spiritual stature of the saint carrying out the act. Thus, Tiruthōl conveys not merely physical shoulders but shoulders honoured and sanctified by their association with sacred duty.

In Pavithra Srinivasan’s translation, the term is rendered simply as “shoulders,” (Siv 190) which omits the layers of reverence and sacred connotation embedded in the original. Meanwhile, P.S. Sri’s translation as “slender shoulders” (SV 159) focuses primarily on a physical attribute—delicacy or thinness—thereby overlooking the crucial spiritual dimension. The adjective “slender” fails to capture the religious significance of the shoulders bearing an instrument associated with holy service, thereby losing the deeper connotation of nobility and divine dedication present in the source text.

#### 6. திருப்பாதம் - TIRUPĀDAM

In the source sentence, திருநாவுக்கரசரின் திருப்பாதங்களில் ஆயனர் சாஷ்டாங்கமாக விழுந்து வணங்கினார். (SS 206). (Tirunāvukkarasarin Tirupādangaḷil sāṣṭāṅgamāga vizhundhu vaṇaṅginār) “Ayanar prostrated in full at the sacred feet of Tirunavukkarasar,” my trans 4), a devotee falls at the saint’s feet in an act of profound devotion and reverence. Here, the feet are referred to as Tirupādhām, where the honorific prefix Tiru signifies sanctity and holiness.

The term Tirupādangaḷ combines Tiru, an honorific denoting reverence, divinity, and sacredness, with pādangaḷ meaning “feet.” In many religious and cultural traditions, particularly in Hinduism, the feet of revered figures—saints, deities, and gurus—are venerated as embodiments of divine presence. Thus, when Tiru is affixed to “feet,” it elevates them beyond their corporeal identity, portraying them as sacred vessels worthy of worship.

In this context, P.S. Sri’s translational choice of “Lotus feet” (SV 160) captures the intended reverence and spiritual symbolism more effectively. The metaphor of the “lotus” traditionally evokes purity, beauty, and divinity, aligning seamlessly with the cultural and devotional significance embedded in the original Tamil term. In contrast, Pavithra Srinivasan’s is a more literal translation with the TL equivalent ‘feet’ (Siv 192) while accurate in a denotative sense, fails

to convey the sacred aura attached to the saint’s feet, thereby diminishing the depth of veneration expressed in the source text.

## 7. திருக்கரம் - TIRUKARAM

In the source sentence, திருநாவுக்கரசர் தமது திருக்கரத்தில் கொண்டு வந்திருந்த திருநீற்றை அவளுடைய நெற்றியில் இட்டார். (SS 217). (Tirunāvukkarasar tamadhu Tirukaratthil konu vandhirundha Tirunīrai avalūdaiya neṟriyil iṭṭār). “Tirunavukkarasar placed the sacred ash he had brought in his divine hands onto her forehead,” my trans 5), the term Tirukaram is employed. In this expression, Tiru functions as an honorific prefix signifying reverence and divinity, while karam denotes “hands.” Thus, Tirukaram refers to the saint’s hands, perceived not merely as physical entities, but as carriers of divine power capable of healing, blessing, and performing miracles — here, the application of sacred ash upon Sivagami’s forehead.

Pavithra Srinivasan translates Tirukaram simply as “hands,” (Siv 202) which, while accurate at a surface level, diminishes the divine aura conveyed by the honorific Tiru. In contrast, P.S. Sri’s rendering as “blessed fingers” (SV 169) aligns more closely with the reverential tone of the original. The adjective “blessed” effectively conveys a sense of sacred empowerment, thus preserving the sanctity implied in the Tamil. While the choice of “fingers” rather than “hands” narrows the focus, it poetically emphasizes the act of blessing and healing, thereby capturing the spirit of the scene more faithfully than a literal translation.

## 8. TRANSLATION OF HONORIFIC PREFIX -PSS VS PAS

In comparing the translations of the five terms featuring the honorific prefix Tiru by Pavithra Srinivasan and P.S. Sri, it is observed that Pavithra’s translations consistently omit the honorific Tiru and render the constituent terms denoting parts of the body—mugam, pādham, karam, and thōl—with their literal English equivalents, such as “face,” “feet,” “fingers,” and “shoulder.” This approach overlooks the layered connotations carried by the prefix Tiru, which signifies reverence, sanctity, dignity, and beauty. Consequently, the translations reduce these sacred expressions to mere physical references, thereby stripping them of their cultural and spiritual resonance. In these instances, the sanctity embedded in the original Tamil expressions through the honorific Tiru is lost in translation.

By contrast, P.S. Sri’s translations employ adjectival equivalents that help retain the reverence and sanctity implied by the source language. His renderings, such as “blessed hands” and “lotus feet,” successfully preserve the divine aura and spiritual significance attached to the original terms. Thus, P.S. Sri’s choices strike a more effective balance between fidelity to the source text and the need to convey the sacred reverence embedded in the honorific prefix Tiru.

Thus, in the translation of Tiru-prefixed terms, P.S. Sri’s approach is found to be more effective in achieving cultural and spiritual fidelity. His adjectival strategy compensates for the untranslatability of Tiru as a prefix by embedding reverential qualities into the translations, whereas Pavithra Srinivasan’s literal translations result in a significant loss of sacredness and cultural resonance.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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