

## **A Comparative Study of Words in Tamil Baby Talk**

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### **Introduction**

Baby talk (BT) is the language used by babies who are below five or six years, for the purpose of communicating with each other or with their parents or care takers. Dil (1971:13, as given in Meegaskumbura 1980:289) uses it "to refer to the adult talk to the baby". Kelkar (1964:40) identifies it as a "fond concession". That is to say that adults use baby talk for fondling. Accordingly, they use it to develop intimacy and to show affection. BT encourages children to engage in the conversation lively. Ferguson (1964:103) defines it as "any special form of language which is regarded by speech community as being primarily appropriate for talking to young children and which is generally regarded as not the normal adult use of language". This indicates that BT is a special, 'not normal' language variety. Thus, it is called "abnormal type" (Sapier, 1949:179), "simplified version" (Bloomfield, 1933:472), "marginal system" Ferguson (ibid), "devient style" (Bell, 1976:158). BT is also referred to as caretaker speech, Infant-Directed Speech (IDS), Child-Directed Speech (CDS) or motherese. Child-Directed Speech (CDS) is the use of intonation, pitch, repetition and the simplification of syntax that adults use to address infants (Chang, 2010). For Example: Phrases like "do you want miiiiiiiilk"? "You want *bikka*"? These are referred as "motherese" or "parentese". It is the spontaneous way of talking in which mothers, fathers, and caretakers do speak with infants and young children.

BT is a key instrument in first language development. "Parentese" is most effective when a parent speaks with a child individually, in the absence of other adults or children around. According to Kuhls(2011) infant's babbling plays a major role in future language development, it shows how important the interchange between parents and a child. When infants hear more baby talk they acquire more words.sIn this regard, Nairán Ramírez-Esparza (2013) is in the openion that "some parents produce baby talk naturally and they don't realize they're benefiting their children. Some families are quiet and are not talking all the time. But it helps to make an effort to talk more. Parentese is preferred at developing language than regular speech, and even better if it occurs in a one-to-one interaction." It is scientifically proved that more Baby Talk parents used, the more their youngsters began to babble. All that babbling produced some surprising results at older. When researchers checked in with the same babies at age two, they found that frequent baby talk had dramatically boosted vocabulary regardless of socioeconomic status. Even if the words are fuzzy, it seems the slow, exaggerated sound of baby talk may make it easier for infant brains to practice early speech sounds and model the needed mouth and motor movements before they speak for the first time.

Baby talk can be observed universally and Sinhala and Tamil are not exceptions. In Tamil it is called "MaLalai". In Sinhala it is called "tondol" or "singiti vacana". In a comprehensive study on "tondol:Sinhala baby talk" Meegaskumbura (1980:288) describes situations where not only children, but also adults use baby talk in some context like immature or deceitful talking, cooing, fondling, pacifying. Yet, it is hard to find any study on "MaLalai, the Tamil baby talk, and thus it is a valuable research area.

### **Significance of the study**

This study is, thus, about "maLalai". Its intension is to find out the similarities and the differences of the baby talk used in different parts of the northern Sri Lanka. It is significant in several ways. Firstly, it paves the way for a 'Baby Words Dictionary' preserving rapidly diminishing variety of language. Secondly, it exhibits commonalities and differences prevailing in this variety. Thirdly, it is a kind of dialectal survey and contributes in some way for the dialectology.

## **Research problem**

Baby Talk may differ from place to place and person to person depending on the various factors. This situation is seen in Tamil Baby Talk as well. Thus, the research problem of this study is "What are the similarities and the differences of Baby Words identified in different geographical dialects of Tamil?"

## **Objective of the study**

The objective of this study is to find the similarities and the differences of Baby words used in different geographical dialects of Tamil.

## **Literature review**

Researches on BT have been carried out by local and international scholars. These discuss various aspects of BT. Recent studies are mainly based on 'baby talk in language acquisition' 'parents-child interaction' and 'the effects on language development' etc., For example, Peter Jusczyk (1999) and Erik Thiessen (2005) are on language development, whereas Karl Pajusalu (2001) is a structural analysis. Peter Jusczyk (1999) shows that babies understand baby talk and that the exaggerated speech pattern known as baby talk is used by adults to teach words, sentences and rhythm of a language.

Erik Thiessen (2005) reveals that though adults feel silly when they talk to babies, babies learn to speak sooner if adults talk to them like infants instead of other adults. Further, he found that adults speak to infants using short, simple sentences adjoined with higher pitch and exaggerated intonation. His research further expresses that infant-directed speech helps infants to learn words more quickly than normal adult's speech. He described how the infants were exposed to fluent speech with the exaggerated intonation, how contour characteristic of infant-directed speech assisted infants to identify the words more quickly than the infants who heard the fluent speech spoken in a monotone fashion.

Daniel Swingley (2008) shows the vocabulary developments in infants. Infants have a unique ability to discriminate speech- sound (phonetic) differences. He found that young children know words and forms of words while they have just begun to talk.

Brody (2009) gives tips on how to develop infant's acquisition of language. Because of the emotional effect the vowels are stretched, with highly exaggerated pitch contours. It shows that Baby Talk is not cultural, it is almost universal. Her study has shown that children learn new words better when parentese is employed. The study declares that new born babies cry with regional accents copied from their mothers. It also suggests that baby's ears drop on their parents' conversation while still in the womb and are picking up their accent.

Although studies in language acquisition have not discovered direct relationships between mother speech and certain aspects of children's language teaching Snow (1994), found the facilitative role of child-directed speech in children's language development. The phonological, semantic, and pragmatic aspects of CDS are all modified to help children learn how to communicate with language.

Lieven (1994) strengthens the point that interaction is essential in language acquisition, even in cultures that adults seldom talked to infants. Lieven reviewed and compared several researches investigating children from cultures in which they are not often talked to, for example Kaluli and Trackton. Lieven found that children in 34 such cultures imitate and memorize routinized, recurring segments in adults' conversation. Although children are not addressed to, they try hard to arouse adult's attention and to participate in communication with others by imitating and memorizing recurring segments. Lieven concluded that children learn language only in an environment in which they can make some sense of and of which they are a part. Interaction with others helps children acquire the ability to communicate by providing meaningful contexts.

Karl Pajusalu (2001) identifies baby talk as a sophisticated Register: It describes the phonological structure and the main prosodic features of South Estonian BT with special emphasis on phonological quality.

The studies done in Sri Lanka are on language acquisition and vocabulary development. Perera et al (2014) is on "2-3 years children verb production in Sri Lanka". Taking 08 children as a sample they have found that children in this age produce more verbs than nouns. Premawardana (2015) is on: "verb production of Sinhala speaking children with typical development from 12-24 months". With a sample consisting 100 children it is found that there is no significant variation in the development of cverb acquisition between male and female children, and all children produce at least one verb at the age of 24 months. Wijeratne (2015) discusses about vocabulary and syntactic development of an infant based on a case study. He analyses the vocabulary development

from month 08 to 18. Jayakodi (2010) studies how verbs are acquired by infants of 18 -48 months. Epa (2014) is a study on acquisition of verbs by 24-48 months children. Wijethunga (2014) is a study on acquisition of nouns by infants of 18 -48 months. Weerawardhana (2016) discusses about 'Language acquisition patterns' taking a child acquiring Sinhalese as the first language. She found that generalization and simplification are the common pattern of child language acquisition. Wijeratne (2016) describes the 'word formation in Tamil Baby talk'. There he identifies several processes, such as deletion, shortening, assimilation and substitution that operate in wordformation in Tamil baby talk.

The account given so far exhibits that many reserch on BT are on language acquisition and all most all the studies in Sri Lanka involves with the Sinhala speaking infants. This indicates the importance of more reserch on this area with Tamil speaking children. In this background the present study is a timely necessity.

## Methodology

The research area for this study is Northern part of Sri Lanka and the data were collected from Vavuniya, Kilinochi, Mullaithivu, Jaffna and Mannar districts. The sample consists of twenty-five babies: i.e. seventeen (17) babies from Vavuniya district, one (01) baby from Kilinochi, two (02) babies from Mullaithivu, one (01) baby from Jaffna and three (04) babies from Mannar. The sample also includes mothers, caretakers of those babies. The children are under the age of four. Also they come from various socioeconomic back grounds. Codes are used to identify babies; the babies are numbered and the letter indicates the district. For example, V1, V2.... denote babies from Vavuniya.

**Table 1: Information about the babies**

Area	Age in Months						children	Parents	care taker
	06-12	13-18	19-24	25-30	30-36	37-42			
District	06	13	19	25	30	37			
Vavuniya	01 V6	06V2,V3,V8, V9,V12,V16	03 V1,V7,V15	04V10,V11, V14,V17	02(V4)	01(V5)	17	34	10
Kilinochi	-	-	-	01(K1)	-	-	01	02	01
Mullaithivu	-	01(M1)	-	01(M2)	-	-	02	02	02
Jaffna	-	01(J1)	-	-	-	-	01	04	03
Mannar	-	02(Ma1, Ma4)	02(Ma2, Ma3)	-	-	-	04	08	01

Direct observation and conversation were carried out. Data were recorded in different formats such as audio, video and one-to-one speaking and all the recordings were transcribed phonemically. The collected data were analyzed based on structural linguistic methods to find out similarities and differences.

## Data Analysis

This section is devoted to exhibit the similarities and differences of BT used by the sample. First, similarities are discussed, it will follow the differences. Both these aspects are analysed based on type of words produced and the processes used.

### Similarities

The similarities can be found in types of words and processes of wordformation.

#### 3.1.1. Types of words

Different types of words, i.e. nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs are produced by the babies in the sample. As exemplified in table 2 most of the babies produce many nouns, yet, they produce only a small number of verbs; the use of adjectives and adverbs and other types of words considerably even less. The babies V1, K1, M2 used only three adjectives /sevappu/, /ma□□apuu//kuuvam/. This is a common feature found in BT of the babies below four years.

**Table 2: Different Types of words used by the babies from the five districts**

Word class	Vavniya	Kilinocchi	Mullaithivu	Jaffna	Mannar
Nouns	28	02	14	05	28
verbs	06	--	06	03	02
Adjectives	02	01	01	--	--

Nouns seem to be easier to produce at the preliminary stage of language production as verbs have different tenses and moods and so babies may find difficulty in producing them. There is a similarity in usage as well. The babies V1 and J1 used the same verb 'ikiræn' to express the same meaning. Further, three babies from two different geographical areas V1, K1, V11 used the same word 'umbaa' for the 'cow.' The babies V16 and V17 used as /mbaa/, /imbaa/ for the word 'cow'.

The babies V7, Ma3 used /uuci/ to identify any insect. The baby V5 who is in age group 37-42 used as 'ambaamaaḍu' which is the combination of BT word and the adult word. It shows that when the children grow they transfer from BT to adult talk.

This shows that type of words and their usage is concerned there is commonality in BT.

### ***Processes of wordformation***

Different types of word formation processes such as deletion, addition, substitution, ideosyncratic creations and mimicks, are found in BT. There are some similarities among BTs in different geographical areas.

#### ***Deletion***

Deletion is a wordformation process in BT. The children for the sake of convenience delete phonemes, syllables and affixes in formation of BT words.

The children delete one or more phonemes of an actual word in forming BT. In the following examples BT word comes first and the actual word follows it.

e.g./mii/ < /miin/ 'fish', /paam/ < /paavam/ 'sorry'/ 'sin', 'paappu/ < /paruppu/ 'dhall'.

In these words /n/, /va/, and /ru/ are deleted respectively. In another instance, they tend to delete whole syllable. /am/ < /ammaa/ 'mother', /ap/ < /appaa/ 'father', /vaapalam/ < /vaalaipalam / 'banana', /ikiræn/ < /irukkiræn/ '(I) am/stay', /kiṅku/ < /kilankuu/, 'yam'/ 'potato', /soo/ < /sooru/are some examples. Here the underlined syllables of the actual words are deleted in BT.

On another occasion, children delete an affix in forming BT words. For example in /taa/ < /tankoo/ 'please give', /vaa/ < /vaankoo/ 'please come' the suffix /-nkoo/ is deleted. The deletion is a common feature which is observed in BT words produced by the babies V1, V2, V6, V7, V8, V11, V17, V18, M2, Ma2, Ma3, Ma4 and J1. This indicates the similarity among BT words used in different geographical dialects of Tamil.

#### ***Addition***

Addition is another common process found in BT word formation. In the following BT words underlined phonemes or syllables have been added. e.g. /puuvaa/ < /puu/ 'flower', /aniya/ < /anil/ 'squirrel', /kaaḍcu/ < /kaasu/ 'money', /viḍcu/ < /viisu/ 'throw', /kaayaa/ < /kaai/ 'raw fruit' added with phonemes. By that process these words are formed as baby words. The word 'puuvaa' (flower) was used by the babies V11 and V15. They both added the phonemes identically. It shows

the individual similarity in producing the baby words. The addition of phonemes is also observed in words produced by the babies V15, V16, V11, M2. This is an example to prove that there is a similarity of words used in different districts.

Comparatively, in the BT deletion process is higher than addition among the babies. Many words are formed by applying deletion to simplify words.

### ***Substitution***

The third process is substitution which is used in different geographical areas. The vowels and consonants are substituted in different environments. In /pu□□a/ < (pu□□u) 'a kind of food', and /neruppi/ < /neruppu/ 'fire' /a/ and /i/ are substituted for /u/ and /u/ respectively. The consonant substitution can be found in initial, medial and final positions. In words like /q̄ambi/ < /tampi/ 'younger brother', /kaanai/ < /jaanai/ 'elephant', /band̄i/ < /vand̄i/ 'stomach', /paattu/ < /vaattu/ 'duck' /meenum/ < /veenum/ 'want', /q̄/k//b//m/ are substituted for /t/, /j/, /v/ /v/ respectively. In medial position also substitution has taken place. Compare following examples where /d/, /q̄/, /t/, /v/, are substituted for /r/, /c/. /eq̄umpu/ < /erumpu/ 'ant', /suud̄æn/ < (suuræn) 'evil' /poq̄iyal/ < /poriyal/ 'frying', /vaaq̄æn/ < /vaaræn/ '(I) come', /kaattal/ < /kaaccal/ 'fever', /kaabaq̄i/ < /kaavaq̄i/ 'a kind of dancing', /koomi/ < /kooli/ 'cock'.

Substitution is found further in word final position. In words like /appai/ < /appa/ 'father', /sitta/ < (sitti) 'aunt', /ammai/ < /amma/, 'mother', /atta/ < /attai/ 'paternal aunt', word final /a/ in actual words is replaced by /ai/, the diphthong.

### ***ideosyncratic creations***

In severe case, a whole word is replaced by an ideosyncratic form. For instance, /ippi/ is used for /paal/ 'milk'. This word was used by the baby Ma4 and the other babies V2, V11, V12 used as 'paapa'. There is no any connection phonologically and morphologically with /ippi/ and /paal/. The baby V15 used the word /æk/ for /kuuq̄aatu/ 'bad' which is morphologically completely different word. The baby M1 used the word /avvaa/ /muttam/ to mean 'kiss'. This is a total substitution of a new word. This type of words are common in all areas studied.

### ***mimicks***

Mimicking is another type of word formation in BT. The children immitate different sounds etc and form words accordingly. This is also a common feature in all varities studied. BT consists of



a single syllable duplicated such as /boom boom/, /tiŋ tiŋ/, /dum dum/ /taiya taiya/ ,/kii kii/, /ba ba/, /peem peem/. These are often imitations of a baby's first utterances which take the shape of the word. Some of the baby talk words for animals and birds involve duplication of the onomatopoeia of the sound they make such as 'miya miya', 'vow vow', 'ba ba', 'kii kii' and so on. For example, the baby V11 used /brr/ to mean motor bike. Here, the baby hears the starting sound of the motor bike and made the baby word from that sound. Some parents substitute certain words to reduce the difficulty in pronunciation. Some babies face difficulty in pronouncing certain phonemes like /tr-/ in 'train', so the parents use the word 'ccoocco' which is easier to pronounce and it helps the baby to remember the object correctly and easily. Strikingly, the babies V17 and V9 used the baby word /soom soom/ for /kuLittal/ 'bathing'. There is no direct phonological or morphological relationship between these two words. In this study the baby M2 used /tiŋ tiŋ/ to mean 'telephone'; the baby V11 /taiya taiya/ for 'dance'; The babies V8 and V9 used /boom boom/ to indicate motor bike; the baby V7 used /miiya miiya/ to mean 'cat'; The baby M2 used /dum dum/ to mean 'drum'; the baby V17 used /ba ba/ to mean a hen.

The baby word /soom soom/ was an imitated form which is produced by the parents or caretakers. Usually at the end of the bathing of the small children most of the elders use it to mean healthiness. This word is traditionally used by the elders. The babies picked that word and used to mean for bathing. As the behaviourists say, it shows that language learning and acquisition can take place by imitating and practising.

## Differences

The differences are also seen in type of words and word formation processes.

### *Type of words*

The number of different words varies from district to district as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Different types of words

Word class	Vavniya	Kilinocchi	Mullaithivu	Jaffna	Mannar
Nouns	28	02	14	05	28
verbs	06	--	06	03	02
Adjectives	02	01	01	--	--

This chart shows that the number of words produced by the children in different districts is different.

### ***Word formation processes***

There are differences in word formation processes given in 3.1.1.

#### ***Deletion***

The children from different area tend to delete different phonemes or syllables. For example the child from Mullaithivu M1 produces /paalaipa|am/, yet one from Mannar Ma 2 uses /vaappa|am/ for 'banana'.

#### ***Substitution***

Partial substitution differs from individual to individual. The baby V1 used as /saanai/ and the baby V17 as /kaanai/; they both referred to the same animal /jaanai/ 'elephant'. Differences are found in complete substitution. This indicates that there are individual differences in baby talk. The baby V18 used the baby word /kaka/ to say 'bad', yet the baby V15 used the word /æk/ for 'bad'. Further, in the sound 'm m' /m/ was interpreted semantically in different ways : to the baby M1 it means /veenum/ 'wants some more'; to the baby Ma4 it is /veliyil/ 'going out'; to baby V12 it means /saapaadū/ 'food' and to the baby V2 it is /nallatu/ 'good or beautiful'. In this context, baby word differs from person to person and place to place. Moreover, the babies Ma1, V3, V11 used the baby word 'uu' to express pain, wound and the baby M2 used 'uuva' to express 'hungry' and the baby V18 used 'uuvaa' to indicate pain, fever, and injure. Noticeably, the baby V11 used 'uuvaa' for pointing out 'bad'. The baby M1 and the baby V11 used as 'kooli' and 'koomi' respectively.

### **Discussion**

The analysis so far clearly exhibits the similarities and differences in BT words used in different areas of Northern Sri Lanka. These can be seen in number of words, types of words and processes of word formation. These facts can further be explained. The word /miin/ 'fish' is used by the babies from Vavuniya, Mullaithivu, Mannar as /mii/, /mimi/, /mi/, /mii mii/; This highlights that the baby words are more or less similar and show some variations in the phonemic shapes. Though these babies are from the different districts they use the same baby words to express the same meaning. This is an indication of the language acquisition process. These baby words have common phonemes in the pronunciation. The baby M1 from Mullaithivu used as /is/ instead of

/sh/ for the word 'fish'. Here, the baby M1 attempted to say the word 'fish' in English. This indicates the baby's socioeconomic background. As the baby's caretaker used the English word 'fish' the baby M1 hearing it simplified it and imitated it as 'is'.

The word **/noo/ 'pain'** is used in four different ways as */uu,uuvaa,nooḍu, valikuḍu/* by the babies. The baby from Vavuniya and Mannar used the identical word as */uu/*; the baby from Mullaithivu used as */nooḍu/*. Further, it is observed that the babies from Vavunya district, in certain other areas they used as */uuvaa/*, */valikkuḍu/*. Because the baby word 'valikuḍu', 'nooḍu' have come from */valikkutu/ /valikiratu/ and /nookutu/*. So here, the baby has imitated the parents or the care taker rather than forming easier words like */uu/* or */uuvaa/* in its own. More importantly, it is observed that the expression 'uuvaa' is used by the babies to indicate different meanings fever, pain, wound etc.

The word **/niir/tanniir/ water** is used by babies in various ways; In Vavuniya it is used as */nani,/tanna, tanna/* and in Mullaithivu it is */anni/*. Observing the baby words the systematic development of language can be observed.

According to Skinner, language learning is also considered as a habit. A habit is a stimulus-response connection. The babies are also reinforced by environment they belong to. So they learn the words from their parents/care taker. Especially, human brain is ready for language acquisition naturally with the help of Language Acquisition Device. A learner's inter language is, therefore, a unique linguistic system. So that, mostly baby words are similar regardless of the place or person. The baby words like */paapa/ 'milk'*, */bikka/ 'biscuit'*, */chuu/ or /cecca/ 'urinate'*, */buum/ 'motor bike'*, */soom/ 'bathing'*, */acca/ 'good'*, */tetaa/ 'tea'*, */cokka/ 'chocolate'* are very common words among many babies from various parts of North.

Further, the babies from different places use different words such as */æk/*, */kakkaa/*, */cccccii/* to indicate 'bad' or not good, 'disliking'; with the baby word they express their strong feelings and their communication becomes successful. Moreover, the words like */acccca/*, */m m/* are used to express 'good' and 'beautiful'. This shows certain dialectal variation and the baby word used by the parents. To pronounce easily baby omits some of the phonemes in the particular word. For example: */kaarai/* instead of */katirai/ 'chair'*; */appuni/* for */appusaami/ /kaḍavul/ 'God'*. Infact, there is no connection between the word */appuni/* and */kaḍavul/* but mostly parents from North instruct their babies to pray */appusaami suham taa/ 'God give me good health'*; so they imitate their parents

and got the word /appuni//apatta/. Later these words have become registered baby words. Strangely, the baby Ma4 used the word /impi/ for mother; the baby might have imitated the word /mummy/ which also gives the meaning ‘mother’. Further, certain phonemes and vowel sounds are easier for babies to articulate. In the common observation of the production of baby words the phoneme like /l/ is omitted in all baby words. Also they mostly used the phonemes /p/ /m/; it seems it is easier to pronounce for babies.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this study reveal that Baby Talk words are not the same everywhere in common use or individual use. It has some variations depending on the place and person. Even in the same district the baby words differ from area to area and person to person. For instance, in the Vavuniya district the baby words are different in Kurumankaadu, poovarasamkulum town and Veepamkulum. This shows that some baby words differ in the internal areas in the same district depending on the dialect and the exposure they get. In some instances the whole word is different, in other instances phonemic shape or the morphology is different though the babies mean the same word. In order to pronounce easily they use processes such as deletion, addition and substitution. The babies from the five districts underwent deletion, addition and substitution process. The findings reveal that all most all babies produce nouns rather than verbs, adverbs and adjectives at the early stage of their speaking. Comparatively, babies from the Vavuniya and Mullaithivu district produce more verbs than the other districts taken into this study. The baby M2 (2 year & 6 months) produced a large number of words compared to babies at the same age from Vavuniya district. Strikingly, the babies from kilinochi and Jaffna only formed a small number of adverbs. Babies from other districts hardly produced any adverb. The duplicate words like /boom boom, /tiŋ tiŋ/, /dum dum/ / taiya taiya/ , /kii kii/, /ba ba’, /peem peem/ are mostly used by Vavuniya an Mullaithivu babies. So it’s clear that the process of duplication was done by Vavuniya an Mullaithivu babies.

Finally, this study is very useful and interesting to learn the baby words; and also it helps to preserve the baby words and prevent from extinction. It gives the record of registered baby words. These words are collected from the natural spontaneous conversations. There are no any artificially formed words. To get more effective results further research needs to be carried out to collect and compare Tamil baby words used in East and south.

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