

The Influence of Tamil Language on Other Languages

Naveenkumar Vasuthavan¹, Dr. Ilangkumaran Sivanadhan²

Department of Modern Language, Faculty of Languages and Communication, Sultan Idris Education University, Tanjong Malim, Perak, Malaysia

Email: kvn33550@gmail.com

Corresponding Authors Email: ilangkumaran@fbk.upsi.edu.my

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Abstract

Language plays an important role in human life. It has distinctive features that distinguish humans from other species, especially the unique capacity to convey complex information to others. Language is not a permanent entity; it continuously evolves over time, often resulting in the expansion of vocabulary and the borrowing of lexical items from other languages. This study examines Tamil loanwords found in 14 languages, namely English, Malay, Sanskrit, Sinhala, Korean, Japanese, Thai, Turkish, Malayalam, Telugu, Kannada, Tulu, Tagalog and Khmer. The analysis identifies a range of items, particularly in the domains of food, animals, plants, vegetables, material culture and social terms that appear to have entered these languages from Tamil. In some cases, near cognate forms with similar pronunciation but differing orthography are observed. It cannot be denied that Tamil has played a major role in the lexical development of other languages. Therefore, this study will serve as a guideline for future researchers conducting further research on the Tamil language.

Keywords: Tamil Language, Other Languages, Loanwords, Orthography, Lexical Development

Introduction

Tamil is the native language of the Tamil people worldwide and serves as the official language of Tamil Nadu, a state in southern India. According to Dr. Rajendran Govender, a board member of the Pan South African Language Board, Tamil is classified as the world's oldest living language, owing to its extensive history in literature, culture, religion, worldview and more. Historically, the Chera, Chozha and Pandiya dynasties, collectively known as the 'Moovendargal' (three great kings in Tamil history) conquered large parts of Asia, which helped spread the Tamil language to various nations. This situation led to the incorporation of Tamil words into other languages. Thus, the influence of Tamil language including its vocabulary and root words in other languages will be explored in detail in this article.

History of Tamil Language

India is home to more than a hundred languages spoken by its people. These languages can be classified into four main language families namely, Dravidian, Indo-Aryan, Tibeto-Burman and Munda. Among these, Tamil is notable for its distinct features. It is praised as one of the classical languages and a major language of the Dravidian family. Tamil language is widely spoken by Tamil people in Tamil Nadu, Puducherry, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Singapore, Mauritius, Canada and the United States of America. By the early 21st century, Tamil was spoken by over 66 million people globally, reflecting its status as one of the major world languages (Newbigin, 2019). The name 'Tamil' is a westernized form of the original name தமிழ் (Tamizh). The last letter of the word, often transcribed as a lowercase 'i' or 'zh', represents a rolled 'i' sound produced by rolling the tongue back. In phonetic transcription, this is usually represented by the rolling symbol.

Researchers have presented different views on the birth of the Tamil language. One such view suggests that Tamil existed as early as the Harappa period. This theory is supported by Clyde Winters in his study, where he posits that the Dravidian were the Proto-Saharans, the ancestors of the Dravidian language family. According to Winters, Proto-Saharan writing shares similarities with the early writing found on pottery, which eventually evolved into a syllabic script. The earliest ceramic stones, symbols and signs discovered in Tamil Nadu bear a resemblance to the writings of the Harappa civilization, reinforcing Winter's views and research (Winters, 2012).

Tamil language is known as an ancient language with a history spanning over 10,000 years, and its literary tradition dates back over 5,000 years (Balasundaram, 2023). Epigraphic evidence of Tamil begins with stone inscriptions from the 2nd century BCE, written in Tamil-Brahmi, an adaptation of the Brahmi script. The oldest surviving literary text is Tholkappiyam, a work of poetry and grammar that describes the language during the classical period between 1st century BCE and 10th century CE. The contents of the Tholkappiyam indicate the existence of two types of language, Sentamil (Old Language) and Koduntamil (Dialectal Language) which are still used in Tamil Nadu today (Schiffman, 1998). Tamil scholars have divided Tamil literature and language into the following periods:

1. Sangam Period (100 BCE – 300 CE)
2. Post Sangam Period (300 CE – 600 CE)
3. Bhakti Period (600 CE – 1200 CE)
4. Medieval Period (1200 CE – 1800 CE)
5. Modern Period (1800 CE – Present)

The Tamil language is written in the Tamil script, an abugida belonging to the Brahmi family. The Tamil script comprises 12 vowels, 18 consonants and one special character called *Aaytam*. These vowels and consonants combine to form 216 conjunct characters, resulting in a total of 247 characters. Moreover, like other Indic scripts, all consonants have an inherent vowel sound 'a', which in Tamil is dropped by adding a dot above the consonant, called *Pulli* to the consonant character in question. Unlike most Indic scripts, the Tamil script does not distinguish between voiced and voiceless plosives. Instead, plosives are pronounced with or without voicing depending on their position in a word, according to the phonological rules of Tamil.

Furthermore, Tamil is one of the few Indian languages with official recognition outside India. It has been formally declared one of the official languages of Sri Lanka. Likewise, it is legally recognized as one of the official languages of Singapore, where it is used with equal rights and privileges (Mustafa, 2004).

Influence of Tamil Words on Other Languages

Tamil language is often considered the mother of all languages in the world (Poongavanam, 1986). It is the only language that is said to meet all 11 criteria of a classical language namely, antiquity, individuality, common characters, neutrality, parental kingship, literary prowess, linguistic principles, noble ideas and ideals, originality in artistic and literary expressions, cultural identity and heritage, and the ability to function independently without any help or influence from other languages (Mustafa, 2004). According to Alex Collier (1996), the first language spoken by humans in the universe is Tamil. Tamil language has a long history associated with the three great dynasties that ruled the southern part of India for nearly 3,000 years (Govindhan, 1955). Moreover, the Chera, Chozha and Pandiya kings have extended their hegemony throughout Southeast Asia and East Asia especially in Malaysia, Cambodia, Thailand, Korea, Japan and even Turkey. As a result, Tamil people who lived across the world have left their mark in various places with their artistic, literary and cultural values (Newbigin, 2019). Consequently, numerous Tamil root words and vocabulary elements have found their way into several global languages. This article aims to explore the influence of Tamil words in English, Malay, Sanskrit, Sinhala, Korean, Japanese, Thai, Turkish, Malayalam, Telugu, Kannada, Tulu, Tagalog and Khmer language.

Tamil To English

English is recognized as an official language in 67 countries as of 2020 (Ilyosovna, 2020). It belongs to the Indo-European language family and it is widely spoken by approximately 1.45 billion people around the world (Aggarwal, 2024). English is the most spoken language globally due to its dominant role in fields such as astronomy, aviation, science, technology, engineering, medical, law and arts (Aggarwal, 2024). It serves as the native language for approximately 390 million speakers and is taught as a second language in 120 countries. This research reveals that many English root words have been derived from the Tamil language. The following table presents selected examples of English words borrowed from Tamil.

Table 1

Examples of English Words Borrowed From The Tamil Language

Tamil Word	English Word
Panchu (பஞ்சு)	Sponge
Pechu (பேச்சு)	Speech
Udan (உடன்)	Sudden
Kattumaram (கட்டுமரம்)	Catamaran
Navaai (நாவாய்)	Navy
Kol (கொல்)	Kill
Vetri (வெற்றி)	Victory
Kaasu (காசு)	Cash
Murungai (முருங்கை)	Moringa
Milaguthanni (மிளகுத்தண்ணீர்)	Mulligatawny

Tamil To Malay

The national language of Malaysia is Malay. It is also recognized as an official language in countries such as Singapore and Brunei (The World Factbook, 2025). This language belongs to Austronesian language family and it is the native language of the Malay people (Raymunde et al., 2023). Malay language is spoken by approximately 60 million people across Southeast Asia. Historical trade and cultural interactions have led to significant linguistic borrowing and this study reveals that the Malay language has incorporated numerous root words from Tamil. The following table presents selected examples of Malay words that have been borrowed from Tamil.

Table 2

Examples of Malay Words Borrowed From The Tamil Language

Tamil Word	Malay Word	Meaning
Amma (அம்மா)	Emak	Mother
Appa (அப்பா)	Bapa	Father
Akka (அக்கா)	Kakak	Elder Sister
Kadai (கடை)	Kedai	Shop
Kappal (கப்பல்)	Kapal	Ship
Kazhuthai (கழுதை)	Keldai	Donkey
Kuthirai (குதிரை)	Kuda	Horse
Paniyaaram (பணியாரம்)	Peneram	Traditional Tamil Snack
Khoni (கோணி)	Guni	A kind of sack
Kholi (கோலி)	Guli	A small ball made up of glass

Tamil To Sanskrit

Sanskrit is one of the oldest classical languages in the world. It is regarded as the mother of the northern languages in India and belongs to the Indo-Aryan language family (Ghatage, 1962). Sanskrit has had a profound influence in various fields such as literature, philosophy and spiritual texts. It served as the original language for many seminal classical works, such as the Vedas, Puranas and Ayurveda (Akeyipapornchai, 2020). This study reveals that a significant number of root words in Sanskrit are derived from the Tamil language. The following table presents selected examples of Sanskrit words borrowed from Tamil.

Table 3

Examples of Sanskrit Words Borrowed From The Tamil Language

Tamil Word	Sanskrit Word	Meaning
Anal (அனல்)	Anala	Fire
Kudam (குடம்)	Kudaa	Water Pot
Kalvan (கள்வன்)	Kalaa	Thief
Mayil (மயில்)	Mayura	Peacock
Maalai (மாலை)	Maalaa	Evening
Erumai (எருமை)	Heramba	Buffalo
Murasu (முரசு)	Muraja	Drum
Udukkai (உடுக்கை)	Uduka	Percussion Instrument
Ulakkai (உலக்கை)	Ulukalaa	Pestle
Elam (ஏலம்)	Eela	Cardamom Plant

Tamil To Sinhala

Sinhala is the national language and one of the official languages of Sri Lanka. It is spoken as the mother tongue by approximately 87% of the Sinhalese people, primarily in central, western and southern parts of the country (USCIRF Annual Report, 2025). Sinhala is also widely taught as a second language in schools and language centres, especially for pupils whose native languages are Tamil, English and Portuguese Creole (Vinothini, 2018). This research has shown that many words used in Sinhala have been adapted from the Tamil language. The following table presents selected examples of Sinhala words borrowed from Tamil.

Table 4

Examples of Sinhala Words Borrowed From The Tamil Language

Tamil Word	Sinhala Word	Meaning
Akka (அக்கா)	Accah	Elder Sister
Thangai (தங்கை)	Nanghi	Younger Sister
Maitthunar (மைத்துனர்)	Massinah	Son of One's Maternal Uncle or Paternal Aunt
Edhiri (எதிரி)	Edhiriya	Enemy
Idam (இடம்)	Idama	Place
Olai (ஓலை)	Hola	FronD
Koodai (கூடை)	Koodaya	Basket
Udhavi (உதவி)	Uddhva	Help
Malai (மலை)	Malaya	Mountain
Vayathu (வயது)	Vayasa	Age

Tamil To Korean

Korean language is considered the mother tongue of approximately 80 million people worldwide (Sook Lee, 2011). It serves as the national language of both South Korea and North Korea, where it is spoken daily by the population. The language is known as 'Hangugeo' in South Korea and 'Chosono' in North Korea. It belongs to the Koreanic language family and is also spoken by communities in Jilin (Northeast China), Changbai County and Sakhalin island (Arokiyaraj et al., 2021). This study has shown that many root words used in the Korean language have been borrowed from the Tamil language. The following table reveals selected examples of Korean words borrowed from Tamil.

Table 5

Examples of Korean Words Borrowed From The Tamil Language

Tamil Word	Korean Word	Meaning
Amma (அம்மா)	Eomma	Mother
Anni (அண்ணி)	Eonni	Sister in Law
Manam (மனம்)	Maeum	Mind
Naal (நாள்)	Nal	Day
Konjam (கொஞ்சம்)	Jogeum	Little
Ondru (ஒன்று)	Eoneu	One
Vettukili (வெட்டுக்கிளி)	Mettugi	Locust
Pal (பல்)	Ippal	Teeth

Naalai (நாளை)	Naeil	Tomorrow
Manaivi (மனைவி)	Manura	Wife

Tamil To Japanese

Japanese is an agglutinative language spoken by approximately 124 million people worldwide (Statistical Handbook of Japan, 2024). It is the principal member of the Japonic language family. Japanese, popularly known as 'Nihongo' is recognized as the official and national language of Japan. This study shows that many common words used in Japanese conversations are derived from Tamil root words. The following table presents selected examples of Japanese words borrowed from Tamil.

Table 6

Examples of Japanese Words Borrowed From The Tamil Language

Tamil Word	Japanese Word	Meaning
Kaaichal (காய்ச்சல்)	Kaze	Fever
Kaaram (காரம்)	Kara	Spicy
Yaar (யார்)	Daare	Who
Kodu (கொடு)	Kudasai	Give
Nari (நரி)	Inari	Fox
Katthi (கத்தி)	Katana	Knife
Arisi (அரிசி)	Uruchi	Rice grain
Kuyil (குயில்)	Kuina	Koel
Mugam (முகம்)	Migao	Face
Tumbi (தும்பி)	Tombo	Dragonfly

Tamil To Thai

Thai is a Southeast Asian language spoken by approximately 71 million people worldwide (World Health Organization, 2023). It is the sole official language of Thailand and belongs to the Tai-Kadai language family. The language is primarily spoken in Central Thailand by various ethnic groups including the Central Thai, Mon, Lao Wiang, Phuan and Thai Chinese communities (Groot, 2010). This study shows that a significant number of Thai words have been derived from the Tamil language. The following table presents selected examples of Thai words borrowed from Tamil.

Table 7

Examples of Thai Words Borrowed From The Tamil Language

Tamil Word	Thai Word	Meaning
Aasiriyar (ஆசிரியர்)	Ajarn	Teacher
Soorayan (சூரியன்)	Sooriya	Sun
Chandhiran (சந்திரன்)	Jaan	Moon
Kiraambu (கிராம்பு)	Gaan pluu	Clove
Kasaayam (கசாயம்)	Grasaai	Solvent
Vennai (வெண்ணெய்)	Noei	Ghee
Thangam (தங்கம்)	Thongkham	Gold
Poomalai (பூமாலை)	Phuang Malai	Garland

Mookku (மூக்கு)	Jamuk	Nose
Kanitham (கணிதம்)	Kanith	Mathematics

Tamil To Turkish

Turkish is spoken by approximately 90 million people worldwide (USCIRF Annual Report, 2025). It serves as the national language of Turkey and is one of the official languages of Cyprus. Turkish belongs to Oghuz branch of Turkic language family and is currently the 20th most spoken language in the world. Additionally, it is recognized as a minority language in several countries including, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Greece, Iraq, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Romania (Kappler, 2023). This study indicates that a considerable number of Turkish words have been borrowed from the Tamil language. The following table presents selected examples of Turkish words derived from Tamil.

Table 8

Examples of Turkish Words Borrowed From The Tamil Language

Tamil Word	Turkish Word	Meaning
Thuukku (தூக்கு)	Tut	Lift
Sarkarai (சர்க்கரை)	Seker	Sugar
Pacharisi (பச்சரிசி)	Pirinch	Raw Rice
Suvar (சுவர்)	Duvar	Wall
Padai (படை)	Piyade	Field Army
Paathai (பாதை)	Patika	Path
Ezhu (ஏழு)	Yedi	Seven
Sirappu (சிறப்பு)	Seref	Glory
Nyaalam (நூலம்)	Alem	World
Sollu (சொல்லு)	Soyle	Say

Tamil To Malayalam

Malayalam is the native language of the Malayali people and serves as the official language in Kerala. It is also one of the 22 scheduled languages of India. Malayalam is widely spoken by the Malayali diaspora worldwide and is also recognized as an official language in the Union Territory of Lakshadweep and the Mahe district of Puducherry (Lekshmi et al., 2020). Beyond Kerala, significant Malayali speaking populations reside in Persian Gulf countries such as Qatar, Oman, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and United Arab Emirates (UAE), owing to historical trade relations (Muneer & Sanil, 2019). This article clearly demonstrates that a majority of Malayalam root words are derived from the Tamil language. The following table presents selected examples of Malayalam words borrowed from Tamil.

Table 9

Examples of Malayalam Words Borrowed From The Tamil Language

Tamil Word	Malayalam Word	Meaning
Naan (நான்)	Njaan	I
Vaa (வா)	Varoo	Come
Ninga (நீங்கள்)	Ningal	You
Yaaru (யாரு)	Aaranu	Who
Indru (இன்று)	Innu	Today
Milagai (மிளகாய்)	Mulaku	Chilli
Kelu (கேளு)	Kelkuka	Listen
Urulai (உருளைக்கிழங்கு)	Kizhangu Urula Kizhang	Potato
Pirachanai (பிரச்சனை)	Preshnam	Problem
Vilithal (விளித்தல்)	Vilikkuka	To call or invite

Tamil To Telugu

Telugu is a classical language of India and belongs to the Dravidian language family. It is native to the Indian states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana (LDC Catalog, 2025). Telugu is spoken by approximately 96 million people worldwide, making it the 18th most spoken native language globally. In addition to Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, it holds official language status in the Yanam district of Puducherry and is recognized as a minority and protected language in South Africa. The Telugu diaspora is widely distributed with speakers residing in the Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Odisha, as well as in countries such as Malaysia, Fiji, Mauritius, United States, Australia, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and South Africa (Kuncha & Bathula, 2004). Telugu holds a special place in India as the third language after Hindi and Bengali to have primary official status in more than one Indian state. The renowned Tamil poet Mahakavi Bharathiyar famously referred to Telugu as 'Sundara Telugu', meaning the sweetest language of all (Sharma, 1991). This study shows that many Telugu words originate from the Tamil language. The following table presents selected examples of Telugu words borrowed from Tamil.

Table 10

Examples of Telugu Words Borrowed From The Tamil Language

Tamil Word	Telugu Word	Meaning
Annan (அண்ணன்)	Annaiya	Elder Brother
Karuppu (கருப்பு)	Naluppu	Black Colour
Periya (பெரியது)	Pedda	Big
Nambu (நம்பு)	Nammu	Trust / Believe
Suttiyal (சுத்தியல்)	Sutti	Hammer
Kankal (கண்கள்)	Kallu	Eyes
Thottam (தோட்டம்)	Tota	Garden
Thisaigal (திசைகள்)	Dhikkulu	Directions
Vendaikaai (வெண்டைக்காய்)	Bendakayaa	Lady's finger
Singam (சிங்கம்)	Simham	Lion

Tamil To Kannada

Kannada is the official and administrative language of the state of Karnataka. It belongs to the Dravidian language family and is recognized as one of the 22 classical languages of India. This language is primarily spoken by the Kannadiga ethnic group in Karnataka (Jennifer & Brooke, 2012). Kannada's writing system uses the Kannada script and Kannada Braille. There are three regional varieties in this language namely, Mangaluru Kannada, Mysuru Kannada and Dharwar Kannada, the latter being the northern dialect. This study demonstrates that a significant number of Kannada words originate from the Tamil language. The following table presents selected examples of Kannada words borrowed from Tamil.

Table 11

Examples of Kannada Words Borrowed From The Tamil Language

Tamil Word	Kannada Word	Meaning
Thalai (தலை)	Thale	Head
Mugam (முகம்)	Mugaa	Face
Mookku (மூக்கு)	Moogu	Nose
Paal (பால்)	Haalu	Milk
Vaai (வாய்)	Baayi	Mouth
Kannam (கன்னம்)	Kenne	Cheek
Pasi (பசி)	Hasivu	Hungry
Kudhirai (குதிரை)	Kudure	Horse
Vandi (வண்டி)	Gaadi	Vehicle
Neer (நீர்)	Neeru	Water

Tamil To Tulu

Tulu is the native language of the Tuluva people and belongs to the Dravidian language family. It is predominantly spoken in Dakshinna Kannada, Chikmagalur, Hassan, the Kasaragod district of Kerala and Udupi district of Karnataka (Gururaj et al., 2022). Although Tulu possesses only a limited written literature, it is known for a rich oral tradition encompassing folk dances, tales, narratives and songs. It has its own writing system, the Tigalari script which is quite similar to the Malayalam Brahmic script. This study demonstrates that numerous Tulu words are derived from the Tamil language. The following table presents selected examples of Tulu words borrowed from Tamil.

Table 12

Examples of Tulu Words Borrowed From The Tamil Language

Tamil Word	Tulu Word	Meaning
Sarkarai (சர்க்கரை)	Sarkare	Sugar
Paavam (பாவம்)	Papa	Pity
Appalam (அப்பளம்)	Appala	Papadam
Pandri (பன்றி)	Panji	Pig
Erumai (எருமை)	Yermai	Buffalo
Kozhi (கோழி)	Kori	Chicken
Maram (மரம்)	Mara	Tree
Kopam (கோபம்)	Kopa	Angry
Arokkiyam (ஆரோக்கியம்)	Arogya	Health

Puli (புலி)	Pili	Tiger
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Tamil To Tagalog

Tagalog is one of the major Austronesian languages spoken by approximately 90 million people worldwide (Raymunde et al., 2023). It is the national language and one of the official languages of the Philippines. Additionally, Tagalog functions as the second language for the majority of the Philippine population. It is predominantly spoken by the Tagalog people in Metro Manila, Calabarzon, Central Luzon, Mimaropa and Bicol Region (Malabonga, 2009). This article highlights that a significant number of Tagalog words originate from the Tamil language. The following table presents selected examples of Tagalog words borrowed from Tamil.

Table 13

Examples of Tagalog Words Borrowed From The Tamil Language

Tamil Word	Tagalog Word	Meaning
Mutthu (முத்து)	Mutya	Pearl
Moolam (மூலம்)	Mula	Origin
Vagai (வகை)	Bagay	Variety / Object
Vilangu (விலங்கு)	Bilanggo	Handcuff / Putting someone in jail
Kaaval (காவல்)	Kawal	Police / Soldier
Murungai (முருங்கை)	Malunggay	Moringa
Thavaram (தாவரம்)	Tanim	Plant
Vaatthu (வாத்து)	Pato	Duck
Mugam (முகம்)	Mukha	Face
Misai (மீசை)	Misay	Moustache / Beard

Tamil To Khmer

Khmer is the national and official language of Cambodia. It belongs to the Austroasiatic language family and is spoken by approximately 21 million people worldwide (Cambodia Inter-censal Population Survey, 2025). It is the native language of the Khmer communities in Cambodia and is also recognized as a minority language in Eastern and Northern Thailand, as well as in the southeastern (Dong Nam Bo) and western (Mekong Delta) regions of Vietnam (Ishak, 2023). This article reveals that some Khmer words are derived from the Tamil language. The following table presents selected examples of Khmer words borrowed from Tamil.

Table 14

Examples of Khmer Words Borrowed From The Tamil Language

Tamil Word	Khmer Word	Meaning
Thodaru (தொடரு)	Dtor	Continue
Parugu (பருகு)	Phoek	Drink
Mugam (முகம்)	Moukh	Face
Munnor (முன்னோர்)	Moon	Former
Karumai (கருமை)	Khkaw	Black

Conclusion

This article clearly highlights the impact that the Tamil language has had on other languages. The prominence of the 'Moovendargal' marks the inception of Tamil's linguistic and cultural diffusion beyond India. The expansive rule of Tamil kings across vast regions of Asia opened the door for the integration of Tamil words into other languages. It is evident that many common words used in daily conversation across these languages can be traced back to Tamil origins.

Moreover, this study makes a significant theoretical and contextual contribution by examining the historical, linguistic and cultural pathways through which Tamil, one of the world's oldest classical languages has impacted other languages across different regions. Theoretically, it enriches the field of comparative linguistics and contact linguistics by tracing lexical borrowings, syntactic patterns and phonetic influences that Tamil has imparted to languages such as English, Malay, Sanskrit, Sinhala, Korean, Japanese, Thai, Turkish, Malayalam, Telugu, Kannada, Tulu, Tagalog and Khmer. Contextually, the study sheds light on ancient trade, migration and cultural exchange networks during the Chera, Chozha and Pandiya periods. This research is significant to existing knowledge as it bridges gaps in historical linguistics by offering evidence of Tamil's pervasive and enduring influence beyond its native speakers. Furthermore, it recontextualizes the role of Tamil in shaping regional identities, linguistic evolution and intercultural connections, thereby deepening the understanding of the global legacy of Asian languages.

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