This is a reference grammar of the standard spoken variety of Tamil, which is spoken by 65,000,000 people in India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Singapore. According to the author, it is the variety that one hears “in the Tamil ‘social’ film, and on the radio, and in the production of ‘social’ dramas…. It is the variety that is used when speakers of various local and social dialects meet in college and university hostels…and must…speak a variety that is understandable to other Tamils from vastly different parts of Tamilnadu” (p. 1). Spoken Tamil is quite different from literary Tamil.

The grammar is intended to be accessible to students and Tamil speakers, as well as to linguists, and is based on the author’s 30-plus years of teaching Tamil to English speakers.

The text includes copious examples taken from film, plays, and the media. They are printed both in Tamil script and in transliteration. Many have morpheme-by-morpheme glosses, but the book would be more helpful to linguists if all examples were so glossed. Some lexical lists are not glossed either, for example, the list of borrowed words on p. 109. In some cases, the gloss line is divided into morphemes but not the transcription line. Again, it would be more helpful to the reader if both were divided.

Chapters include: phonology, the nominal system, the verb phrase, pronouns, pro-forms, adjectives, syntax, and complex syntax and related topics. There is also an appendix, which gives literary Tamil equivalents of spoken Tamil, and a comprehensive index.

The chapter on verbs is the most comprehensive. The discussion of “strong” and “weak” verbs is good but would have been clearer if they had been defined at the beginning. I found the discussion of verb classes the hardest to follow since the classes are compared to Graul’s traditional classification, but only after all of the classes are described does the reader find tables listing Graul’s classes and subclasses in one place.

The discussion of verbal aspect and aspectual verbs, on the other hand, is not only easy to follow but insightful. The examples give the reader a sense of the semantics and idiomatic usage of tense, aspect, and mode markers. These markers are often grammaticalizations of verbs such as
‘leave’ in which some of the phonology is different and the meaning is ‘completive’. The examples give good contrasts of sentences with and without the “aspectual verbs.”

There are some infelicitous passages in the book. For example, the description of demonstrative adjectives repeats word-for-word what was said about deixis in the description of demonstrative pronouns. On p. 186 there is a reference to example (163), which should be (162).

Native speakers of Tamil with some background in linguistics find the book to be very helpful. They comment that the discussion of the sociolinguistic questions, such as acceptability or rejection of loan words and of additional orthographic symbols that would be introduced by the loan words, to reflect language attitudes as they experience them. They also comment that the extensive paradigms and tables will be helpful in describing other Dravidian languages.

Shortcomings aside, the book as a whole is useful.