

Doubled Meaning

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- For Dr. E. Annamalai, who has inspired us, by example and by invitation, to reflect on the problem of meaning, in all its multiplicities and shades, in Tamil and otherwise

Introduction

In the context of the Tamil cinema (and its comedies in particular), Tamil speakers often speak of *ullarttam*, or the ‘meaning’ (*arttam*) ‘inside’ (*ul*), and more particularly, of “double meaning dialogues” or *irattai arttam* (‘double’ or ‘twinned meaning’; perhaps a calque/translation of the English, or vice versa¹); the English phrase is itself perhaps a calque off the (old) French-borrowed (now) English phrase *double entendre* (cf. *double entente* in modern French), a ‘double understanding.’ These phrases denote the situation of one stretch of speech that has two distinct meanings at play at one and the same time. To typify something as a “double meaning,” thus, is not to comment on homonymy or ambiguity per se but rather of how speakers exploit this fact to some pragmatic end, as when multiple interpretations (“understandings”) are made available and, further, put in dialogue/relation with each other.

A double, after all, is not the same as two-ness; a double is a copy, a twin, a citational iteration that differs but only because it first makes a claim of identity to what it copies. More than one but less than two, a double meaning dialogue, thus, is not simply an utterance that has two interpretations,² but that involves a citational, parasitical relationship *between* two distinct (denotational) texts that, despite (or because of) their distinctness, reflect and refract each other; the issue, in short, is not simply that one stretch of signs has two interpretations, but that the two inter-

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pretations *articulate* to and mutually frame each other. “Double meaning,” then, is somewhat of a misnomer, for in its doubling its meaning is also one, it is the *relationship* between distinct interpretations that gives it its pragmatic oomph.

But if there are twins, they are not equal. Consider again the Tamil metalinguistic term, *ullarttam*. The term suggests a topology of meaning, one of depths and surfaces, and points to, by marking out explicitly, the fact that one of the meanings—the one ‘inside’ or deep down, in the heart of the sign—is the more important one. (The surface meaning, presumably that of the unmarked form, *arttam*, the ‘meaning’ per se, is left unremarked.³) This suggests obfuscation, avoidance, a kind of secrecy from the surface which, at one and the same time, constitutes the interpreter as a forensic listener, a discerner of things below the surface, things submerged, hidden. It also suggests, thus, a second listener (a double), a rube of sorts who does/can not see below to the depths, who does not get the second meaning underneath it all; or perhaps, a demure subject who feigns ignorance, of not getting it. The term, in short, ideologically sketches out a participation framework (Goffman 1981) of (non)understanding with which various social identities and relations are pragmatically enactable.

This discussion recalls another doubling: Bakhtin’s (1982) “double voicing.” Bakhtin’s concern was with the European novel and the way in which narrating and narrated voices come into a virtual dialogue; in particular, where one voice *accents* the other. The most obvious cases for Bakhtin were where the narrating voice ironizes the voices of narrated characters. But, as Bakhtin (1982) and Vološinov (1986[1929]) noted, the reverse also happens, as when two voices blend and merge (e.g., in free-indirect style). In such cases, the character’s voice begins to color the voice of the narration itself. Bakhtin’s larger point was that *all* speech (and thus language) is/stages a contact zone between voices, and all of language so accented. But whereas Bakhtin focused on the *intention* of the other in my words (and vice versa), double meaning dialogues enact a different kind of dialogue: not between speaking subjectivities (or their virtual avatars: “voices”) vis-à-vis the “word” (Bakhtin’s term for any mono-or-multi-lexemic stretch of discourse) but *within* the “word,” wherein one “meaning” seems to comment on, or masquerade via and thus dance with the other.

Or, at least, this is what the ideology of “double meaning” seems to propose, in framing such acts as somehow “indirect,” “obscured,” or

“buried.” (As we’ll see, this ideology itself glosses over the fact that the double meaning is often not obscure at all to viewers even if not-understanding—and understanding—is a pragmatic act enacted by some viewers and modelled by the films in which such double meanings occur.)

Of course, there is nothing peculiar about double meaning acts; and while we don’t know of any comprehensive cross-linguistic survey, we don’t feel uncomfortable with the claim that all human speech communities involve such a phenomenon: puns and word play are universal phenomena (or at least, a universal possibility of language). The social value of such phenomena, however, are not universal; “puns” in the American context, for example, are often figured as a rather low form of humor (“dad jokes” being one such genre that copiously and over-enthusiastically involve them, where the stereotyped form of uptake reception, by children, is the groan); by contrast, Gabriella Ferro-Luzzi’s (1992) survey of Tamil humor, *The Taste of Laughter* indicates the high value and frequency played by puns, word play, and other double meanings in both “folk” and “urban” forms of (written) Tamil humor (the terms in quotes are hers). If the late, great *Kalaiñar* M. Karunanidhi was an artist, it was because he was a master of alliteration, pun, wit, and innuendo.

The problem, of course, is that “word play,” while fine as an etic analytic category is so broad as to lose utility in guiding any kind of specific study. There are too many different ways to (and purposes in) “play” with language (just/insofar as “language” is a heterogeneous congeries of semiotic infrastructures, each with their own principles of meaningfulness and thus, their own affordances for play: from alliteration at the phonetico-phonemic level to ambiguity at the lexemic level to garden-path sentences at the syntactic level to burlesque and parodies at the discursive level, and so on). A second problem (for us, at least), is that it isn’t clear if “language” is sufficient to focus on as the basis for a study of the problem of double meaning; this is all the more so in multimodal media such as film, where visual signs play a significant part (as they do of course in face-to-face interaction, needless to say).

In this paper, we focus on a rather more circumscribed issue: those moments in the Tamil cinema where for one and the same context (or at least, some aspect of it) two texts are projected from some stretch of signs; that is, where there are multiple mappings of text to context that put the same context (or referent, state of affairs) under a different description.⁴ Here, the issue is about the dialogicality/tensions that happen *between*

interpretations in one and the same communicative message. While the range of such acts is wide, we focus on two prototypical domains wherein such effects are rife: the sexual and the political.⁵ Both, as we will see, are occasioned by some felt inability or undesirability to speak “plainly” or “directly” or where no “direct” mode of expression is otherwise available.⁶ Yet, such a functionalist account (e.g., that would argue that doubled meaning is necessary *because* talk about sexuality or politics is taboo), while not without basis, is somewhat reductive, for it obscures the fact that the multiplicity of texts *is a principle on the amplification of the pragmatics of the act*. That is, there are good reasons for circumspection besides taboo. Further, what makes something taboo or vulgar or to-be-avoided isn’t reducible to the content of a speech act, but involves questions of who speaks, to-whom they speak, and within whose earshot one speaks, and so on. Finally, we are interested to ask: what are the peculiarities of cinema as a narrative medium and a technological apparatus vis-à-vis such doubling and what does this say about doubled meaning more generally?

I.

Romance, Sexuality, and Double Meaning

We start with the cultural concept and generic textual form and pragmatics of “double meaning” in the Tamil cinema, which we find in both comedic sequences and lyrics in song sequences. Both involve forms of punning and word play, but their meaningfulness, as we show, cannot be exhausted by explaining their multiple meanings. This is because, as any viewer of Tamil cinema knows, such uses of language are a conventionalized genre, primarily anchored by their putatively taboo content (women’s sexuality in particular) and by a certain pragmatics: they are “vulgar.” (The term *vulgar* here and throughout is in scare quotes to indicate that it appears not as an analytic characterization so much as an ethnometapragmatic judgment available to Tamil audiences.) In comedy, “double meaning dialogues” have a particular emic status as a cultural category of what in English might be called “dirty jokes.” Another term for such jokes in Tamil is *kittipullu*, a reference to the game gilli, where the *kitti(ppul)* (the piece of wood the players hit with the cudgel) is readable as itself a phallus, which can be hit on either of its sides. Similarly, such song lyrics may at times have the status of a certain kind of vulgarity linked to their interpretation

as denoting sexual acts, sexual desire, and the like. These shade from love, romance, and eroticism.

Double Meanings in Song

Consider an example from the lyricist Kannadasan, who explored the erotic possibilities of double meaning in one of the most popular songs of the 1960s, “*Paḷiṅkināl Oru Māḷikai*” (*Vallavan Oruvan*, 1966, dir. R. Sundaram; Music: Veda). The song opens with the following lyrics:

<i>Paḷiṅkināl oru māḷikai</i>	A palace, made of marble
<i>Paruvattāl maṇi maṅṭapam</i>	A memorial of youth
<i>Uyarattil oru gōpuram</i>	with a tower at the top
<i>Unnai aḷaikutu vā</i>	is inviting/calling you!



Figure 1. L. Vijayalalitha/L. Eswari sing “...*aḷaikutu vā*” in the first (left; <https://youtu.be/5BPLiLRbGOM?t=4900>) and last (right; <https://youtu.be/5BPLiLRbGOM?t=5090>) verse

The verse projects two denotational texts: on the one hand, it denotes a memorial building and its architectural features; on the other hand, it is a description of a woman’s body imagined from a low angle which is ‘calling’ her addressee.⁷ Here, the twinned meaning is motivated by a number of different features: first, that there is no such building in the universe of discourse within the song (we see no shots of it and it is not part of the diegesis); second, it is animated in the image-track by Vijayalalitha, known for her roles as a voluptuous vamp, and sung in the sound-track by L. R. Eswari, similarly known for her husky renditions of

sensual songs (Weidman 2021). Further, in the diegesis, it is sung *by* the heroine/dubbing-artist *to* the hero, Shankar (played by Jaishankar). Interestingly, the early part of the first verse works through tight close-ups of Vijayalalitha's face, tracking outwards to a bust-shot when she sings "*gōpuram*" and describes its height; in the last verse, by contrast, the camera cuts to a full-length shot of her body while her dance gestures emphasize the height of her body. (Neither shot is a low-shot, however.) Similarly, while the "*alaikkutu vā*" in the first verse invites Shankar (to a sexual encounter) through such visual display, with the camera playfully pulling away from him, by the last verse (which closes the song-sequence), the imperative "*alaikkutu vā*" co-occurs with her dancing towards him and culminates with their tight embrace, her invitation being taken up with his second-pair part of tactile acceptance.

The entextualization of this rather banal and conventional double meaning reveals nothing particularly surprising, with metaphor doing the work of suggesting a sensual encounter; but if the linguistic text is "on record" as non-sensual (and, we might add, at least to our 21st century ear, non-vulgar), the total effect of sensuality and romance (perhaps bordering on vulgarity for some in its time) is created by the juxtaposition by a number of different para-texts: some visual (the cutting strategies; the mis-en-scène of tight dress on the dancing/singing body); some performed (the dance movements—which emphasize the face and body of the dancer—and the music, with its Western jazz marimba style; note how both the dance and the music are recognizably "cinematic," that is, non-"traditional" in style);⁸ some diegetic (Vijayalalitha's character is trying to distract Shankar while some henchmen come to attack him); and some non-diegetic (the offscreen personages of Vijayalalitha and of L. R. Eswari).

When romance in the cinema shades into vulgarity, it has often had its roots in *karakāṭṭam*, which unlike other folk art-forms like *villupāṭṭu* or *kaṇiyān kūttu*, does not borrow its narratives from epics, myths, and classical folklore. *Karakāṭṭam*, as a folk form, features narratives about feuds in the family as well as anecdotes revolving around the buffoon, who is often depicted as the son-in-law of the house, and bawdy songs. The latter two are often occasions for "vulgar" double meanings. For example, when the buffoon asks the new woman he meets, 'Where are you from,' she may respond, 'from Medupallam ('elevation-pit'),' rhyming with the neighboring Malayalam. (*Mēṭu* and *paḷḷam* standing for crotch or the private part of a woman.) *Karakāṭṭam* song lyrics may be more explicit.

For example, the heroine might sing “*Kutturēn kutturēn kuttāme pōyittiyē*” (‘You said you will punch [*kuttu*], you will punch, but left without punching’), to which the hero would respond, “*Kātturēn kātturēn nnu kāttāme pōyittiyē*” (‘You promised you will show, you will show, but left without showing’).

Lyrics such as these have been recycled by Gangai Amaran and Ilaiyara-
raja in films such as the wildly popular 1989 film, *Karagattakkaran* (dir.
Gangai Amaran, musical dir. Ilaiyara-
raja). Here, ‘punching’ (*kuttu*) is an
allusion to writing letters and the seal/stamping enclosing it in an
envelope and the (not) opening (the ‘showing’) of the letter (in the
envelope); in the film, this meaning is motivated through gestures of the
heroine through gestures to the letter in hand. Its doubled meaning,
however, is the act of showing/undressing and punching/sexual inter-
course. The double text of the exchange, thus, are about the hero and
heroine trying to preempt each other, both challenging the other as not
courageous enough when it comes to sex.⁹ In a film like *Karagattakkaran*,
such gestures and linguistic meanings clothe the desire to make love and
thus render *karakāṭṭam*, as an art of the subversive subalterns, allowable/
performable in public spaces (be they theater halls or temple premises). In
this way, such double meanings act as a kind of anti-language (Halliday
1976) for a subaltern society that codes its meanings in the public space of
respectability (cf. Seizer 1997).

During the 1980s and 1990s, it was not unusual for audiocassettes of
the *karakāṭṭam* singer Narambu Natarajan and (obscene) storytellers/
entertainers like Narambadi Narayanan to be played in the male-centric
tea stalls of villages (like those of Swarnavel’s). In such cases, the entire
cassette, whose lyrics imitated the query/response model of *karakāṭṭam*,
revolved around the double entendre of the *aṭipampu*—the hand pump
used to pump water from the well. Through such cassettes, double mean-
ing dialogues like these spread beyond the confines of the theater hall
into public spaces that attracted both men and women (the latter of whom
would come to tea stalls, often until midnight, particularly during the
harvest, for boiling milk).¹⁰ *Aṭi* has the multiple meanings of ‘hit’ (as a
stand-alone verb) as well ‘below’ or ‘at the bottom’ (as a noun). Further, as
a verbalizer, it connotes haptic contact and inappropriate action (Schiffman
1999:110), as with verb phrases such as *sight aṭi*, ‘to ogle’ (see below; lit.
‘beat sight’), *tannī aṭi* ‘to drink alcohol’ (lit. ‘beat water’), *kai aṭi* ‘to
masturbate’ (‘beat hand’). Lyricists have played with the idea of *aṭi*-

kkarumbu (the bottom of the sugarcane), which is supposed to be juicy and sweet, in lines like, “*aṭikkarumbai kaṭiccu tinga āsai vantāccu*” (‘The desire to bite and devour the sugar cane came [to me]’) sung by the heroine and her friends in the song “*Kalyāṇa Mēḷa Sattam*” from the film *Thambikku Entha Ooru* (dir Rajasekar, 1984; Lyrics: Panchu Arunachalam, Music: Ilayairaja, Singer: S. Janaki and Chorus).¹¹

We might compare the romantic imagery of the heroine-as-gopuram-calling-the-hero with the more “vulgar” comparisons of sugar-cane-stalk-as-phallus and fellatio. Notice that the former’s “double meaning” itself involves an ellipsis and avoidance—for ‘calling’ itself stands in a relation of denotational vagueness vis-à-vis the sex act just as does its visual realization in the film, the hug (itself a metonymic substitution for copulation); by contrast, the veil in the comparison of biting and devouring sugarcane is relatively diaphanous, as well as narrower in its referential target (of male genitalia and fellatio, versus the vaguer ‘calling’ for sexual encounter per se).

Double Meaning in Comedy Sequences

While song sequences typically mobilize double meanings to romantic and erotic ends, in the diegesis they are more often used for (erotic) humor. Consider Sivaji Ganesan’s 1981 film, *Lorry Driver Rajakkannu* (dir. A. C. Tirulokchandar). When early in the film, Kannamma (played by) Sripriya, who runs an idli shop, asks the working-class lorry driver, Rajakkannu (played by Sivaji Ganesan) what “item” he wants (to eat) (*enna item vēṇum?*),¹² Rajakkannu chides her and asks her to list the foods she has. (Here “item” doubles for food item and an attractive female.) After she quickly rattles off the foods, he gestures her to come closer, looks away as his hand taps the table, and then up and at her as she leans in. He says in a somewhat sotto voce, “*vaṭai (.) nallā irukkumṁā?*” He exaggerates the word-initial voiced labiodental fricative in *vaṭai* and contracts and nasalizes the final diphthong in a phonetic style (presumably) appropriate to his working-class status, but also arguably his lascivious intent (note the intimate fictive kin term, *mā* at the end of his utterance). This intent is registered by Sripriya’s offended uptake, “*Eeh?!*” alongside a non-diegetic comic sound effect, as well as Sivaji’s sidekick’s embarrassed reaction (he brings his head down to the table, pops back up and begins scratching the

back of his head). Immediately after, the sidekick shifts the conversation and inquires after prices. Shortly afterwards, Sivaji looks at Sripriya and says crudely, “*reṅṅu iṭṭiyum oru vaṭai koṅṭā reṅṅu pērukkum*” (bring both of us two idlis and one vadai).



Figure 2. Sivaji asks for two idlis (left) and one vadai (right) in *Lorry Drive Rajakkannu* (<https://youtu.be/blvaHKi0WE0?t=495>)

Here, the food items have the twinned meaning not only of food (which Sivaji is ordering) but also of Sripriya’s anatomical body parts (the roundness of the idli for the roundness of her breasts; the doughnut topology of the vadai for her vagina). Notably, with this latter line there is no response from the sidekick, no extra sound effect, and Sripriya simply looks confused and puzzled as she walks off to get their food. Arguably, Sripriya models a certain ignorance, opening a position for viewers themselves to enact/feign non-understanding which is importantly gendered female; that is, that Sripriya doesn’t seem to understand performs a form of feminine modesty in the mode of a certain kind of (tactful) ignorance/perplexion, in effect *doubling* the dialogue which, for at least some (perhaps most viewers) would be transparently seen as singularly vulgar.¹³

Here, we can also note how the historically earlier association of *paruppu* (lentil) with a woman’s bosom (as signified by the softness of vadai) is displaced and is replaced with idli. Sivaji marks it by conspicuously looking up at Sripriya’s face and chest area when he says “*iṭṭi*” (figure 2 – left) and then down at her torso/crotch, when he says “*vaṭai*” (figure 2 – right). Reviewers of the film at the time noted the vulgarity of this dialogue and criticized the thespian for mouthing such words. Again, notice the

importance of the offscreen status of the actor (as a “class” actor) informing the double meaning; in this case, working *against* its pragmatics as a kind of interference effect and, arguably, *amplifying* its vulgarity.

Sivaji’s delivery in *Lorry Driver Rajakannu* (1981) citationally echoes a similar scene in the 1972 film *Neethi* (dir. C. V. Rajendran), which provides an intertext that frames his utterance in the later film. In *Neethi*, Sivaji (also playing a lorry driver) acts alongside Jayalaitha, who plays a shop owner. In a particular scene, Sivaji also looks her body up and down when she asks a similar question, “*enna vēṇum.*” These two films outline the time period when such more explicit references to sexual anatomy began in Tamil cinema (in contrast to the times of Kannadasan that we saw above) and when they became conventionalized as part of both film comedy and a wider public vocabulary for sexuality.¹⁴ Indeed, as we see below, other films/comedians in the 1980s and 1990s have taken up this food-based trope for female anatomy just as such tropes became ubiquitous among adolescent boys in tea shops and on college campuses (as attested in Nakassis’s ethnography in the late 2000s). This is an instance of the reverse journey of double meaning; rather than from folklore to cinema, as we saw in *Karakattakaran*, here double meaning moves from the screen back to the “folk.”

As the above discussion indicates, vulgarity is partly a function of *who* says what *and* in what intertextual series of cinematic texts, on and off the screen. To take another example of this, consider the popular duo, Goundamani and Senthil’s extended comedy track in *Neram Nalla Neram* (dir. N. Sambandam, 1984), that also takes place in a tea shop where idli and vadai are sold.¹⁵ In this track, the character played by the actress Deepa, who is consistently framed to overtly expose her cleavage, mid-rift, and ankles, works as a cook in Senthil’s shop, where she grinds flour for idli and vadai. Instead of focusing on the food or tea, which often keeps burning their tongue, the customers simply come to ogle her working. Here, what is important for our discussion is how the “double meaning” of the various scenes that make up this comedy track (where talk about vadai, and everything else, becomes talk about something sexual) is anchored by the *actress*, Deepa’s presence. This creates a deep multilayeredness to the comedy track: on the one hand, the *diegetic character* of the laboring woman is erased, reducing her to a so-called pleasure doll (which we can read as an allegory for the fate of *non-diegetic actresses* like Deepa, on which more below); and on the other hand, this very doubling of onscreen and off-

screen enables a Mulveyean scene of scopic pleasure (or *sight aṭikkiratu*, to use the Tamil phrase [NB: the pejorative and haptic use of the verbalizer *aṭi*]) where both Goundamani, and by extension, the audience, can ogle a woman (the actress), seated on the floor as she grinds away.¹⁶ (Though in this sequence, the joke is ultimately on Goundamani, who gets maavu on his face and is humiliated, itself perhaps an allegory of Christian Metz's [1982] claim that the cinema is marked by its "shamefaced voyeurism.") This doubling is linked to Deepa's onscreen and offscreen paratexts. Unni Mary in real life, a Christian from Kerala, Deepa's onscreen para-text was as a vamp or the third woman, an extension of the supposedly licentious Anglo Indian who entices men. Echoing this was offscreen gossip about her as a licentious starlet.¹⁷ Even popular, mainstream magazines like *Kumudam* and *Ananda Vikatan* had their gossip columns revolve around Deepa. She was in the in-between space of Malayalam and Tamil, both because of her background and because she acted in both industries. This made it convenient to target her and take advantage of the misogyny-driven stereotype of the morally loose, licentious Malayali actresses (cf. Nakassis 2015). And not coincidentally, the first (unverified) rumor of an actress in a porn film was also about Deepa (Indu Nesan) with the arrival of the VHS tapes.¹⁸

Such sequences and writing interpellate a(n imagined to be) mostly male audience. But we would be remiss to suppose that double meaning comedy dialogues only work in this way. Actresses like Kovai Sarala, for example, could navigate vulgarity through their spontaneous retorts as a woman and provide space for women to enjoy such scenes beyond their misogynistic confines, even in films where she was sandwiched between the typically "vulgar" duo Goundamani and Senthil.¹⁹ Consider, again the incredibly popular *Karakattakaran* (1989, dir. Gangai Amaren). In this film, Kovai Sarala plays a dancer in a *karakāṭṭam* troupe that also includes Senthil (as the *nadhaswaram* player) and Goundamani (as the *tavil* player). Senthil and Kovai Sarala have a romance, which they have hidden from Goundamani, who would oppose it for disturbing the troupe dynamic.²⁰ One way they do so is by linguistically framing their relationship as *aṇṇan-taṅkacci* (older brother-younger sister; a non-marriageable relation, cf. *māmā-murai poṇṇu*, cross-kin such MB[S]-[F]ZD). In a particular scene (that takes places after the above context has been established), Senthil and Kovai Saral are sitting at the feet of the haystack, alone. Senthil says:

Enna, anta tavilkkārar romba tuḷḷurān!
What the hell, that tavil guy is so arrogant.

Anta tavil illāme āṭamuṭiyātā?
Can't you dance without that tavil (drumbeat)?

With a loud, modal-pitch (and pitch range), and nasalized phonetic style, Kovai Sarala replies:

Aṭā nīnka oṇṇu! Oru tagara(pēṭṭi) taṭṭinā kūṭa nān āṭuvēn!
Oh, you're crazy! I could dance even if (someone) tapped (a rhythm)
on tin box!

Anta tavil ennattukku?
Who needs that tavil?

Kovai Sarala then leans over and puts her arms around Senthil's arms and speaks in quieter voice, with a slower delivery, markedly raised-pitch, wider pitch range, and with a relative absence of nasalization (i.e., in sing-song childish/romantic voice). She says:

Uṅka nātacuvaram tān vē::num.
I only need / want your nadhaswaram.

Senthil responds with an affirmative backchannel and puts his arms around her shoulders. He goes on to dismiss Goundamani, which Kovai Sarala takes up in a series of insults towards him (Goundamani), who eventually shows up and breaks up the lovers' rendezvous.

While in the previous examples, the masculine actor alternately makes fun of prominent actresses like Vijayalalitha and Sripriya—through the perversion-driven reversal of their image onscreen as helpless characters—or subjects them to an objectifying gaze (especially with secondary stars like Deepa), in this example Kovai Sarala inverts things (which Goundamani ratifies). Here, the reference to nadhaswaram—at one level, an instrument in the *karakāṭṭam* troupe, itself a metonym for its player (Senthil); at its doubled level, a reference to the phallus, also a metonym for its possessor (Senthil)—is a sign of affection, intimacy, and love. It bears no trace of the misogyny that characterizes what is otherwise readable in the typical double meaning dialogue as a castration anxiety (cf. the male-authority-driven order of *vadai*, which hides a male anxiety in the presence

of a sexualized women or triggers a sadistic punishment of her). Notice how in the above discussed scene, Senthil responds with an affectionate hug, with no trace of base sexual desire or shock (and non-diegetically, there is no secondary comedy sound). If Sripriya's confused uptake above split the dialogue to produce its doubledness (by recognizing its vulgarity by feigning non-understanding of it), here Goundamani's response validates Kovai Sarala's inversion of the vulgar into the romantic. We can further note that in her castigation of Goundamani, she stands up for Senthil, who is the typical target of Goundamani's aggression, and thus substitutes for his compromised masculinity, not in the mode of castration but of fierce domestic affection.

At the same time, as a double meaning dialogue, Kovai Sarala's dialogue here is nevertheless an expression of her sexuality and desire. Here, one wonders if for female audiences at the time the nadhaswaram also signified an aspiration for marriage as, in the context of the narrative, it does for her character (and perhaps also the actress, who never married). Finally, we should again emphasize that this inverted female agency—a kind of structural inversion of patriarchal cruelty and objectification—is not simply a feature of the filmic text but reaches beyond it; it is, and certainly became after films like *Karakattakkaran*, a feature of Kovai Sarala's own parallel star text. Consider, for instance, her many roles with Vadivelu, where she hounds him and even physically beats him to pulp. In short, through the doubling of meaning vulgarity is itself doubled and transformed, and a certain kind of upper-caste patriarchal regime of comedy is inverted, if only temporarily and partially, into a subaltern, folk order of agency, intimacy, and legitimate desire.

Double Meaning and the Participant Framework of Cinema (i.e., watching with family)

But what does it mean to be *vulgar*? What makes a particular joke or lyric vulgar? *And for whom?* Above, we suggested that the vulgarity of double meaning dialogues has something, presumably, to do with the way in which such dialogues talk about that which should not or cannot be talked about “directly”: women's bodies, sex acts, sexual desire. This is also a folk ideology about what makes such jokes vulgar and thus has to be taken account of; yet, such a rationalization erases much of the phenomenon by

focusing on the referential *content* of such speech as a justification for its pragmatic effects (and metapragmatic typification). That is, such an ideology—while not untrue—narrows our analytic gaze (even as it must be part of the phenomenon we analyze).

Beyond this focus on the *content* of such dialogues, let us note that the vulgarity of double meaning dialogues is a problem of *who else is around*—that is, it is a problem of what Erving Goffman (1981) called the “participation framework” of an encounter; in the case of double meaning dialogues, that one is constituted as part of an audience among co-present overhearing others. And *who* are they, sociologically speaking, which is to say, what kinds of social identities are consequentially in play in the vicinity of such “vulgarity”?

In Nakassis’s ethnographic fieldnotes, “double meaning” dialogues pop up in various places. Talking with an assistant film director, S—— one day outside a tea stall, Nakassis was querying him about the moral reputation of actresses. Speaking about them, he noted that heroines are like dolls, they are there to be “sighted” ... To be crass, he said, in Tamil Nadu for most people, there are no relationships with women that are not as a sister or a mother. The fieldnotes continue to describe the assistant director observing a division he makes, between our women and all others; others are barely even human as far as most guys are concerned; that is, one can look at them however one wants. From this sexist set of statements, the conversation found its way to his mother’s own reception practices; from the fieldnotes: when his mother was young, she went to see a Sivaji film. She was so sad when Sivaji’s character died at the end, so she went back to see the film again, hoping that the second time he wouldn’t die at the end. The fieldnotes continue with Nakassis and the assistant director shifting topics to the status of kissing and glamour in film. What is problematic about them, the assistant director opined, has nothing to do with the acts per se; it is *that you can’t watch such scenes with your family*. It’s embarrassing, he said, and to many inappropriate and *hence* vulgar. (That is, the vulgarity is an effect of the participation framework, the co-presence of family.²¹) This is why, he then noted, double meaning dialogues in film are okay but not kissing; because you *can* watch with your family under the cover of the dialogue’s non-sexual meaning (even when everyone knows it is the sexual one). The double meaning, as a kind of public secret, is a way to manage the fact that there are multiple audiences in the room, all of whom understand both meanings, but are too uncomfortable to

openly experience representations of sexuality in the same room as each other. (Here, again, recall Sripriya's perplexion at Sivaji's crass innuendo discussed above as an internal filmic model of this pragmatic fact of the cinematic reception of double meaning dialogues.)

Note the associative chain of topics of this director's rationalization (guided as much by Nakassis's own research interests at the time as his) and how it lends a kind of conceptual (non-in-)coherence to the conversation: from scopically consuming heroines on the screen to the blockage of sexuality *by* consanguineal (cross-sexual) kinship relations, to the figuration of older generations as cinematic rubes (believing the film would change the next time around),²² and then back to the problem of kinship and watching and hearing sexuality. The explicitness of sex is *blocked* by watching and hearing with kin; here, we interpret the interregnum of his mother's credulous spectatorship (otherwise, a non sequitur) as an implicit comment that such prudishness—to watch sex with one's family members—while completely natural and self-evident, is somehow illiberal or un-modern. And this sets up his point that in the place of the explicit is the veiled—the double meaning dialogue which is “okay” (when around family; perhaps, in particular, credulous mothers).

Or is it? In 2010, Nakassis was chatting on Gmail with a female friend, at the time recently finished her post-graduate degree and as yet unmarried. She asks Nakassis if he'd seen any new films—he hadn't. She then proffers that she recently saw *Aayirathil Oruvan* (2010, dir. Selvaraghavan). Nakassis asks her how it was, and she replied as follows (original in the left-hand column; English translation in the right-hand column):

12:45 AM **V**—: 1000il oruvan one time paarkalam avalo than..

Il half Scenes romba vulgara irundadu..

me: eppadi

sex rithiyaa?

ille, violence-aa?

12:46 AM **V**—: Familyoda paarka mudiyaaada padam..

Violence ila...

Sex,double meaning dialogues..

me: double meanings?

12:47 AM aaah

V—: You can watch *Aayirathil Oruvan* one time, that's enough.

The scenes in the 2nd half were really vulgar.

me (CVN): how's so?

In terms of sex?

Or, violence?

V—: It's a film that one can't watch with family.

It's not the violence.

(It's the) sex, double meaning dialogues.

me: double meanings?

Aaah

so, nee yaarooda paarthe? So, who'd you watch with?
 V—: Nan en friendsoda paarthen.. V—: I saw it with my friends..

At issue here is not simply the question of a (for her, transparently) vulgar content, nor even the question of vulgarity as the question of who is watching with you; it is also that a certain kind of cinema is itself defined in terms of these questions. A refrain Nakassis heard over and over again from young college-going persons in his ethnographic research was that a proper “neat” or “decent” film—tellingly called a *kuṭumpa paṭam* (“family film’)—is one that you can watch with your family; such a film, stereotypically at least, has no double meaning dialogues, no item numbers or “rape scenes,” and has lots of family sentiment, moral messages, and the like.²³ By contrast, cinema that is *for* youth was defined as cinema that *you cannot watch with family* (but with friends); and why? Self-evidently for these youth, because of the presence of item numbers, sexy scenes, and “double meaning dialogues,” all of which *make* for a type of cinema by circumscribing the pragmatics of the participation framework for encountering it (i.e., with whom you can watch and what follows—in terms of one’s affects, comportment, and the like—when one must watch with such others).²⁴

Youthfulness of Double Meaning Dialogues

As we have been arguing, double meaning dialogues do their work through a doubling of their possible interpretations (their denotational texts) *and*, correlatively, through the multiplication of the kinds of uptake of them. The claim, then, is not about whether how such dialogues are understood *as* or *as not* vulgar or sexual or as ambiguous per se (though they may be) but that the doubleness of the interpretability of such acts, as denotational texts, is itself an effect of the interactional texts of uptake, that is, of the act of not-getting it, not-seeing (or hearing) it, or of only attending to one (the “literal,” on-record meaning) of the double meanings.²⁵ This fact is itself folded into the textuality of double meaning dialogues, which often do their work by *modeling* the non-intelligibility of their vulgarity to a figured overhearer, as we saw with Sripriya’s character in *Lorry Drive Rajakkannu*. That is, certain double meaning dialogues model a singularity of meaning for some spectator *who does not get the joke* (for a spectator who

does) or feigns not getting it (for a spectator who need not disavow understanding). This is itself part of its effect.

Consider an example provided by Dr. N. Govindarajan (personal communication, 23 March 2022), from *Polladhavan* (2007, dir. Vetrimaran). In the scene in question, the hero Dhanush is narrating, over a flashback, his getting up the courage on the bus to talk to the “figure” (beautiful young woman) he has fallen in love with. He walks over, only to look down at her feet. In the image-track, the camera cuts to her high-heel shoes and then back to Dhanush telling the story to his friends.²⁶ He says, narrating his intimidation and loss of courage: “*Avlō periya heels! Ten steps back-u*” (‘Her heels were so big! I took ten steps back’). The comedian Santhanam retorts to Dhanush: *Kai uṭu maccā(n). Kuṭuttu veccevan ṭā nī! Hee::ls-ē avvalavu perisunnā...*” (‘Shake my hand, bro. You’re so lucky! If her heels are that big’).

With this last line, Santhanam raises his eyebrows from a furrowed position at the onset of the low-pitched “heels” to a maximal height with the high-pitch-stressed and elongated *-ē* as his head rocks back in forth and his mouth opens into a smile. He repeats this rising intonation contour/ facial expression again when moving from the (low-pitch/ relaxed-eyebrows) first syllable of *perisu* to the (high-pitch/ raised-eyebrows) *-(nn)ā* of the conditional, though with relatively lesser height in both (pitch and eyebrows). The overall effect is an iconic resonance of head movement, eyebrow raising, mouth opening, pitch-raising and stress, and vowel lengthening to effectuate a teasingly licentiousness. Santhanam never finishes the line, though, because he gets a smack from Dhanush’s character.²⁷ Here, Dhanush’s punishment both works as a form of censorship diegeticized *within* the film *and* as a confirming uptake of its vulgar implication (already metacommunicated, of course, through the performed speech style, in particular the parallel stress on the emphatic and conditional markers), though only at the cost of causing the comic utterance to remain unfinished.

As Dr. Govindarajan points out, because the joke turns on the spectator supplying the second clause of the hypothetical (if her heels are that big ...) the vulgarity is partly a function of the spectator’s own uptake. This, of course, is the point with all double meaning dialogues; but what this particular example points to is how the spectator’s own habits of interpretation and imagination are at issue *with the joke itself*. And this itself construable along generational lines (and gender lines; see note 26 above). Dr. Govindarajan offers an account:

If you're an 80's kid (born between 1980 to 1990 and nearing 40s) you'll certainly have some problem in getting the meaning immediately. So, you're a *maṅkuṇi*.²⁸ If you're a 90's kid (born between 1990 to 2000 and still longing for marriage) the response, be like "*Dēy! Dēy! Nī enna solla varēnnu teriyum*" ('Hey! Hey! I know what you're trying to say') with *asaṭṭu sirippu* ('a smirk'). For the 2k kids (born between 2000 to 2010 and who have enjoyed and continue to enjoy all the gifts of capitalism and technological advances), it has no inner meaning, and the meaning is explicit.²⁹

So, not only do such double meaning dialogues work to sketch out zones of appropriate consumption by imagining a kind of kinship chronotope of reception (watching with friends vs. watching with family), they also ascribe a certain set of qualities of personhood to those who watch (older vs. younger); here, (enacting) understanding (of) the joke is a second-order iconic index of spectators' own identities, generationally and, as discussed above, by gender (Silverstein 2003). Not simply reflecting the (male) youth identity of a spectator (the one who gets the joke; who can appreciate vulgarity as humor; who has their sexual urges satisfied in the cinema), such humor presupposes the entailment of male youthfulness (of the spectator, space of interaction) in the uptake of the joke itself.

Doubling Doubled Meaning beyond the Cinema Hall

This last point brings us to a critical issue about the specificity of the cinema as a narrative medium vis-à-vis double meaning dialogues. The doubleness of the double meaning dialogue is not only a function of the *dialogue between* its doubled meaning; it is also the way in which, as an enunciated narrated text, it can be de- and re-contextualized *outside of the cinema*.

During Nakassis's fieldwork, it wasn't uncommon for filmic texts to be citationally reanimated by young men to "tease" or flirt with young women. One female friend, for example, reported the nuisance of college boys sitting nearby their "top" (area where they hung out on the campus) and singing film songs with "double meanings"; here, note the participation framework of the college student (or would-be "[college] hero" as was sometimes said of young men's self-stylings) singing a song *for* his

proximal peers—as ratified bystanders—to young women—as unrated addressees who are non-proximal, but within hearing range. Similarly, upon an excursion to the Eco Park in Madurai with a group of hostel mates, Nakassis et al. passed by a group of young women sitting under a tree (Nakassis 2016:174). One of the boys, P. J., broke into song, singing with a sideways glance to the girls: “*Maccānai pāttīṅkalā malai vālai tōppukkullē?*” (‘In the mountain banana grove, did you see *maccān*?’). “*Maccān*” refers, in female-to-male usage, to a marriageable cross cousin, here a euphemism for lover or future husband (Nakassis 2014). Reanimating a lyric from the classic film *Annakili* (1976, dir. Devaraj–Mohan), here P. J. took the filmic sequence, a romantic song in a mountain banana grove, and projected it onto our own arboreal mise-en-scène, in effect flirting with the young women by using the alignment of filmic hero with heroine as his opening gambit to initiate a “line,” or romantic relationship, while casting himself as a “college hero.” In fact, the voicing was more complex since in the original film sequence it is the heroine who sings this line *about* the hero. P. J., then, was voicing her desire for *him* by singing the song for/as her, by hypothetically reanimating *her* as the desirous one and himself as the object of her desire. In doing so, P. J. transformed the original text, dropping the first-person pronoun possessing the kinterm *maccān* in the original lyric, leaving its referent ambiguous. This ambiguity allowed the lyric to simultaneously (i) refer to himself (without having to shift the possessive pronoun to the second person) while addressing the young woman and (ii) ventriloquate the young woman’s first-person desire for him qua referent, as in the original song. His friends laughed as we strolled on, and the young women giggled in embarrassment. Again, here the romantic double meaning—drawing on presupposed cultural knowledge about kin term relationality and the arboreal (onscreen/offscreen) chronotope of romance, the fecund fields/garden—is itself doubled in its citation. In both cases, the twinned meanings of the cinematic sequence are projected *onto* the interactional framework that is enacted *by* the fact of singing the song, recruiting bystanding men as an audience for an act of flirtation with the young women (forced into the role of the heroine). The doubleness of the song affords the doubleness of its reanimation.

II.

Political Allegory, the Doubleness of the Hero-Star

In this penultimate section, we pivot to a phenomenon that is not culture-internally classified as “double meaning”: the use of narrative Tamil cinema to enact allegorical political commentary. Yet while not considered in the same category as double meaning dialogues, such usages do draw on a number of similar semiotic relations: both double meaning while keeping both “texts”—meanings, “understandings”—in play at once. Further, both usages stand in tension with a certain liberal understanding of representation, in both political and semiotic senses. Both are, in other words, emblematic of the “massness” of cinema in South India. And finally, both usages draw on the narrative and technological capacity to entangle the offscreen body and personage of the actor to the characters they animate onscreen such that what is narratively depicted is interactionally enacted. In short, while political allegorical uses of film should not be conflated with double meaning dialogues (they differ in very key ways), the comparison is useful to highlight what is semiotically of interest to the process of doubling in the Tamil cinema independent of the question of “content” per se.

Kalaiñar M. Karunanidhi (1924–2018), the famous Dravidian ideologue, DMK politician, and many-times Chief Minister of the state of Tamil Nadu (1969–1976, 1989–1991, 1996–2001, 2006–2011) was as equally legendary for his florid film dialogues, which in the 1950s and 1960s often expressed his politics against the Indian Congress Government at the Center as well as the State. Sometimes his use of dialogue to criticize the Center were subtle, sometimes blatant and explicit. For instance, responding to Nehru’s famous utterance “Nonsense” (in regard to the possibility of an autonomous Dravidanadu), in the 1953 film, *Thirumbippaar* (dir. T. R. Sundaram), Karunanidhi had the protagonist Parandhaman wearing Nehru’s famous high-necked collarless coat while repeatedly uttering “nonsense” during significant moments in the film (Eswaran 2021).

As various authors have noted (Sivathambi 1981b; Pandian 1991), while the early films penned by Karunanidhi and other Dravidian writers congealed around propagating the DMK party vision and image (eventually becoming known through the genre label, the “DMK film”)—through their use of well-placed monologues, song lyrics, symbolism (of the red and black, the rising sun), and narrative arcs (that echoed offscreen

political realities)—through the 1960s the “DMK film” increasingly revolved around the stardom of the most charismatic of the DMK’s matinee idols, M. G. Ramachandran (or MGR, for short). From the 1950s onward, MGR’s persona was carefully constructed by a team of writers, directors, and producers who borrowed the swashbuckler action-hero stereotype from Hollywood (especially from the films of MGR’s own idols, Errol Flynn and Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.). Such filmmakers effectively intercalated this swashbuckling hero into a variety of local textual forms (Prasad 2014), such as the melodrama of indigenous folklore or the mythos of an Oedipal son who balances excessive attachment for his mother with the taming of the shrew(s) while freeing the downtrodden. If before the doubled meaning of the DMK film’s political allegory implied the need for the DMK to rise to power to restore the evils of the Congress rule (and casteist-Brahminical-Aryan-Northern-Hindi domination of an otherwise egalitarian-non-Brahmin-Dravidian-Southern-Tamil community), with the MGR film, the doubled meaning was MGR himself, that is, his transtextual and offscreen paratext as the hero of the masses who had come to save them.

This emergence of the MGR film from the DMK film led to numerous tensions within the DMK party through the 1960s. By the early 1970s, MGR’s persona fully subsumed the narrative of his films even as he was being increasingly marginalized within the DMK. Such offscreen drama found its way into MGR’s films of the times. This is exemplified in MGR’s *Nam Naadu* (dir. Jambulingam, produced by Vijaya-Vauhini), released in November 1969. The film’s narrative capitalized on the growing resentment of the masses over corruption within the DMK government, especially following C. N. Annadurai’s demise in 1969 and Karunanidhi’s assuming party leadership. MGR plays an honest clerk in the mayor’s office who is forced to contest the elections due to rampant corruption. MGR utilized the film to critique his own party, the DMK, and its allegory—the need of MGR to contest elections—anticipated and became a reality in 1972 as MGR left/was ejected from the DMK and formed his own party Annadurai DMK, eventually contesting elections.

A central element to the film’s allegorical critique is its use of the ‘philosophical (or propaganda) song’ (*tattuva pāṭṭu*), a staple of MGR’s films. Consider the song-sequence “*Nalla Perai*,” which comes about 46 minutes into the film.³⁰ The song-sequence emerges out of a narrative scene of MGR’s character chastising and advising his niece and nephew to

listen their parents: ‘don’t you know that those who appreciate their parents receive praise from others?’, he asks them. He then affectionately hugs the children (figure 3 – left), who frame him on either side, his gaze turning to the camera as the camera tracks-in to a tighter, centered composition of him (figure 3 – right) as he breaks into song: “*Nalla pērai vāṅka vēṅṭum piḷḷaikaḷē, nam nāṭu ennum tōṭṭattilē, nālai malarum mullaikaḷē*” (‘Kids, you have to get a good name, in the garden that is our [inclusive] country, tomorrow thorns will blossom [into flowers]’).



Figure 3. MGR singing to the children, his audience. Note his deictic, frontal gaze at the camera as it tracks-in, as well as his presentative open-palmed gesture (right) as he sings, framed by the gods and the great political leaders of the past (in the top-left of this frame we see Bharatiyar; and later, Gandhi, Vivekananda[?], and, most prominently, Tiruvalluvar and C. N. Annadurai [see figure 4]).

While narratively the song offers advice to his children on how to live properly, receive a good name, and uplift the country, the song also stands in as an ethico-political statement issued by MGR to the audience (his ‘children’, the people of ‘our [INCL.] country’). Later in the song, MGR sings and the children repeat back, matching his melody and accompanying gestures (i.e., having internalized his lesson and style and citationally doubled it):

- MGR: *Vilī pōla enni nam moḷi kākka vēṅṭum*
Like the eyes we must protect our language
- Children: *Vilī pōla enni nam moḷi kākka vēṅṭum*
Like the eyes we must protect our language
- MGR: *Tavarāna pērkkū nēr valikkāṭṭa vēṅṭum*

	We must show the right path to the misguided ones
Children:	<i>Tavarāna pērkku nēr valikkāṭṭa vēṇṭum</i> We must show the right path to the misguided ones
MGR:	<i>Jana nāyagattil nām ellōrum mannar</i> In democracy we are all kings
Children:	<i>Jana nāyagattil nām ellōrum mannar</i> In democracy we are all kings
MGR:	<i>Tennāṭṭu Gandhi Annānil sonnār</i> As told by the Southern Gandhi <shot of MGR <u>pointing</u> to Annadurai portrait>
Children:	<i>Tennāṭṭu Gandhi Annānil sonnār</i> As told by the Southern Gandhi < <u>shot</u> of Annadurai portrait>

In the last couplet, the camera tilts down to a low-angle (figure 4 – top-left) so as to pan upwards, following MGR’s pointing index finger as it points ‘up’ to Annadurai’s image (figure 4 – top-right; cf. Nakassis 2017:204, 231). The image cuts back to the children (figure 4 - middle-left), who put their hands together in worshipping supplication as they sing, as the camera then pans right, past MGR to Annadurai’s illuminated image (figure 4 – middle-right). Pausing on Annadurai, who substitutes for MGR and his pointing gesture, the song continues and cuts back to a long-shot of the family and MGR, who is at its center(-top) of the shot, now substituting for Annadurai.

These lines, while having some scope over the film’s narrative world, more importantly point beyond the film, not only to Annadurai but, via Annadurai, to the offscreen tensions between MGR and Karunanidhi. Lyrically, the text alludes to the Dravidian ideology by invoking Tamil language (which we [INCL.] must protect), but here voiced by MGR—as the onscreen animator (and principal) of the song—to critique “the misguided ones” (Karunanidhi et al.); similarly, it alludes to the democratic principle of equality (that the misguided ones have betrayed), as taught by the great Annadurai to us. This figures MGR, perhaps, as also a ‘child’ (i.e., the real heir) of Annadurai (and the Tamil nation), even as we are his children.



Figure 4. MGR's citational invocation of "Annadurai" in *Nam Naadu*, cited by his [MGR's, and Annadurai's] children

After MGR founded the ADMK in 1972, his party's candidate, Maayathevar, won the by-election at Dindigul in 1973. *Nam Naadu* was rereleased to capitalize on the euphoria. In this 1973 version, stock shots of MGR and Maayathevar celebrating the electoral victory were inserted into the film

when MGR's character celebrates his own success in the film's mayoral elections. In addition, the black and red colors of the DMK flag depicted within the film at the mayor's office were changed to the tricolored—black, white, and red—of the ADMK flag. In sum, note how the rupturing within the narrative of the national (Gandhi) through the regional (Annadurai as 'southern Gandhi' of "*nam nāṭu*" 'our country') opens a space within the text—and its exhibition space—for the later juxtaposition and superimposition of both mayoral (diegetic, onscreen) and district (nondiegetic, offscreen) electoral success, equating one with the other in anticipation, arguably, of MGR's eventual offscreen ascent to the Chief Ministership of the state (Eswaran 2012:81–82; also Prasad 2014).³¹ The semiotics of scaling here, enabled through the doubling of the text, is as dizzying.

And through it, causality is bent all the way around, with 1969 *Nam Naadu* anticipating and (arguably) leading to a 1973 victory which is itself registered within an updated version of the film to celebrate what it led to. In both the original and the updated, what is narratively depicted is politically enacted (either in anticipation or in celebration), and the text and its lyrics, dialogues, colors, mis-en-scène, even photographic indexicalities are doubled, twinned, twice. Here, it is not that the offscreen world is represented by the onscreen text, but that the onscreen text doubles itself so as to hold in play two interpretations and two references which it then smears into one. As with our previous examples of double meaning dialogues, swatches of filmic discourse draw on the possibilities of ambiguating semiosis *and* of the cinema's capacity to enact what it represents through the twinned bodies of the character/actor. That MGR's political charisma is immanent in his characters operates exactly parallel to Deepa's sexual charisma in that both serve to make possible a range of double meanings that such films exploit, on and off the screen.

Conclusion

Our point in the above discussion is not, of course, that political allegory and sexual innuendo are one and the same. Certainly, their social values are different. And certainly, the uptakes are distinct. Moreover, in double meaning dialogues a kind of ambiguity or incongruity is *modeled* by the text and its uptakes (even if no one necessarily understands such dialogues *as* ambiguous or incongruous) between the twinned meanings (hence,

their metaphoric quality) while in the MGR film the doubled meanings are collapsed into each other (with, for the spectator-fan, a near-total congruence; hence their allegorical quality). In both cases, however, we find similar semiotic processes and relations. Indeed, we see with clear contours how the cinema, as narrative form and indexical technology, already pre-doubles its discourse; a discourse that in its doubling pre-figures its citational uptake beyond itself, which is to say, its further doubling, whether this is MGR songs at election rallies (or election rally footage in MGR films) or double meaning dialogues or lyrics used by youth to woo or tease each other. Such processes of doubled meaning, of course, are not unique to the cinema. The pragmatics of discourse are always anticipating this kind of uptake and recontextualization; yet these examples brightly highlight this aspect of the pragmatics of discourse *as* the pregnant potential of meaning to being doubled, not simply repeated or copied but put into a dialogue of twins: doubled meaning.³²

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Notes

1 Cre-A dictionary, under its 4th entry for *irattai* writes: “4. (வெவ்வேறு மாதிரியான) இரு நிலை அல்லது வகை—with the gloss of ‘dual’ or ‘double,’ has the following examples: திரைப்படத்தில் இரட்டை வேடம்/இரட்டை அர்த்தம் தொனிக்கும் வசனம்.”

2 In this regard, consider a story told about Kalamegam (see <https://kaaviyavarigal.wordpress.com/2017/12/15/mundane-musings-of-maestros/>), a 15th-century poet who famously complained about bad service at a restaurant (run by one *Nāikai Kattān*), with the following song:

கத்துக் கடல் சூழ் நாகை காத்தான் தான் சத்திரத்தில்
அத்தமிக்கும் போதில் அரிசி வரும் – குத்தி
உலையில் இட ஊர் அடங்கும் ஓர் அகப்பை அன்னம்
இலையில் இட வெள்ளி எழும்.

In the instance, this song counted as a complaint ('at this rate, it will be dawn [Venus rising] before I get my food!'), occasioning the apology of the owner, upon which the *same song* is then pressed into service to count as a different kind of interactional text: praise, with quietude now read as satiation (*aṭaṅku*) and the rice compared to the event of Venus rising rather than falling on the plate *when* Venus rises. Here, while both denotational texts (and thus interactional texts) are projectable from one and the same stretch of speech, the interpretation is one *or* the other, depending on its co-text (bad service vs. apology from the owner, Kalamegam's annoyance or feeling kindness), and not *both at once*. (Of course, in the *story* about Kalamegam, by its end we are supposed to be astonished that one and the same song could be so pressed into meaning, where the effect of astonishment emerges from this doubling.) Ambiguity, here, then affords serial interpretations rather than virtually simultaneous ones. Similarly, we might differentiate double meaning from irony, metaphor, *akupeyar*, and other tropes that work to enact/invite/transform one meaning/interpretation (the tropic one) through another (the non-tropic, or "literal" meaning), though double meaning is clearly related to them. We might say, then, that these are not formal distinctions but the particular pragmatic distinctions of what some text figurates vis-à-vis its uptake and effects.

- 3 Dr. N. Govindarajan (personal communication, 23 March 2022) notes that Tolkappiyam says there should be an inner meaning in every poem, which he calls உள்ளூறை, of which there are five types: உடனூறை உள்ளூறை உவமம், உவம உள்ளூறை உவமம், சுட்டு உள்ளூறை உவமம், நகை உள்ளூறை உவமம், சிறப்பு உள்ளூறை உவமம். Dr. Govindarajan: "உள்ளூறை is the meaning *residing* inside a poem. உள் உறையும் பொருள். Ramanujan calls it ... language within language. The first *language* is the language you're reading or seeing. The second is the உள்ளூறை. The above five types are nothing but the aftereffects of the poems, i.e., responses occurring inside the reader, ... Thus, உள்ளூறை makes you to think and to interpret and to reinterpret. But Tolkappiyam restricts meaning making and advise us to stick on to one acceptable inner meaning by giving some rules. So, you should not take meaning beyond certain limitations." Again, here our interests are slightly different, focused in particular on the simultaneity of multiple interpretations are part of (and are often apprehended *as*) a *single conjoined meaning/lact* (in particular, as occasioned by the inability to speak monologically).
- 4 This is not to make a claim about how viewers process such multiple texts—indeed, as we noted above, often viewers may transparently experience a "double meaning" as involving no multiplicity whatsoever—but rather as an analytic point about how different dimensions of meaningfulness intersect and interact.
- 5 Speaking of how "the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed," and in particular, the "web" of prohibitions around speech, Michel Foucault in his lecture, "The Discourse on Language," notes that "where the danger spots are most numerous, are those dealing with politics and sexuality" (1972:216). Andrew Ollett noted during the Chicago Tamil Forum workshop discussion that the Sanskrit term *anyōkti-* 'speaking (of one thing by means of) something else' takes as its primary examples politics and sexuality.
- 6 The terms are in quotes since it isn't quite clear what it means to speak directly: do we mean semantically or pragmatically? As Susan Ervin-Tripp (1976) long ago pointed out, the most "direct" way, pragmatically, to say/do something may turn out to be "in-

direct” semantically. And, as was pointed out in the Tamil Forum discussion, in many cases there is no direct mode of expression that is available, which is to say that the “indirect” mode *is* the way in which such topics are discussed. A better distinction might be explicit versus implicit (denotationally), if itself necessarily understood in reference to whatever the local language ideologies in question are (usually, they are referentialist and privilege explicit denotation as “direct,” “plain,” and on-record). Moreover, given that viewers may transparently parse such double meaning dialogues or scenes *as* “vulgar” or “sexual” (and not as indirect per se)—as if the overall entextualized effect created by the relation between the “doubled” textualities over-came any possibility of ambiguity (this itself abetted by the expectable, conventional nature of such dialogues *and* by the fact that in such contexts there may not really be more direct way of expressing such topics)—in the rest of the paper we avoid the language of “indirect” and “direct.” We thank Christina Davis, Andrew Ollett, and Sascha Ebeling for pressing us in the Tamil Forum discussion to make these points more clearly.

7 During fieldwork (by Nakassis) in 2000s with college youth, the verb *vā*—issued in the interrogative mood, present tense, second-person singular, *vāriyā* (reportable with the verb *kūppiṭu*)—would be used as euphemism for an invitation for sexual encounter (*pōṭu*, similarly), as recalled for me by one young man’s narration of his sexual encounter with a neighbor. Beginning with him “*sight*”ing her at the bus stop for 2–3 months, they then began talking (small talk about where she was going, coming from, etc.). As they became more familiar, he started to utilize “double meanings”—*pōṭavā* (‘shall I put it down?’, e.g., something in his hand; twinned meaning: ‘shall we have sex?’) or *vāriyā* (‘are you coming?; twinned meaning: are you coming to have sex?’). He interpreted her non-responses to mean she was interested in some kind of relationship with him, authorizing (so he thought) the escalation of the relation, which eventually he reported took a physical turn, culminating with a sexual encounter in the sugarcane fields (see discussion below).

8 <https://web.archive.org/web/20200116135031/http://milliblog.com/2019/03/31/milliblog-weeklies-mar31-2019/>

9 This illustrates that the idea of *etircintu* or counter/responsive songs—an aesthetic of the relatively classical folklore, where it is as if you contemplate and respond (Sivathambi 1981a:377)—was not limited to songs in rivers, rice fields, and ceremonies like marriages.

10 Audio cassettes were prevalent this time because piracy made them cheaper in the 1970s and 1980s. T-series with 5 -rupee empty cassettes to record, unlike the 25 Rupees HMV recorded ones or the equally expensive but high-quality Sony ones, made it possible for villagers to afford cassettes, on which they would record the songs they wanted. For 10 rupees all the latest songs of Ilayairaja and others, as per their choice, could be had in places like Amasamudram or Tirunelveli! The tape-recorders—particularly, AIWA and Panasonic—were dumped in Madurai and Tirunelveli via Kerala from the Middle East and Gulf. As a result, all the tea shops and many households in rural areas had the Two-in-One transistor/cassette player. When the cassette industry became big, the market developed beyond the cinema songs, which was beyond the radar of official censorship. The vulgarity surrounding politics and sex travelled in this

circuit mainly among men and through the women who used to come to the tea shop for getting milk.

11 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dsEaDB2dK1Q>.

12 This comes right after the Sripriya and Sivaji's sidekick, Suruli Rajan, have an exchange about "side" versus main dishes. Sripriya has asked: "*ennāṅkayyā side vaṅkarīṅka?*" ('What sides are you all going to get?'). Suruli Rajan replies, "*Aṅṅan-kiṭṭe ippaṭi pesunā side-ye kiṭaiyatu, nēraṭiyāna dash tān*" ('When you talk to elder brother in this way, there aren't any sides, just a head-on collision'); here the use of "dash" refers to a head-on collision, a variation of the trope of *kuttu* (for intercourse), but here "translated" into the idiom of the lorry driver's parlance. Note here the analogical transfer 'inside' the double meaning.

13 There is, thus, a gender of the epistemic rights to 'get' the joke which is enacted by Sripriya's character as a sort of signal, or model for, the viewer. The doubled meaning as a deflection of what is otherwise straightforwardly sexualized and vulgar is not only in the doubled denotational text (that Sivaji's dialogue could be about sexuality and/or food) but in the distribution of uptake within the scene itself, between Sivaji and his sidekick (and the enunciative gestures of the sound track), on the one hand, and Sripriya, and the other. Again, this itself models the distribution and meaningfulness of getting the joke, that is, who, in the context of theatrical exhibition, has to act like they don't quite get it. We thank Shweta Swaminathan for pushing us to articulate this point more clearly. As Shweta further pointed out, this motif has a longer history in Tamil literature, with feminine virtues including *maṭam* (ignorance), alongside *accam* (fear), *nāṅam* (shyness), *payirppu* (delicacy, unease with vileness), and *karpu* (chastity). Some interpretations (e.g., by Nacchinarkkiniyar, verse 96) emphasize that such ignorance (*maṭam*) is itself willful, as when the heroine is teased about the physical manifestations of lust.

14 Comedians after the Thangavel-Nagesh generation who were known for vulgarity, such as Thengai Srinivasan and Kathadi Ramamurthy (at which point vulgarity became synonymous with comedy), have used the potential of *paruppu*'s multiple meanings, stretching from signifying the nipple to the mons (the orgasmic center).

15 For the intermittent scenes that make up this track, see the compilation here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O9gfwr13q34>, in particular, around 7:23. For the full film: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UAp_biqIX8Y.

16 This scenario itself has a resonance specific to the feudal romance characteristic of Indian cinemas, where the comfortably seated landlord (here, the spectator; but also Goundamani, who refers to himself in the film as the feudal landlord of the village) exploits his woman laborers (and in more than one way). It is also an instance of the double entendre framed visually—grinding (*āṭṭaratu*) and kneading (*pisaiyaratu*) have long been used as sexual innuendos in Tamil—and aurally.

17 Deepa shot to fame as the titular, *Rosappoo Ravikkaikari* (Woman with the Rose-Colored Blouse, 1979, dir. Devaraj-Mohan) where she played the voluptuous and promiscuous wife. Deepa signified modernity in the film, wearing blouse in a village (Vandicholai) during the pre-Independence era, wherein women were not used to it. The same modernity drives her to protest against her mismatched and naive and rustic husband and

indulge in extramarital affair with Manickam, a British Government recruiter. Such a defining role in a critically acclaimed and commercially successful film marked her as a woman wearing her sexuality on her sleeve for the rest of her career.

18 In this context, taking MGR, a Malayali, as the signifier of virtue is ironic and therefore understandable—a cleansing, perhaps, of guilt on the part of Tamil psyche.

19 In the post–Goudamani-Senthil and Vadivelu era, particularly during the Tamil cinema of the new millennium, with internet pornography becoming ubiquitous, the double entendre as a variably nuanced aesthetic tool for sexual innuendo is giving way to comparatively explicit and unabashed vulgarity, even in the titles of films; for instance, the recent *Iruttu Araiylil Murattu Kuthu* (Rough Punch [i.e., Fuck] in a Dark Room; dir. Santhosh P. Jayakumar, 2018) and *Pallu Padaama Paattuka* (Careful with Your Teeth, dir. Vijay Vardhraj, yet to be released). Such titles are not proving enough to pull the audiences to theatres, but they do find a not unsuccessful place in OTT platforms. Such films are part of a newly emergent “adult comedy” genre. This genre is distinct from “blue films” of an earlier era (though note the citation allusion in producer, K. E. Gnanavel Raja’s production banner for the two above mentioned films, Blue Ghost Pictures, which has so far focused on adult-themed [Blue] horror [Ghost] films [Pictures]), but also from the double meaning comedy track of a “mass” masala film (with its non-niche addressivity). But so too is it distinct from mainstream comedy films with an admittedly niche audience. Ironically, the “adult comedy” film is exactly akin to what young men during my fieldwork referred to as “youth movies” (vs. ‘family films’; see discussion in the main text), though they differ, perhaps, given their aesthetic sheen of global cosmopolitanism (cf. Kunapulli 2021 and her discussion of similarly irreverent new films that feature both dark irreverent themes/comedy, more specific genre aesthetics, and aspirations to globality) and perhaps with the demographics with whom they are popular (viz. adults).

20 See <https://youtu.be/13B-lmDaepw?t=1570>. The previous scene from the comedy track is immediately previous.

21 Of course, this is not to say that families do not end up sitting through such scenes together, insofar as many films feature them and such films fill up not only theaters but also television programming, whose consumption is squarely within the domestic sphere. Of course, in many cases in our experience, the station might be changed or the television shut off—by or at the behest of senior members of the family—when objectionable content comes on. (This censorship might itself be anticipated by the film text in question; for example, pirated VCD versions of the youth hit film *7/G Rainbow Colony*—made for consumption in the home—had a particular sequence that featured explicit depictions and discussions of premarital sexuality edited out of the film.) But even in cases where the film plays on we can detect this blockage, for example, as certain members of the family move out of the room or avert their gazes (see discussion in chapter 2 of Nakassis 2023). Swarnavel reports, for example, such a situation from the household of uncle’s daughter, who married to an engineer in Tiruchendur. Some twenty-five years back, when his daughters were approximately thirteen and fifteen, Swarnavel noticed that when watching a film on the television during a typical family social on Sunday evening, the teenager girls would turn their eyes down to the ground, and their father affect a stern gaze, if there were any vulgar dialogue or jokes, or even

erotic songs. But the volume was not altered or muted, nor the image turned off or otherwise blocked. In this play and distribution of the sensible, the visual is marked as the site of taboo (and a kind of explicitness) while sound continues on as fine to be experienced. Such practices presume that one is supposed to imagine the morally right thing through sound, whereas visual forecloses the ability to avoid or feign experiencing the sexual or vulgar, constituting the doubleness of the double meaning which allows the film to continue while some (the young women) attenuate their presence to the screen and to others in the room, who continue to watch. Here, too, again, kinship relationality and particular kinship roles (of father, of daughter) are enacted through a mode of cinematic reception in relationship to the double meaning. See the discussion in note 24 below.

22 Of course, they do, as when audiences are upset with the ending of a film and the filmmakers recut the film to cater to them.

23 These were a spontaneously offered ideal type by these young interlocutors—not an empirical claim about films that families watch—which informed a cultural classification of film (as “neat” or “vulgar”), for families or for friends/youth. See note 21 above.

24 We might compare the censorship by the Symbolic Father in the context of the family also redoubled into the context of the symbolic Big Brother (Bigger Daddy) of the censorship board and the state; and indeed, in such contexts, all sorts of inappropriate explicitness finds itself cut from films, or, at least, put under erasure. Double meaning dialogues on this view anticipate such a fact and erase themselves through doubling themselves. Other examples include Sivaji Ganesan’s famously silenced *kal* in *Parasakti* or, more recently, an Ajith Kumar dialogue (in *Mankatha* [?]) where we see Ajith mouth *devathi payal* but the audio is silenced. Here, note the cinematic possibilities of image and sound tracks in partial independence. Other examples that come to mind include the stereotyped cut to the birds at the moment of lip lock or the appearance of flowers between the lovers and the camera. See the discussion in note 21 above.

25 As this implies, central to double meaning dialogues is the accountability or responsibility for the act of (non)understanding and how it is distributed in some moment of exhibition. The doubling of meaning, thus, provides a potential cover in and by providing the threat of (understanding) its “vulgarity.” This distribution of responsibility thus can allow for multiple audiences to watch together without it becoming an actionable problem. We thank Christina Davis for framing this point for us in terms of the distribution of responsibility.

26 For the set-up of the joke, see this video, start at 2:10: https://www.facebook.com/watch?ref=search&v=2079979945450660&external_log_id=ab0d6c3f-7a80-46aa-b93e-ae10b14878ae&q=polladhavan%20santhanam. Tellingly, however, the double meaning dialogue proper, starting with “heels” is completely edited out of this video. The line, without its narrative setup was here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0BOwvBvEsc> (last accessed in March 2022), but taken down within a month. This absence, even effacement from the Internet, is not, however, because the dialogue did not register with its audiences. Six years after the film, for example, we find online discussion of its meaning being reportedly asked after by an uncomprehending woman: <https://www.facebook.com/HDApage/posts/heelse-avlo-perusunaa-appoo-indha>

dialog-la-enna-double-menaing-irukunu-oru-pon/447761885302089/; also see references to this dialogue in other online discussions (<https://indusladies.com/community/threads/rare-pictures-of-sridevi.177265/page-3>); as well as its use as a caption on Twitter (see https://twitter.com/search?q=Heels%20perusu&src=typed_query&f=top).

27 Dhanush's character hitting his friends is a recurrent comedy element in the film.

28 *Mañkuṇi* refers to someone who is mentally slow, not in the know.

29 Here, the effect is also achieved through ellipsis. As Dr. Govindarajan points out: "In the above quoted dialogue, the reader should fill the gap (or complete the line) to get the meaning. Meaning depends on his or her own experience. There is no correct answer. ... Here the clues are not given by the poet or by a screenplay writer but 'produced' by the reader. The clues of the reader satisfy the text. There is no answer and there are no restrictions. This is an 'inverse' of tradition" (i.e., of Tolkappiyam's *ullūrai*); see note 3 above.

30 https://youtu.be/qztLG-1eB_U?t=2814

31 See Nakassis 2016, 2017, 2019, 2023 for more examples of such doublings with later mass heroes, such as Rajinikanth and Vijay.

32 MGR was, of course, famous for assaying the double role (sometimes even as twins).

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