

**Tipping Scales with Talk: Conversation, Commerce, and Obligation on the edge of  
Thanjavur, India**

**By**

**Laura Corinne Brown**

**A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
(Anthropology)  
in The University of Michigan  
2010**

**Doctoral Committee:**

**Professor Judith T. Irvine, Chair  
Professor E. Webb Keane Jr.  
Professor Bruce Mannheim  
Professor Farina Mir**



A *maḥ kaṭai* /phonebooth in central Thanjavur, October of 2006.

© Laura Corinne Brown

---

All Rights Reserved

2010

## **Dedication**

To my parents, Robert and Linda Brown, and to T. (K.) Kalavani.

## Acknowledgements

Many mistakes were made in the course of writing this dissertation, but my choice in interlocutors was never among them. This project would not have been possible without the help and friendship of T. (K.) Kalaivani. Her hospitality, and that of her family, sustained me through fieldwork. Her questions, criticism, and generosity continue to inspire me.

While in Thanjavur, I incurred many debts of the sort that can never be repaid. I learned that it is possible to turn strangers into family, that there are people for whom generosity is much more than a practical strategy, and that the vegetables sold in shops I studied could be unforgettably delicious. In order to preserve the anonymity of people who are mentioned in the dissertation, I will avoid giving detailed accounts of all that I owe. Instead, I simply offer deep and heartfelt thanks to the families of: S. Singaram, J. Selvakumar, D. Velu Murugan, L. Prem, J. Abdul, Vera Ragavan, H. Dishnamoorthy, Mani Rao, and K. Rajendran. Among the many other people to whom I owe thanks are: Ambazhakan, Ambujam, Anuradha, Arul Mozhi, Bakiraj, Bharathi, Divya, Dhoulath Bee, Ezhilarasi, Francis, Gomathi, Jayanthi, Karthikaya, Kavi Arasan, Lalitha, Laxman, Lenin, Madhava Mala, Madusudana, Mary, Mathiyalagan, Menaga, Meyyarasi, Muthulakshmi, Nilakandan, Prajeesh, Premila, Poorna, Raghavan, Ramya, Ritha, Roja,

Sareedha, Sambasivam, Saranya, Selvi, Selvadurai, Shanmugapriya, Siva, Sushila, Suvanathi, Umamaheswari, Vanitha, Velu, and Yoganatham.

Prof. K. Karunakaran introduced me to both the sweetness of Tamil and to many of the people who made this work possible. Prof. L. Ramamoorthy provided invaluable aid with transcription and translation, as well as help with the analysis of many of the conversations that appear in this dissertation. Both offered models of patience, generosity, and scholarly commitment that I will strive to emulate. Among others whom I thank for the gift of Tamil are: Dr. S. Bharathy and others at the American Institute of Indian Studies in Madurai; Profs. Natanasabapathy, Ganesan, Muralidharan, and Meenakshisundaran at Annamalai University; and Profs. Karthikeyan, Rajendran, and Susheela at Tamil Univeristy. Their wit and willingness to support a project that differed so dramatically from their own research brought joy to the struggle of language learning.

Although I drew intellectual and social support from Tamil University, I owe thanks to American College in Madurai for providing me with a research affiliation and to the American Institute of Indian Studies for helping to make the necessary arrangements. I thank the Wenner-Gren Foundation both for the funds that supported the bulk of this research and for the flexibility needed to accommodate delays in the visa application processing.

As I attempt to thank the members of my committee, I can say only that I hope my inability to make an adequate return gift will cause these relationships to endure. Working with Farina Mir made the challenge of South Asian history a delight. Conversations with Bruce Mannheim have transformed mundane details into delicious

mysteries. Webb Keane showed me what should be done with ethnographic detail and brought a sense of play to the process of interpretation. I continue to celebrate the luck that allowed me to work with Judith Irvine as an advisor. I thank her for what she has taught me about language as social action and for the models of mentorship and scholarly life that she provides.

To John Thiels, who knows what it means to come next in the list of acknowledgements, I owe more than can be said. Andy Conroe and Tam Perry introduced me to methods of hope and brought light to dark days and murky questions. This dissertation was improved by readings and discussions with members of the “non-gendered writing group”: David Akin, George Hoffman, Miranda Johnson, Lee Schlesinger, and Jennifer Solheim. They helped to transform what had become a chore back into a pleasure. I am also grateful to Lee Schlesinger—whose intellectual rigor is surpassed only by his kindness and enthusiasm—for building a community of South Asia scholars in Ann Arbor. My research and writing have benefitted immensely from interactions with members of the Kitabmandal. Frank Cody, Chandan Gowda, and Bhavani Raman in particular offered invaluable advice and warm hospitality. Nishaant Choksi, Punnu Jaitla, Hemanth Kadambi, Jane Lynch, and Sudipa Topdar provided other forms of fellowship and support.

Classes with Penelope Eckert, Kira Hall, Karen Hoppes, Miyako Inoue, Nita Kumar, Lesley Milroy, Ann Stoler, Sarah Thomason, Thomas Trautmann, and Katherine Verdery helped me to see what would otherwise have been invisible. Conversations with Anna Babel, Sepideh Bajracharya, Molly Callaghan, Katherine Chen, Sonia Das, Erika Hoffman-Dilloway, Eva-Marie Dubuisson, Paul Duffy, Susan Frecko, Ema Grama,

Randall Hicks, Mathew Hull, Simon Keeling, Jonathan Larson, Alaina Lemon, Michael Lempert, Barbra Meek, Barbara Metcalf, Josh Reno, Eric Rupley, and Karen Smid enriched my understanding of linguistics and anthropology, while bringing joy to life in Ann Arbor. Claire Insel, Bridget Guarasci, Sherina Feliciano-Santos, and Susanne Unger offered the warmth of friendship and feedback on chapters. Deborah Michales, Xochitl Ruiz, and Elana Busch provided solidarity that kept me writing. Christina Davis has been a sister in the study of Tamil and a fast friend throughout the research and writing process. I owe thanks to Emily Freeman and Claire Insel for help with copy-editing and to Awlok Josan for support during the final stage of revisions.

I thank Yasmeen Hanoosh, David Gamage, Neela Kale, Bridgit Offer, Tim Ruttan, and Allen Young for the friendships that made me who I am and for asking questions that keep me up at night. I celebrate my brother, Kevin Brown, for his distinctly un-anthropological insights on how to live in the world. This dissertation is dedicated to my parents: Robert Brown, who helped me to see patterns as beautiful, and Linda Brown, who pushed me to find possibilities for political transformation.

## Table of Contents

Dedication .....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
List of Figures .....	viii
List of Transcripts and Translated Material.....	ix
Notes on Transcription and Transliteration .....	x
Chapter 1: An Introduction to the Social World of <i>Maḥi Kaṭai</i> .....	1
Chapter 2: “Strangers Will See You Only as Profit”: Familiarity and Obligation in Shop Interactions.....	54
Chapter 3: The Space of the Shop and its Implications: Addressing the Possibility of Overhearing on Thanjavur’s Streets .....	114
Chapter 4: “You Have to Get up Early in the Morning”: Rhythms of Expectation in <i>Maḥi Kaṭai</i> conversations .....	162
Chapter 5: Shoplifting Responsibility for <i>Kaṭaṇ</i> : Blurred Participation Frameworks in Discussions of Credit/Debt .....	217
Chapter 6: Keeping Agents Accountable: Texts, Transparency, and Trust in Two Circuits of Commerce .....	277
Chapter 7: Tipping Scales with Tongues: How Money is made in <i>Maḥi Kaṭai</i> .....	343
Bibliography .....	356

## List of Figures

Figure 1. Shop with advertising signboard.....	42
Figure 2. The signboard for "Indian Store" a shop located in Vishnu's Lake .....	44
Figure 3. A crowd of regulars buying vegetables around noon in Vishnu's Lake.....	113
Figure 4. The table of vegetables for sale at Pushpa kaṭai, around 10am in July of 2008 .....	187
Figure 5. Sign placed in front of vegetable market on the day of the 2008 strike.....	188
Figure 6. Customers in line to buy kerosene at a ration shop, April 2007.....	340
Figure 7. Customers buying soda at a maḷi kaṭai in Vishnu's Lake, February 2007 .....	341
Figure 8. Francis, helps a customer to fill out an application form.....	342
Figure 9. The newest shop in King's Community, as of April 2007.....	355

## List of Transcripts and Translated Material

1. "I need to pray not to be human in my next birth" .....	1
2. "Chettiyar has died" .....	87
3. "Take My Mother-in-Law" .....	90
4. "I'll give you lemons at a discount, but you cannot buy mangoes" .....	101
5. "Spinach may go bad, but cilantro won't" .....	197
6. "My cycle tire is punctured" .....	204
7. Little Liccu (by Pillai).....	210
8. "Get it from him" .....	218
9. "My husband won't tell things to me" .....	235
10. "And now what?!" .....	251
11. "Don't give credit to my eldest daughter" .....	259
12. "Get it from him" Continued .....	272
13. An Unwritten Reminder of a Debt.....	304
14. Talk about whether or not to write a debt.....	310
15. "Tell me what I've bought" .....	316
16. At least this isn't a ration shop.....	333

## Notes on Transcription and Transliteration

In keeping with the conventions established by recent monographs in the Anthropology of Tamil-speaking places (Mines, 2002; Seizer, 2005; Bate, 2009; Pandian, 2009), I have used the system established in the Madras Tamil Lexicon (University of Madras, 1936; Burrow & Emeneau, 1961) for my transcriptions of recorded conversations, approximations of what was said in interviews, and Tamil terms. I have chosen to use this system both because it is already popular amongst historians and anthropologists and because, as compared to other systems, such as the International Scheme for Transcription (see Seizer, 2005), it offers Latin script representations that come relatively close to the ways in which words would be written in Tamil script. The primary feature that distinguishes the MTL from the IST and other systems that are likely to be familiar to scholars of South Asian languages, is the use of a single grapheme, for example *k*, to represent sounds that the IST and other systems represent using different Latin letters, for example *k*, *g*, *h*. For the sake of readability, I have used common Anglicization of proper names, place names, and other common South Asian words that are not likely to be classified as Tamil (I use *panchayat* as opposed to *pancayat*, for example).

As L. Ramamoorthy (p.c.), and others with whom I have discussed the problem of Tamil transliteration have observed, the *Madras Tamil Lexicon* (MTL) itself only gives

transliterations for words associated with written Tamil. Charles Ferguson (1959) identified Tamil as an emblematic example of a diglossic language, in which the “high” literary (or *centamiḷ*) forms commonly associated with writing differ markedly from the “low” spoken (or *koccaitamīḷ*) forms commonly associated with speech.<sup>1</sup> Beginning in the early 1960s, Tamil linguists have applied Ferguson’s concept of diglossia to the Tamil sociolinguistic situation (Zvelebil, 1959; Sundaram, 1981; Britto, 1986; Schiffman 1998; Karunakaran, 2000). Though useful in some respects, this model is problematic, as Tamil has multiple registers, so heteroglossia rather than diglossia seems a more appropriate characterization (Bakhtin, 1981 [1975]; Cody, 2007).

Although the prescriptive conventions of *centamiḷ*, or something approximating them, are taught in schools and reflected in the choice of words given by the MTL, it is not uncommon for Tamil speakers to use Tamil script to write in ways that more closely approximate speech. Much of what people say, and the ways in which they say it, cannot be represented within the confines of the lexicon itself. Drawing on an analogy with the ways in which dialogue is written in Tamil magazines and novels, Tamil speech can be represented using the MTL transliteration system.

While living in Thanjavur, I transcribed selected recordings with help from assistants, whom I refer to as *Gayathri* and *Sundar* in the text that follows. Although *Gayathri* and *Sundar* made initial rough transcripts of several texts independently, I found that the most helpful procedure was for them to repeat what was said in the

---

<sup>1</sup> Making the excuse that, as I explain in Chapter Two and six, questions of register, and even orthographic correctness, are rarely applied to the ways in which people write grocery lists or records of credit and debt, I will forgo lengthy discussion of diglossia.

recording word-by-word while watching me write a transliteration in Latin script with diacritics.<sup>2</sup> Despite its laborious pace, this process allowed me to seek clarification of what was being said and provided an immediate check for transcripts as I wrote them.

All translations provided in this dissertation are my own. However, K. Karunakaran and L. Ramamoorthy provided corrections and suggested alternate interpretations.

---

<sup>2</sup> Out of a fear of pricing local researchers out of the sort of aid that is usually given freely, I did not pay participants in this study for interviews, conversations, or similar sorts of interactions that might occur in something resembling everyday life. I insisted on paying my friends and interlocutors for lodging and regularly provided meals, which fell into the categories of things one might normally pay for. I also insisted on paying for aid with transcription, which felt like real work and was unlikely to be required by scholars based at or funded by Indian institutions. I attempted to use gifts, purchases at shops, and payments for services that were considered purchasable to make up for other sorts of trouble that I caused and aid that I required in the course of research.

## Chapter 1:

### An Introduction to the Social World of *Maḥi Kaṭai*

#### 1. “I need to pray not to be human in my next birth”

*This exchange occurs at Pushpa kaṭai around 5 pm on July 5, 2008*

*Pushpa:* The female shopkeeper at *Pushpa kaṭai*

*Aḷaki:* A woman about *Pushpa*’s age who comes to the shop at about this time every night

*Muttu Lakshmi:* *Aḷaki*’s neighbor, she also comes to the shop at about this time every night.

1. <i>Pushpa:</i> aṭutta piraviyē maṇita piraviyē vēṇṭām-ṇu vēṇṭikkaṇum	1. <i>Pushpa:</i> “For my next birth I don’t want a human birth” I should pray (like that)
2. <i>Aḷaki:</i> aiyō aiyayō	2. <i>Aḷaki:</i> Oh god, oh god [This is a sympathetic exclamation of frustration, more weary than enthusiastic]
3. <i>Pushpa:</i> atutāṇē	3. <i>Pushpa:</i> Just like that [She agrees with <i>Aḷaki</i> ’s exclamation]
4. <i>Aḷaki:</i> (laughs) cāntōcamē valḷaiyā iruntā eṇṇa avāratu? iṇṇakki-tāṇ (unclear)	4. <i>Aḷaki:</i> If we’re always living a happy life, what then? Today only isn’t going well [She’s trying to be comforting]
5. <i>Muttu Lakshmi:</i> pōṇṇā(l) pirantāle caṅkaṭam-tāṇ pō!	5. <i>Muttu Lakshmi:</i> Get out! (scolding <i>Aḷaki</i> in a joking way) For those born as women there will only be problems.

This exchange occurred on a warm July evening at a small grocery shop or, *maḥi kaṭai*,

located on the edge of the city of Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu. The shop, which I call *Pushpa*

*kaṭai*, consisted of a section of a four room house—three walls and an open face that was divided from the street by a counter and a concrete step. Vegetables and snacks were displayed on a stand to the side of the shop, while other items being sold were stored within it. *Pushpa*, who spent the late mornings and early evenings working in the shop, which was owned and run by her husband, makes her comment about preferences for her next birth as she measures out the rice bran and husk that *Aḷaki* and *Muttu Lakshmi* have requested.<sup>3</sup> *Aḷaki* chimes in with an exclamation of exhaustion, expressing agreement with *Pushpa*'s feelings. *Pushpa* affirms her sense of their shared misery, and *Aḷaki* responds with a suggestion that happiness alone wouldn't be interesting. Her reply seems to be an attempt at comfort, but *Muttu Lakshmi* joins the chorus of complaint by suggesting that trouble is not the result of being born as humans, but the result of being born as women. The interaction ends shortly after this stretch of conversation as the customers rush off to feed their cows and *Pushpa* shifts to helping the next group of customers.

### *Questions to Ask of Shopping Interactions*

Because it is not explicitly about prices, products, or credit, this conversation between *Pushpa* and her customers is different from those that usually appear in ethnographic accounts of shopping. If I had asked them about it directly, it is likely that *Pushpa* and her interlocutors would have described their talk as *cuma* – as “just because,” “of no purpose,” or “meaningless.” Yet, despite such dismissals, participants in this and similar conversations assigned a great deal of importance to such seemingly idle talk and

---

<sup>3</sup> Like all other names of people mentioned in this dissertation, *Pushpa*, *Aḷaki*, and *Muttu Lakshmi* are pseudonyms.

recognized it as a critical component of commercial transactions. Viewed out of context, this conversation can be classified as an instance of complaint, solidarity building, or a critique of gender roles. Although it does all of these things, I argue that this conversation and others like it, which are typical of interactions in small *mafi kaṭai*, should also be understood as doing the work of shopping and commercial exchange. As I explain in detail below, this conversation demonstrates a great deal of the situation in which the women gathered at the shop found themselves. Yet I will argue that, rather than simply commenting on the difficulties faced by the shopkeeper and her customers, this conversation can be understood as part of an attempt to adapt to or ameliorate them. This dissertation is about the ways in which interactions such as this one play a part in the life in the city of Thanjavur and in the lives of its residents.

Scholarly accounts of shops and shopping have tended to focus on relatively rare commercial encounters: those between strangers, which participants treat as marked events rather than on everyday acts of provisioning (Miller, 1998, 2001). Yet routine commercial transactions pose a distinctive set of questions. Repeated encounters, ongoing relationships, and the ability to dismiss activities as “normal” depend on assumptions and produce possibilities that are unlikely to be found in isolated exchanges between relative strangers. This dissertation attempts to understand how *mafi kaṭai* shopkeepers and their interlocutors deal with the problems and possibilities produced by routine exchange between people who have multiple ways of knowing and relating to each other.

I propose that attention to talk and other semiotic activities in face-to-face interaction is critical to understanding how and why participants in *mafi kaṭai*

transactions are able to overcome, ignore, or treat as irrelevant many of the risks and suspicions that are commonly associated with commercial trade. My project centers on investigations of language ideologies, on discursive practices that reveal the social embedding of language, and the ways in which political and moral interests work to produce them. I attend to the ways in which metapragmatic frames, discourses that guide interpretations of semiotic activities (Silverstein 2003; Keane 2008), shape the definition of interactions surrounding small shops and the possibilities experienced by participants. This mode of interpretation allows me to connect practices that constitute provision shopping, such as details of talk, writing, dress, movement, and monetary exchange, as well as to other scales and domains of social life.

I approach these questions by chronicling the ways in which forms of talk, and the expectations that regiment these forms, participate in making money, in both the idiomatic and deeper anthropological sense. By examining talk in face-to-face interactions, the frameworks that govern talk's assessment, understandings of what it means to be a speaking subject, and the broader possibilities that these understandings allow, I map the ways in which social ties and expectations differentiate domains of exchange in present day South India. Yet before I can explain these relationships and how I went about studying them, I think that it would be useful to say a bit more about where the fragment of conversation with which I opened this chapter occurred and why I chose to start with it.

### *Context and Interpretation in a Mundane Shopping Interaction*

Roadsides in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, like other small Indian cities, bloom with small grocery shops known as *maḷi kaṭṭai* (*maḷikai kaṭṭai* as written), where goods, advertisements, and news from distant locations mix with products and persons who spend most of their time within a single neighborhood. My study is anchored on the north-western edge of Thanjavur in three semi-distinct areas, which I refer to as neighborhoods. I focus on interactions and transactions carried out in and around three such shops: one located in a relatively wealthy area near the center of town (*King's Community*), one located in a more recently built, economically mixed area that was technically outside of the city and part of an adjoining *panchayat* union (*Vishnu's Lake*), and one located in a recently built area on the border between the same *panchayat* union and areas classified as parts of a village (*Pushpa Nagar*).<sup>4</sup> My title locates this dissertation “on the edge of Thanjavur, India” because much of the action that I describe takes place outside of the administrative boundaries of the city. More importantly, many of these interactions explicitly address the nature of the city, its boundaries, and the implications of these divisions in everyday life. As I explain in later chapters, situating my study at the edge of the city, and in areas that had been recently built, allowed me to ethnographically examine the ways in which study participants strove to become familiar with each other, create and come to terms with the place in which they lived, and interpret it in relation to other kinds of spaces.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> *Panchayats* are governing bodies made up of elected officials whose scope and responsibilities are roughly similar to those assigned to city councils in the United States.

<sup>5</sup> Because similar conversations took place in both the older and newer sections of my study area, I suspect that they took place in shops throughout Thanjavur and similar cities. However, interactions that sought to discover more about who people were, particularly inquiries about diet that seemed targeted towards confirming caste affiliation, seemed to occur with greater frequency and intensity around the recently opened shop in *Pushpa Nagar*.

As on most evenings, *Pushpa kaṭai* was subject to a heavy flow of traffic, as neighborhood residents scrambled to buy provisions for evening meals, feed for cattle, and other incidental necessities of daily life before children and (mostly male) family members who worked outside the household returned to demand them. Yet the female residents of the neighborhood that I call *Pushpa Nagar* were more exhausted than usual on that evening. Water was not flowing in many of the area pumps, and the fence surrounding the irrigation source for a nearby rice field, where many area residents surreptitiously bathed or washed clothing, had been strengthened by its owner. Although men sometimes helped using bikes or motorcycles, the task of getting water in the mornings usually fell to women, many of whom had been forced to get up earlier than usual that morning to haul water for bathing, washing, and other household chores. Adding to that stress was a new and unpredictable schedule of daily power cuts, which cut off water supplies to residents with private wells and pumps, forced those at home to endure the heat of the day without electric fans, and delayed chores, such as preparing food with electric grinders.

July fifth had also been a particularly stressful day for *Pushpa*, who suffered from an ongoing cough and had been growing noticeably thinner—as many visitors to the shop continually pointed out. She too had to get water in the morning, to contend with power cuts throughout the day, and to prepare that evening’s tea and snacks for her husband and daughters: all while keeping the shop running.<sup>6</sup> She had recently injured her leg while trying to catch her youngest daughter as she played in the street, and she limped

---

<sup>6</sup> On this and other days when I carried out observations, *Pushpa* also prepared tea for me. The nature of her offer and of our relationship changed during the course of my fieldwork (initially she didn’t offer me any tea, she then shifted to giving it to me on the steps, and finally to insisting that I come inside and drink it – in part, I think, because her youngest daughter refused to come inside and drink unless I did too.)

noticeably as she went to get the cattle feed that was stored in the front entrance to her house. *Pushpa* refused my insistence that she should go and see a doctor, explaining that the combined demands of waking her husband at four am to send him to the wholesale vegetable market, preparing food in the morning, keeping the shop through the middle of the day, doing household chores, and preparing the evening meal for seven days each week left her no time at which she might be absent.<sup>7</sup> Although she was as quick as ever in helping customers and rarely complained so openly, *Pushpa's* pain and fatigue showed on her face and were commented on, along with her rapid weight loss, by other women and some male neighbors who visited the shop.

To make matters worse, these other stresses were present at the most potentially contentious time of the month. Customers often bought goods on credit and promised to pay the shopkeepers back when they received salaries or pensions, usually around the first of the month. If by this time they had not paid, reminders, explanations, and negotiations might be required. The day's work had called for many tense encounters with customers in which *Pushpa* and her husband asked for payments that they might have found difficult to give. Customers who bought on credit, many of whom were also friends and most of whom were neighbors, needed to be cajoled and reminded gently. If they were annoyed or threatened by anything that the shopkeepers said or did, customers might take their business elsewhere, perhaps to one of the five other shops located within a short walk of *Pushpa kaṭai*. Their anger and abandonment would be an emotional

---

<sup>7</sup> Although I volunteered to take her to a doctor who I knew who wouldn't charge us (she was a friend of a friend), concerns about possible fees might have been part of what deterred *Pushpa* from seeking attention for her injury, which seemed to take a long time to heal. Yet I think it's also plausible that she really couldn't find the time to go to the doctor, especially since she would probably want to be brought by her husband, which would require closing the shop.

blow: *Pushpa*'s family still spoke of two households in the area that had stopped doing business with them, in whispers which were both angry and sad. Also, the loss of an account would add to the financial stress that *Pushpa*'s family already felt acutely. They had spent the last two years struggling to build a customer base at this tiny shop located in a recently build up area, once an unincorporated edge of the city. Quarrels with relatives two years earlier had forced them out of a much larger shop, which was owned by *Karthikeyan*'s brother and operated near the wholesale market at the center of town.<sup>8</sup> Loss of this larger shop, a popular location, and long-standing customers caused what *Pushpa* felt was an irrevocable shift in her family's financial and social standing. Her daughters had been switched from prestigious English medium school to a Tamil medium school, which consistently narrowed their future prospects for employment and education. They now lived in a much smaller house and were able to afford far fewer toys, new clothes, or other consumer goods than they had in the past. Yet, as owners of

---

<sup>8</sup> Although *Pushpa*'s and her husband reported that were making an income of around Rs 6,000 per month (approximately \$140 US dollars at the time when the conversation was recorded), owned their house, and were able to keep a standard of living similar to many of their neighbors, they were acutely conscious of financial loss and the precariousness of their situation. *Pushpa* frequently lamented that loss of their larger shop and old customer base had forced them to switch their two older daughters from English-medium to Tamil-medium school. This shift required a significant social adjustment for the girls, a long and awkward commute from the center of town along a road on which unsavory events, such as chain snatching and harassment, were occasionally reported. Most importantly, since valued university degrees, jobs, and travel outside of Tamil Nadu were seen as requiring proficiency in English (no one in the family spoke Hindi and no-one seemed to care), the shift was seen as dramatically decreasing the girls' future prospects. The youngest daughter, who was in kindergarten when the family had been forced to move, was kept in English medium school until first grade, in the hope that she might learn to write and speak a little. After that, she was moved into the same school as her sisters.

*Pushpa*, who wrote beautifully in English, although she was shy to speak it around me, seemed to be particularly depressed about this change, which seemed to mirror her own crushed hopes. She had earned a Bachelor's degree in technology and had clearly once hoped to pursue work in a technological field. It was never clear to me how she had come to marry *Karthikeyan*, who had a 10<sup>th</sup> grade education at a Tamil medium school and had never done any other kind of work. It was clear that she had once hoped to do something else with her life and resented the fact that she now spent exhausting days in an unending rotation of the same fading saris doing housework and minding a shop on a dusty street bordered by recently built houses, rice, and sugar cane fields. *Pushpa* seemed to particularly enjoy my work at her shop because it allowed her to participate in post-graduate research – something that I suspect she had longed to do in a more direct way.

their house and a relatively successful business, *Pushpa* and her family occupied a status and financial standing that was similar to or better than that of many of their neighbors and customers.<sup>9</sup>

This conversational excerpt was initially identified as significant by *Gayathri*, the patient friend and research consultant who helped me to do rough transcriptions of selected recordings by slowly repeating what had been said and by using her knowledge as a former shop-clerk and life-long area resident to provide commentary on what people meant, what was happening, and why. She heard this exchange when I accidentally rewound a recording a bit too far, laughed aloud several times in agreement with *Muttu Lakshmi's* statement, and insisted that I should transcribe this exchange and put it in my dissertation.

I was much more interested in transcribing a later interaction, in which *Pushpa* responded to a customer's complaints about the increasing price that the shop was charging for vegetables by connecting her business to a rise in petrol prices, which had increased transportation costs and inflated prices at the vegetable wholesale market. The idiom of "next births" was strange to me; in fact, I didn't quite understand what was being said while listening-in, although the character of the interaction was generally familiar. It had many of the same qualities of two friends at the University of Michigan winking at or high-fiving one another as they scurried between classes or other kinds of work. Yet, although it resembles a kind of joking and support that may occur in many

---

<sup>9</sup> As well as bringing her household's already acute sense of financial precariousness into focus, the need to call in payment of debts from customers exacerbated tensions between *Pushpa* and *Karthikeyan*, who had different sense of how urgently payment should be called for, as well as how and when. *Karthikeyan*, who *Pushpa* described as born into the business of shop-keeping and as having worked in his family's shop since he was a small child, despite attending school through grade 10, had a knack for remaining calm, cajoling customers into buying a bit more, and laughing through difficult situations.

times and places, I also think that the above interaction helps to illustrate a particular kind of gendered solidarity that was frequently deployed as a means of explanation and dispute resolution in *Pushpa kaṭai*.<sup>10</sup>

I initially agreed to transcribe this passage out of deference to *Gayathri*, whose advice on many topics had proved invaluable during the 21 months from 2005-2008 that I spent living with members of her family. At the time, I assumed that she was simply growing tired of listening to conversations that erupted into arguments and confusion, which I recorded often, both because I assumed that tension was a sign of significance and because raised voices made participants' speech easier to hear over the constant din of motorbikes, birds, sweeping brooms, and children's play that muffled talk on the street. As well as appreciating the humor of this exchange, I assumed that *Gayathri* was eager to ensure that I documented an interaction in which customers and shopkeepers cooperated with and showed concern for one another.

Yet *Gayathri's* insistence that I record this bit of friendly banter, which is much more typical of interactions in Thanjavur's small grocery shops, points towards a much more significant conclusion. Rather than the overtly adversarial exchanges that I expected to record, this segment of talk comes much closer to the kinds of speech that shopkeepers, suppliers, and customers described as necessary to do business. Members of all three of these groups, but especially shopkeepers, suggested that building, confirming, and maintaining relationships through this sort of talk was the substance of commercial exchange. While some of their statements came fairly close to the cliché insistence on the importance of providing "service with a smile," their explanations of

---

<sup>10</sup> I discuss this at length in Chapter Five.

how such talk could be used to build and classify relationships, to establish shops as particular kinds of places, to coordinate rhythms of activity, and to distribute responsibility, reveal a great deal about how transactions worked for shopkeepers and their customers. Rather than simply commenting on relationships, commercial domains, or on social and political stances, this talk worked to constitute and enable them.

### *How Do People Make Money in Small Grocery Shops?*

Economists and other social scientists describe small shopkeepers who depend on routine business as facing a “trader’s dilemma,” in which obligations to share wealth with friends and neighbors frequently conflict with the need to obey market forces and to make immediate profits (Evers & Schrader, 1994; Van der Grijp, 2002). This study was initially framed as an answer to the question of how participants in interactions surrounding small grocery shops respond to the challenges raised by the “trader’s dilemma”—particularly situations in which the need to make a profit or exercise thrift potentially conflicted with the need to appear generous and cooperative enough to maintain relationships. Yet a significant part of my answer lies in suggesting reasons why the conflicts that this model assumes—between profits and relationships, short-term success and long-term stability, markets and other modes of exchange—are not particularly significant, salient, or necessary parts of *mafi kaṭai* interactions.

The trader’s dilemma is a useful framing device because it addresses concerns and arguments that were directly raised, debated, and worried about by study participants. Many shopkeepers, customers, and wholesale traders were intensely interested in the question of what privileges, prices, and protections were due to friends, neighbors, and

family members when they approached each other as buyer and seller.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, as I explain below, the trader's dilemma succinctly embodies many of the questions that anthropologists, policy makers, and others who attempt to understand or regulate trade in India, have asked about commerce. It highlights the question of how commerce is framed, located, and understood in relation to other aspects of social life. Yet I use it as a question rather than as an analytic model. It is, as Bill Maurer says of money itself, a McGuffin device—a literary mechanism that drives the plot and captures the attention of characters but which is ultimately a prod towards other kinds of motion (Maurer 2005). My aim here is to ask how participants in interactions respond to and manage potential conflicts in ongoing commercial transactions, without assuming that the particular problems posed by the trader's dilemma are natural, universal, or even particularly real. By raising questions about expectations, interpretations, and credibility—even in situations where participants view the answers to these questions as obvious—I hope to expose connections between linguistic, fiduciary, and social forms of value and evaluation.

### *The Semiotics of Commercial Circulation*

By drawing on observations of face-to-face interactions in small grocery shops, examining their depictions of other domains, and tracing the ways in which these encounters are linked to actions and actors that are located elsewhere, I seek to explain how linguistic, commercial and other forms of value are produced and related. Viviana

---

<sup>11</sup> For reasons that should become clearer in Chapter Three, vegetable wholesalers tended to experience the problems raised by the trader's dilemma more acutely than *mafi kaṭai* owners. In the course of our first interview, *Ajith*, who worked as a tomato trader in the wholesale vegetable market, explicitly raised this question before I had a chance to ask it, and answered it at a length and with passion that suggested that, after 10 years in the business, he still had difficulty getting relatives to accept his views.

Zelizer (2004) argues that instead of classifying transactions as belonging to naturalized domains, such as households or markets, analysts should consider the ways in which people actively work to produce and maintain differentiated ties across multiple domains of activity. This dissertation traces the production of these domains, which she refers to as “circuits of commerce,” through multiple scales and types of activity. Investigating the relation between spoken interactions, commercial transactions, and other modes of exchange—the semiotic production of markets—in terms of circuits of commerce allows me to avoid some of the categorical assumptions that have tended to plague studies of markets and money.

Scholarly accounts of commercial trade have tended to draw on models that treat commerce as a relatively uniform, abstract, and internally undifferentiated practice. Such unified accounts have tended to draw on one of two models to explain the impact of money and commercial trade: social dissolution and social embedding. The dissolution model, characteristic of critiques of capitalism, depicts money, commercial trade, and markets as a sort of social acid that dissolves other kinds of ties and produces antagonistic relations (Taussig, 1980; Smith, 1998). The embedding models focuses on undoing the first by concluding that money, markets, and trade must be understood as situated within and part of other forms of social life. While the introduction of, or shift to different forms in, money and markets may certainly lead to very real social problems and changes, accounts that connect trade to the dissolution of social ties tend to overlook the ways in which commercial trade itself may be a differentiated and socially situated practice.

The assumption that trade in money can have a single and definable relationship with other aspects of social life draws on an ideological separation between commerce and other forms of sociality and exchange. As Viviana Zelizer (1994, 2005) notes, American law, social life, and academic analysis have a historically rooted tendency to treat commercial trade as naturally separate from and potentially hostile to other aspects of social life. Anthropologists seem to import these hostile worlds assumptions, which may be understood as socially and historically rooted in particular strands of Protestantism (see Shell, 1982), into their default model of commercial transactions.<sup>12</sup> As I explain in Chapter Two, the assumption that most commercial encounters in which prices are not fixed will involve overt haggling and that exchange without money must take the form of overt barter (Thomas, 1992; Humphrey, 2002) seem to draw implicitly on the assumed incommensurability between money and other forms of social life. I am careful to introduce my use of the trader's dilemma as a question, rather than a model that explains shopping interactions, precisely because it assumes this sort of division.

Stories of *The Great Transformation* (Polanyi, 1944) or great transformations, in which the introduction of market trade or shifts to new forms of commercial trade relations lead to greater abstraction and disembedding, are a diachronic projection of the "hostile worlds" model of commerce. As Paul Alexander (Dilley, 1992) notes, the

---

<sup>12</sup> The classic anthropological "coinages" of money, markets, and commodities (see Mauss' s 1990 [1925] book *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*), like those popular amongst economists (see McCloskey, D. N.'s 2002 book *The Secret Sins of Economics*) define commercial trade as a realm of potentially rational action that is disembedded from social relations and even as hostile to and potentially disruptive of other modes of social life. They also tend to depict commercial trade as a uniform and universally identifiable practice that depends on abstraction and produces hostile or morally negative results. Although the "hostile worlds" model of money and sociality has been applied to most societies, the extent to which it is relevant in and applicable to South Asia has been debated (see Parry, J. P., 1986, 1994). I avoid taking up this question directly because, although it is a powerful and significant ideology, I doubt that the incommensurability of commercial exchange with other modes of sociality is useful for understanding social life anywhere.

narrative of the great transformation and its association with other stories of modernity is pervasive enough that attention to face-to-face talk as a significant site in commercial interaction has a tendency to exoticize and even primitivize its object of study.

Alexander observes that studies of markets, trade, and finance often assume a dichotomy between “peasant markets,” in which commodities are seldom standardized, objects are not pre-packaged, overhead costs are not calculated, traders do not keep written accounts, vendors do not overtly compete to make sales, and prices are seldom marked, and what is usually described as a “modern” or “Western” market economy (Alexander, 1992, p. 80). This dichotomy and the assumed story of modernization—in which markets shift from face-to-face relations towards increasingly alienated, impersonal, abstract, and institutionalized forms of trade—persists as common feature of anthropological accounts of money and markets (LiPuma & Lee, 2004).

I address the great transformation narrative explicitly only in order to reject it as an interpretive framework. At first glance, the *mafi kaṭai* shops in this study have a great deal in common with the ways in which anthropologists and others usually describe trade in a “bazaar” or “peasant” economy. They make at least 30% of their profits by selling vegetables that they buy from relatively small-scale traders who have direct, often multi-generational, ties to particular farmers. Some of the goods sold in these shops are prepared by shopkeepers’ family members: *Pushpa kaṭai* sold peanut sweets made by one of *Karthikeyan*’s brothers and pre-made batters prepared by one of his cousins. Customers occasionally make in-kind payments to shops with vegetables or other products from their fields and gardens. Most small *mafi kaṭai* are run by their owners and owners’ family members, and many of them are operated out of people’s houses.

Shopkeepers do not pay taxes and keep relatively few written accounts of their trade. Shops are plagued by frequent power cuts, cows and goats that attempt to steal vegetables from display shelves, and other technological and logistical problems that may easily be taken as signs of non-modernity.

Although they are usually described as chronicles of liberalization, stories of social disembedding and radical disruption that echo the “great transformation” narratives have become a dominant lens through which economists and policy makers view changes in Indian society (see Bijapurkar, 2007; Jaya Halepete, 2008).<sup>13</sup> As I explain in Chapter Three, between 2005-08 the introduction of large grocery stores, such as those that were opened by the Reliance corporation, was hailed both as a sign of India’s transition to modernity and as a possible threat to contemporary modes of shopping. At the same time, small shops, like those described in this study, were often depicted as symptoms of economic backwardness and deficiency.

A 2006 article in *The Economist* displays attitudes typical of this period. It begins with a joke told by Dilip Modi, the CEO of an India telecommunications company, which aligns the popularity of small shops with India’s failure in global competition: “Why are Indians better at cricket than at soccer? ... Because every time you award an Indian a corner, he opens a shop” (p. 76). The same article ends with comments from an official at the Indian Ministry of Commerce and from an expert business consultant, which

---

<sup>13</sup> Concerns with the relationship between commerce and sociality are not unique to liberalization narratives. As Ritu Birla notes in a history of Indian economic law and practice (2009), clear delineation between “local” forms of trade, which were assumed to be embedded in kinship and other private networks, and more “global” spheres of commerce, which could be understood as purged of these relations, was one of the chief aims of colonial economic policy in India. She describes British colonial law as attempting to denigrate forms of trade that drew on social connections, while privileging commercial relations that could appear to be separated from other forms of sociality. Contemporary discussions of commerce in India echo many of the same distinctions, predictions, and fears.

suggest that Indian consumers can, should, and will abandon the confines of the “cramped little shop” in favor of transactions conducted at a large “hypermarket” similar to Wal-Mart (Economist 2006). I refuse such narratives of great transformation or other models that depend on hard separations between intimate and commercial spheres as useful analytical models for understanding commerce in Thanjavur. However, these ideologies, which imagine fully abstract or purely commercial relations as a likely or possible end to social transformation, do inform the ways in which commerce was practiced and governed by some people in Thanjavur. In interviews, product distribution agents and wealthier shoppers sometimes echoed these assumptions and suggested that small shops should be understood as relics of an earlier economic or social order that would soon disappear.

Yet the fact that the differences between kinds of shops and forms of commerce were understood—even by some of their users—in terms of a shift from traditional to modern or from concrete and embedded to abstract and impersonal does not mean that these differences result from a real transformation. As I argue at length in Chapter Six, these models of difference served to enable, enact, and, perhaps, even preserve existing differences between circuits of commerce. Understandings of difference enable shopkeepers to accomplish various forms of differentiation and associated productions of value. Despite resemblances to their historical and more marginal counterparts, the shops described in this study are and should be understood as nodes in complex, multi-national,

and contemporary networks of trade—what others might call the “modern” or “Western” “global economy.”<sup>14</sup>

Because part of my argument is that economies are not singular or unified entities, I do my best to avoid bounding or naming a singular economy in which the shops described in this study participate. However, as measured by changes in the value of the currency that they use, the products they sell, the shifting popularity of cartoon characters on children’s snack foods that they stock, and the events that affect their prices, the shops described in this study are clearly connected to globally dominant systems of exchange and circulation.<sup>15</sup> Although my aim is to examine the ways in which face-to-face interactions, interpretive frameworks, and expectations about transactions produce distinctions between markets within the parts of Thanjavur in which I collected ethnographic material, these shops are nestled in networks of trade that extend far beyond the scope of this study.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> I dislike all three of these terms: “modern” because it enforces and naturalized the same teleology that I hope to question and avoid; “Western” because it erases the extent to which far-reaching networks of trade have deep historical roots in the places that are usually described as “Eastern” (people living in Thanjavur and other parts of what is now India were engaged in trade with people outside of South Asia long before the East India Company and other European traders became a powerful force in the region); and “Global” because it erases the extent to which some people and regions of the globe may remain relatively disconnected from and marginal with respect to these networks.

<sup>15</sup> These are the same systems that funded and produced this dissertation.

<sup>16</sup> As their attached UPC stickers announced, many of the apples sold where this study was conducted were grown near my parents’ home in Washington State. At the time of my study, children in both areas seem to have lost interest in Pokemon and whined feverishly for cookies and candy that featured images of Dora the Explorer. Many of the products sold in the *mafi kaṭai* on which I focus—Johnson and Johnson’s baby soap, Coca-Cola, Maggie Noodles, and Glade air freshener to name a few—were produced and distributed by widely known multi-national companies. Although their commercials were usually dubbed into Tamil and frequently designed for the South Asian market, some of the same adds that ran on Sun TV and other Tamil channels were playing on televisions in the USA when I returned.

The story that I tell is not one of alienation, increasing, abstraction, or social disembedding. I attempt to attend to the ways in which things changed during my stay in Thanjavur, to situate the stories that I tell in relation to longer histories, and to suggest future possibilities. However, more importantly, I hope to demonstrate that, rather than representing relics of an imagined pre-industrial past, face-to-face talk and associated forms of practice, are critical to allowing *maḥi kaṭai* to work and even flourish in a system of complex multi-national commercial trade. In recent decades, anthropologists working on markets and money have worked to provincialize, locate, and limit that assumption that commerce is hostile to other forms of sociality (Parry & Bloch, 1989; Akin et al., 1999; Lee & LiPuma, 2002; Akin, 2005). However, as Keith Hart (2000; 2007) observes, the conclusion that commerce and money are parts of social life, rather than an acid that dissolves it, has also become a cliché in economic anthropology.<sup>17</sup>

Examination of the specific forms, practices, and expectations that differentiate ties and domains within commercial systems, as well as beyond them—what might be called the metapragmatics of commerce—has become a particularly fruitful topic in economic anthropology (Maurer, 2005; Miyazaki, 2005; Maurer, 2006; Miyazaki, 2006; Zaloom, 2006; Keane, 2008; Peebles, 2008; Ho, 2009). Rather than simply pointing out that commerce, debt, and money are part and products of social life, these studies examine the ways in which specific practices and evaluative frameworks work to produce

---

<sup>17</sup> However, I do think that it may be worth asking why, given that this conclusion has been reached fairly consistently for over a century, anthropologists continue to be delighted by studies that undue the abstraction of money. While the scope of this question is certainly beyond my project, I do think my conclusion—that metapragmatic frames that differentiate between kinds of exchanges and relationships are critical to how commercial transactions work and are understood—might have something to do with it. The same semiotic logics of inside/outside, familiar/strange, and material/abstract that anthropologists tend to apply to “commerce” as a unified whole are also at play within most commercial transactions.

them. In keeping with that line of inquiry, I seek to examine the differentiated ties, domains, and metapragmatic frames that are produced within, through, and by commercial transactions. I contribute to this discussion by examining the ways in which commercial models are projected, produced, and modified through specific instances of face-to-face interaction and conversation, as well as through the transactions that they enable.

### *Language Ideologies and Political Economy*

Questions of how forms of money and commerce are practiced, differentiated, and enabled demand examination of the relationships between linguistic, fiduciary, and other modes of value. Money and words are frequently compared as emblematic cases in discussions of the source and nature of value (Graeber, 2001). They have been described as sharing characteristics: as abstract, arbitrary, and substitutable signs (Simmel, 1978 [1900]), as material components of the systems in which they participate (see (Bakhtin, 1981 [1975]; Stewart, 1983) and as sites for false consciousness or mystification, in which processes that occur elsewhere are mistaken for properties of objects (Saussure, 1916 [1966]; Marx, 1978). Money and words are often employed, implicitly or explicitly, as explanatory models for each other. For example, work on evaluations of styles and codes frequently employs the metaphor of markets (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu, 1991; Eckert, 1996; Eckert, 2000). Yet, as most of these studies acknowledge, the relationship between words and money is deeper than one of accidental resemblance. Although the modes, means, and substances through which they move can

be distinguished, words and money, or language and debts – to take a less itemizing view—frequently share or co-construct systems of circulation.

This project draws on work in linguistic anthropology, and related fields, which investigate the role of linguistic forms and practices in political and economic relations (see Gal, 1987; Fairclough, 1989; Freidrich, 1989; Irvine, 1989; Fairclough, 2000; Gupta, 2001). Much of the recent work on language ideologies—on discursive practices that reveal the social embedding and participation of language—has attended to the ways in which understandings of language and evaluations of linguistic varieties participate in political and economic systems and transformations (Gal & Irvine, 1995; Fenigsen, 1999; Irvine, 2001; Inoue, 2002; Silverstein, 2003; Jacobs-Huey, 2006). Rather than simply situating language use within political economic context, scholars working on language ideologies have demonstrated that characterizations and interpretations of language use operate as part of political and economic processes. As Judith Irvine (1989) has convincingly argued, linguistic and fiduciary exchanges are part of the same systems of circulation.

Ethnographic accounts and everyday life are replete with situations in which speech and money may be substituted or exchanged. Indeed most instances of linguistic evaluation, standardization, and regimentation have implications for economic circulation. Although exchanges in money and words are connected in all contexts where money is present, trade and shopping offer particularly clear vantage points from which to examine their relation. As Bill Maurer (2005) explains, trade is an emblematic site for the examination of situations of adequation (Gell, 1998; Keane, 2003). Evaluations of discursive practices—ranging from assignments of social place to differentiated codes

and styles, definition of speech as service or commodity, and constitution of talk as a ground for economic relations—require the relation and adequation of linguistic and commercial exchange. I contribute to studies of language ideologies and political economy through a direct examination of situations in which the substitutability, and so the equivalence, of speech, money, and the movement of objects in time is directly at issue. By examining conversations in shops, I seek to answer questions of how much speech can be worth, what alters its value, and how its value can be made to endure or decay in later transactions or interactions. I trace specific ways in which linguistic exchanges—in the form of conversation, overhearing, and writing—serve to guide, produce, and substitute for the movement of objects and money in commercial transactions.

The title of this dissertation, “Tipping Scales With Talk,” highlights the emblematic moment of valuation and evaluation in *mafi ka tai* interactions—the point at which vegetables are weighed and so equated with a particular price—that is usually assigned to fractions of a kilo. This is also the moment when a shopkeeper might choose to appear generous by adding a little bit extra (*koceru*), when a customer might demand that more be added, or when objects are equated with money, with debts, or with words through the process of payment. Although, in practice, goods bought in the shops that I studied were rarely weighed with a degree of precision that was likely to make the accuracy of scales an issue, tampering with and modifying weights were frequently mentioned as activities that might constitute cheating. I seek to examine the ways in which spoken interactions and written texts participated in these and other moments of

adequation: the extent to which words could be substituted for things and single interactions could cover or modify ongoing transactions.<sup>18</sup>

Although part of my aim is to ask how words might be traded for money and other kinds of things, answering these questions requires attention to the spatial, temporal, and social contexts in which transactions occur. Many of Bourdieu's observations about the relationship between trust, knowledge, and markets in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Bourdieu 1977) apply to the interactions and transactions that I observed in Thanjavur. His description of the rules and expectations that govern transactions with strangers, as opposed to kin and other practical relationships, such as those with friends and well-known shop owners, are strikingly similar to those that I associate with "event" and "everyday" shopping in Thanjavur. Like many of my interlocutors, he describes attempts to expand kinship and kin-like relationships as a strategy through which people build the scaffold of trust that provides critical support for a variety of business transactions. For example, he explains:

...old informants will talk endlessly of the tricks and frauds which are common practice in the "big markets", that is to say, exchange between strangers... But in most transactions the notions of buyer and seller tend to be dissolved in the network of middlemen and guarantors designed to transform the purely economic relationship between supply and demand into a genealogically based and genealogically guaranteed relationship. (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 174)

Bourdieu's observation of how transactions work makes a point that is often overlooked in studies of talk in markets (see Kapchan, 1996; Seligmann, 2004), and even in other

---

<sup>18</sup> As I explain in Chapters Two, Four, and Six, adequation was much more than a momentary act. It was also accomplished the projection and comparison of possible future actions and outcomes. Temporal gaps between the arrival and enactments of the words, things, and possibilities that participants in shopping encounters hoped to adequate provided one of the primary means through which words and things might be substitutable.

parts of his own work: commercial trade frequently requires the creation, delineation, and maintenance of relationships. Although talk and other forms of exchange that build relationships can be understood as part of the labor of commerce (Elyachar 2010), participation in trade need not be understood as an end in itself. For example, in an ethnographic study of a Crofter community in the Shetland Islands, Erving Goffman (1953) found that shoppers were careful to distribute business in ways that avoided giving offense to neighbors. Similarly, in my own research, I found many instances in which people said that they went shopping in order to have an excuse to talk.

### *Politics, Subjects, and Possibilities on the Street in South Asia*

Because they are nodes for multiple scales and kinds of circulation that help to define subjects, provision households, enact neighborhoods, and connect them to much larger spheres of activity, *mafi kaṭai* are unique sites from which to examine the ways in which multiple kinds of subjects, positions, and possibilities are produced, maintained, and located through face-to-face interaction. Although questions about the ways in which transactions and interactions in commercial space relate to other domains of life are relevant anywhere, they are particularly fruitful ground from which to examine the production of places, social differences, gender, and political possibilities in contemporary South Asia.

Many ethnographers of contemporary South Asia have noted that small streets in India cities seem to work in ways that cannot be explained by bourgeois European understandings of public and private, and that interactions on these streets seem to play a particularly significant role in South Asian social and political life (Price, 1996; Kaviraj,

1997; Venkatachalapathy, 2004; Seizer, 2005). The visibility, audibility, and movement of groups and their representatives through urban space, and the ways in which such signs of presence are interpreted, is frequently cited as a determining force in both overt and informal politics in India (Varshney, 1995). Small shops are a convenient vantage point from which to study interactions on small urban and peri-urban streets, as well as the ways in which they are interpreted in conversations. By focusing on small shops, which are often represented as marginal to the spaces in which overt political and meaningful displays occur, I map the ways in which visibility, sound, and presence can come to be interpreted, or ignored, as socially and politically significant.

Although other sites, such as water pumps, tea shops, small temples, and bus stands, afford a view of interactions on the street, grocery shops are a particularly fruitful site for the study of caste, class, gender, and related subject positions. The circulation and exchange of foodstuffs, in which grocery shops play a critical role, is of particular importance for the definition of caste, religious, and class difference in South Asia (Marriott & Inden, 1977; Dumont, 1980; Appadurai, 1981; Dumont et al., 1986). As well as working as sites for the production, display, and circulation of such broad and potentially politicized forms of difference, grocery shops are sites of unique possibility for actors that may be marginalized from explicitly political arenas. Unlike tea shops and other roadside spaces that have been more heavily studied (see Venkatachalapathy, 2002; Cody, 2009), grocery shops are easily accessible to women and children, who are frequently described as confined to the insides of institutions, temples, or domestic spaces (see Seizer, 1997). Examining the ways in which shops are situated suggests both the ways in which members of these marginalized groups may participate in and relate to

activities that are associated in other domains and the ways in which they may participate in these interactions while still being understood as confined to domestic domains.

Because they are situated at the intersections between realms that might be classified as interior and exterior, or as public and private, interactions in roadside shops suggest the ways in which these domains are produced, commented on, and subverted in interactions. Susan Gal observes that social life and analysis are frequently organized around contrasting domains and principles “conveniently linked to either public or private: community vs. individual, rationality vs. sentiment, money vs. love, solidarity vs. self interest”(Gal 2002, p.79). She suggests that these co-constitutive categories, and the expectations for behavior that they entail, are always relative to the context of their use and that the “semiotic logic” of the distinction provides an ideological scaffold through which multiple scales of difference can be understood.<sup>19</sup> These same divisions, which are part of the question raised by the trader’s dilemma, also play a critical role in defining the kinds of subjects, spaces, and associated political possibilities that are enabled and through interactions on the streets of Thanjavur.

Studies of South Asia frequently suggest that, although the public/private divide is present in some domains, local place-making practices are best understood in terms of a division between inside and outside (*u//le* and *ve//iyē* to use the Tamil terms) (see: Daniel, 1984; Chakrabarty, 1991; Chatterjee, 1993; Kaviraj, 1997; Dickey, 2000; Chatterjee, 2001; Seizer, 2005; etc.) Interior spaces are those that are enclosed in ways that render

---

<sup>19</sup> As I note earlier, anthropologists and historians (ex: Kaviraj, 1997) have argued that this distinction does not apply neatly in South Asia, or to people who are not trying to be bourgeois. The distinctions between public/private and inside/outside divisions in space and social practice are not crucial to understanding my argument.

them secure, auspicious, and relatively pure—by the taking off of shoes, for example. Exterior spaces are those that fall outside of boundaries and are viewed as relatively less orderly. While it might be said that shops were framed as “interior” in much the same ways that more intimate parts of houses were, the realities of place-making practices were varied and complex.

A examination of conversations that assign and shift responsibility also contributes to understandings of the kinds of subjects that enact everyday life in Tamil Nadu. Anthropological accounts have emphasized the importance of caste and family as dominant organizing principles in South Indian social life (Dumont, 1980; Trawick, 2009; Kapadia, 1996; Pandian, 2009) and suggested a relative lack of a ready abstract sense of the individual as an integrated whole (Marriott and Inden 1977; Daniel 1984). Similarly, histories of South India have chronicled the ways in which the possible forms of subjects may be a relatively recent invention of law (Beteille, 1996) or importation of Protestant missionaries (Hardgrave, 1965; 1969). Deconstruction of possible Tamil subjects has gone so far that Mattison Mines introduced his book on merchants in Georgetown, Chennai declaring, “I shall demonstrate that Tamils *do* recognize individuality as an essential feature of ordinary...[and] civic life” (1994, p. 2). Drawing on the analysis of conversations and transactions in which responsibility is at issue, I suggest the ways in which everyday exchanges animate, perpetuate, and enable particular forms of subjects. Because the forms of coordination, organization, and responsibility that are prevalent in *maḷi kaṭṭai* render some kinds of actors more salient or powerful than others, and because they provide a resource for participation in other circuits of

commerce, participation frameworks in shopping interactions shape the possibilities that participants encounter in other domains of life.

*The Stakes of Gossip, Everyday, Informal, and Other Unmarked Interactions*

Anthropologists often define what they study as “mundane” or “everyday” relations. Yet, even while doing so, they have often defined the everyday through negation: the everyday is often defined as what is returned to after an event, what is markedly different from it, or as a gloss for that which is uninteresting (Das 2007). This approach renders the everyday and the ordinary little more than residual categories that contain our disinterest. An alternate approach is suggested by Erving Goffman’s (1959) assertion that all domains of social activity can be viewed as organized and performative. Similarly, discussions of the multiple frames and contexts that might be suggested by the categories of “formality” (Irvine, 1979) and “religious” (Keane, 2004), which are also used as ethnographic catch-alls, point the ways towards examining the ways in which classifications of speech and spaces as “informal” or “ordinary” might cover a wide variety of practices, while working as discursively and socially productive frames. Rather than using it to mark a default state or the margins of events, I seek to investigate the ways in which the statuses of speech, space, and action as “everyday” are actively defined, maintained, contested, and created.

I seek to treat the everyday as an understanding of activity that can be as rich in structure, meaning, and contestation as any other. I propose to examine this category, and the terms and actions that mark it, as a semiotic and linguistic ideology, an understanding of what signs do and how they become meaningful, which is tied to

broader social structures and enacted through material practices and interactions.<sup>20</sup> This move can be understood as part of a much broader trend of examining the ways in which the framing of spaces, actions, and domains as intimate (Stoler 1995) has politically and socially transformative effects.<sup>21</sup>

As Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and Marshal Sahlins (Sahlins 2001) and others have suggested, what counts as ordinary and uninteresting is a politically, socially and morally significant question. Linguistic anthropologists have examined these issues most explicitly through studies of processes of standardization (Silverstein 1998), which frequently serve to support one way of speaking and through it one group, place, or way of being more than others by establishing it as natural and normative (Bucholtz 2001; Milroy 2001). The politics and possibilities of ordinary speech—or of speech that is framed as unregimented—have also been addressed in studies of rumor (Caton, 2005) or gossip (Besnier, 2009; Brenneis, 1987; Spitulnik, 1996) and their political effects. Following their lead, I examine the “ordinary” situated production of *mafi kaʔai* conversations and spaces as an active and socially efficacious practice. Treating the category of “ordinary speech” as a discursive move rather than a distinctive variety allows me to explore the political and economic effects of this classification.

---

<sup>20</sup> I say “semiotic” and “linguistic” not to suggest that the two categories are separable but rather to emphasize an approach that considers both spoken and unspoken aspects of interaction.

<sup>21</sup> However, as I hope to have suggested in the previous section, I do not view “intimate” and “ordinary” as equivalent. Although some discussions of public/private and internal/external divisions treat the intimate as relatively unregimented, the work of Stoler, Gal, and others who have consider these issues (especially from feminist perspectives), has suggested that this is far from the case. Instead, I hope to suggest that the same kinds of analysis that anthropologists have applied to the intimate, when they examine it as a significant metapragmatic frame that is related to explicit political projects and ideologies, can also be applied to “the ordinary”.

## *A City of Villagers (But Not a Village): Thanjavur in 2005-2008*

This dissertation examines the ways in which spaces that are rarely classified as anything in particular are in fact connected to the social life of a city and the district that it governs. Thanjavur, which is usually called Tanjore in English, is the capital of Thanjavur district—an administrative unit roughly equivalent to a county—in Tamil Nadu, India.<sup>22</sup> Its population is usually estimated at between 215-250 thousand people. However, many of the houses located within the city are not recognized on official maps and the functional space of the city extends well beyond its official boundaries. The number of people who describe themselves as living in Thanjavur is far greater than the number recognized on any administrative list.

The three adjacent neighborhoods in which this study took place are located along an administrative edge of the city. In speech and action, residents treat them as separated from the crowded, more central part of town, which is home to the old bus stand, the railway station, the registrar's office, the parade ground, large shops, the main vegetable market, and other official buildings, by the canal that was built to surround the Maratha palace located at the city's eighteenth century center.<sup>23</sup> Although it is, by Indian standards, small both in size and population, Thanjavur has a long and architecturally

---

<sup>22</sup> The transliteration of the city's name, according to the Madras Tamil lexicon, is *taṅcavur*. I have decided to use the more common transliteration of the Tamil name, because I expect that it will be more recognizable to most readers.

<sup>23</sup> Tourist books describe the palace that stands at the city's former center as a Maratha attempt at Byzantine architecture and recommend the section open as a museum. Its ramparts were better known locally for housing the West Branch of the Police station and deserted rooms where vendors from the wholesale vegetable market, which occupied an old palace complex across the street, lounged and ate at the end of their working day. I report these details to stress that, although the section on which I focus is recently built, Thanjavur is not a new city.

evident history as a node in networks of trans-regional trade. From rooftops of *King's Community* and *Vishnu's Lake*, it is possible to glimpse the granite towers of the famous Brihadeeswarar Temple built by Chola emperors in 1015 CE. People of all religions in all three locations list the temple as the city's defining landmark and most famous tourist site. They were happy to speculate about a time when the now dry moat surrounding the city center was supposedly filled with crocodiles and other fierce and exotic animals, one of many testaments to the skill, taste, and prowess of the city's favorite kings.

As the teenage daughter of a police officer who lived in *Vishnu's Lake* explained, Thanjavur might be described as “a city full of villagers, where villagers come to shop.” Many of the people described in this study named their “native place” (*cunta ur*) as a village either in Thanjavur or one of the surrounding districts. Some commuted back and forth between Thanjavur and surrounding villages, while others who had lived in the city for more than a generation assisted relatives from villages when they came to town on shopping expeditions. The city is also known throughout Tamil Nadu as having once been home to an unusually large number of Brahmins (Fuller, 1999; Narasimhan, 2008). However, as C. J. Fuller and Haripriya Narasimhan (2008) note, since Brahmins have moved away from Thanjavur to larger cities at a much higher rate than members of other castes, many of their houses now stand empty.<sup>24</sup> While this demographic quirk is

---

<sup>24</sup> As I discovered when I was looking for a place to stay in *King's Community*, many of these houses remain empty because the owners are reluctant to rent them to people who do not share their dietary practices. Although similar concerns with separating dwelling spaces by diet, and thus by caste, seem to have shaped residence in several buildings, the sections of the city in which this study was conducted were mixed in terms of caste composition. All three of the neighborhoods in which I conducted observations were home to Christians, Muslims, and people from multiple Hindu castes, including *Dalits*. Residents in all three areas agreed that, although most people in the area were Hindu, caste and religious community played no discernable role in determining where houses were located. However, because I spent most of my time living with and making contacts through a *Pallar* family, I may have unwittingly selected a study area and participants who were not particularly concerned with maintaining caste separations.

certainly responsible for many of the characteristics that define Thanjavur as a city, and for its reputation as a home to excellent vegetarian food, it had no discernable affect on the conversations and interactions described in this study.

### *Participation and Observation: My Place in Shops and the City*

The places where I stayed and shops where I studied were strongly shaped by my relationship with the woman who I call *Gayathri*. Even more than the pseudonym that I have chosen, her real name suggests a strongly Tamil Hindu affiliation, though not her Pallar caste background, as well as her intelligence and hope for the eager acquisition of knowledge. It is a name that makes Tamil scholars smile when I share it with them, and it suits her perfectly. When I met her, *Gayathri* was studying for an M.Phil at Tamil University. She was well prepared to assist me in my study, not only because she had been born and raised in the section of Thanjavur where this study took place, because she had many family members, friends, and contacts in the area, and because she had spent several years working as a clerk in a small shop herself, but also because she possessed outstanding curiosity, creativity, and a willingness to do embarrassing things

During the 21 months that I spent in Thanjavur, I ate most meals with *Gayathri's* mother or with other members of her family. Although I arranged meetings to conduct interviews with product suppliers, markets, wholesalers, large shop owners, ration shop workers, and other area residents who were customers, I learned at least as much in relaxed conversation with people who were also *Gayathri's* friends and neighbors. Talk with them in houses, on side streets, and while cooking or doing other chores allowed me both to get a sense of how talk in *maḷi kaṭai* differed from interactions in other locations

and of “back stories” that explained particular interactions that I had observed in shops. I freely moved in and out of the five houses occupied by members of *Gayathri*'s immediate family and spent hours each day talking to other neighbors who lived in the area, watching people's children, and visiting nearby shops.

As well as taking a census of all sixteen *maḷi kaṭai* in my study area and conducting semi-structured interviews with five households that were customers of each of my focal shops, I gained a sense of local networks and relationships by participating in area activities, such as marriage negotiations, marriages, and temple festivals, and helping, whenever possible, with errands and household work. In order to get a sense of how the shops and networks on which I focused were connected to Thanjavur as a whole, I made daily trips to more central parts of the city, visited and conducted interviews at other sites where provision shopping was possible, and accompanied people who were customers at the shops on which I focused on trips to surrounding villages, temples, markets, shops, and family members' houses.

For eight months in 2006-7 and another three months in 2008, I spent roughly three hours each day recording conversations at one of the three focal shops described in this study. I picked these shops because their proximity to where I stayed made it easy for me to get to know their customers and to visit each of them regularly, because their owners were eager to support my project, and because they were located in places that were quiet enough to allow me to record conversations.

Although I conducted recording and observation sessions at all times between six am and nine pm, I quickly discovered that the morning and evening were the busiest times at these shops and that evenings offered a better opportunity to record

comprehensible conversation. I transcribed these recordings with help from *Gayathri*, who repeated difficult-to-follow segments, offered explanations of words that I did not understand, and frequently provided additional gossip, evaluations, or possible back stories.<sup>25</sup>

When I proposed this project, I hoped to find focal shops in three parts of the city and compare interactions in each of them. After one or two attempts at conducting observations and recording conversations in one of the large grocery shops located near the main bus stand, which was constantly surrounded by traffic and flooded with people – many of them known but most of them strangers – I realized that, if I were to be able to hear conversations, recognize participants and have any sense of what was going on I needed to focus on smaller less crowded shops tucked away on relatively quiet neighborhood streets. Although these shops served a smaller portion of the city’s population than the large grocery shops and vegetable markets at the center of town, they were places where it was far easier for me to spend time, get a sense of what was happening, and record conversations that were audible and clear. Similarly, although I initially planned to study shops in socially and economically distinct parts of the city, I found that I was able to have a much better sense of who was present and what was happening in shops that were located very near to where I lived. The times at which most people shopped—in the early morning, afternoon, and evening—and the speeds of transportation that were easily available to me—bus and bicycle—also made it much easier for me to spend time in places that were located relatively near to one another.

---

<sup>25</sup> I received similar help from *Martha* and *Maria*, two other graduate students at Tamil University who lived in the area; from *Naveen*, who *Veena*’s husband briefly employed in a document processing shop that he hoped to open, and from *Sundar*, an unemployed recent graduate and friend of *Gayathri*’s, who lived in a nearby village.

Although I spent time in and conducted interviews with the owners of small grocery shops located in the wealthy government colony and medical college road areas, in the older and more crowded parts of the city, and on the city's outskirts in areas that were usually classified as a village, I spent the bulk of my time in relatively new sections of the city, which had been built out between the 1970s and the present, located along a single road that went towards the old bus stand.

In picking my study sites, I unwittingly followed the advice that was given to Theodore Bestor when he sought to study a typical Tokyo neighborhood 20 years earlier, to “pick a network not a neighborhood” (1989: 6). I chose to study transactions and interactions at shops located in *King's Community* and adjacent peri-urban spaces because my connection to *Gayathri* and other area residents made it easy for me to live in the area, gain introductions to residents, and get help figuring out what was going on. Although the neighborhoods that I name are, to some extent, real practiced places, I came to know them through networks that were built through conversations in grocery shops.<sup>26</sup>

Soon after I met her, *Gayathri* explained that, because there were no men staying in either her mother's house or that house of her *periyamma*, her father's older brother's wife, where she lived part time, she effectively acted as “the man of the house” for both families. All errand running, bureaucratic wrangling, and complex public positioning of both households usually fell to her. Although this division of labor was partially the result of necessity, as all of *Gayathri's* male relatives lived elsewhere, and all of the other women, with the exception of her younger sister who worked full-time in a shop, were

---

<sup>26</sup> Since I knew the area both through these shops and through *Gayathri* and her family members, I also had a chance to meet with and speak to people who lived in the area but rarely shopped there. I mention them briefly in Chapter Three.

married with young children or too old and ill to move about easily, it also perfectly suited *Gayathri's* personality and her status as the most educated of her immediate family members.

The spaces on which this study focused traced the lines of *Gayathri's* social networks. During my first six months in the city I lived with her, her *periyamma*, *Malarmangai*, and six other people in the area that I call *King's Community*. Although some of the people who lived in the area were certainly economically marginal, people were fond of pointing out the many doctors, lawyers and engineers who lived in the generally prosperous and well cared-for area. *King's Community* was officially part of Thanjavur city, had power cuts relatively rarely, and was where family members who lived in other areas chose to host the two guests who came to visit, ostensibly because it was close to the bus stand but also because the house was relatively large and well kept.

After my first six months in Thanjavur, I took up residence in the upper portion of a house owned by former colleagues of *Gayathri's periyamma*, *Sunitha*, in the area that I call *Vishnu's Lake*.<sup>27</sup> *Gayathri* had spent her early childhood and late teen years living in two houses adjacent to the one where I stayed. *Malarmangai's* third daughter and *Veena's* older sister, *Sivakami*, lived in a rented house with her two children on the same street that I did, very near the lake after which the area was named. *Malarmangai's* oldest daughter, *Sundari*, who did not speak to other members of the family but frequently spent time with me, lived two doors down in a house with glass windows that her husband, an engineer, had built recently at great expense. They were one of two

---

<sup>27</sup> During a final, three-month visit to Thanjavur in the summer of 2008, I lived on the same street in *Vishnu's Lake*, in the upper part of a house owned by *Manjusha*, her husband, their adult daughter, and her two children. Although the family identified as *Maratha*, all of them had been born in Tamil Nadu and only *Manjusha* and her husband spoke *Marathi*.

families in the area who owned a car, and they were much better off than most people in the neighborhood. Built mostly in the 1980's, *Vishnu's Lake* was much more mixed than either *King's Community* or *Pushpa Nagar* in the caste, economic, and occupational background of its residents. While some families, such as *Sundari's* and the doctor's family who lived up the street, were wealthy people in clearly white collar professions, others were more economically marginal. The area behind *Amlan's* shop, in particular, was home to families who were described as struggling (*kaṣṭapāṭavāṅkā*).

When I first moved to town, *Gayathri's* mother lived in a very small, rented, one-room row house located at the back of a sugar cane field, in an area that I call *Pushpa Nagar*. Houses in this area, which was part of a *panchayat* union adjacent to the city, tended to be very new, built within the last five to ten years, and much smaller. This area, where power cuts were frequent, spaces between houses were greater, and the government water supply was unpredictable, was significantly less prestigious. Although there were some comfortably-off people (*vasuthiyathavanga*) in the area, it was often described as "like a village" by people in older parts of the city.

Although I regularly visited and conducted interviews with other shopkeepers in the area, I chose three focal shops that served as anchors of my study. At each of these shops, I conducted multiple interviews with shopkeepers, regular customers, distribution agents, and other who frequented the area. I picked shops in three distinct neighborhoods, both because I wanted to get a sense of possible differences between areas, and because I feared that conducting observations at shops that served very similar groups of customers might provoke discomfort with shopkeepers, some of whom quietly

worried about competition, and with customers, who occasionally “cheated” their regular shop by going elsewhere.

It would have been easy to pick three shops that were run by *Nadars* and even to select three shops that were run by members of the same family. However, I picked shops of similar size and type that had owners from different backgrounds, in the hope of discerning ways in which these affiliations might shape transactions and interactions. As I explain in later chapters, discernable differences between shops on these grounds were minimal, as shopkeepers told me I should expect them to be. The most dramatic difference that I found was *Amlan*'s inability to be viewed as taking shopwork seriously, both because he opened the shop late in the day, and because he employed a paid worker. Because it was recently opened and in a newly built area, *Pushpa kaṭai* was a particularly fruitful space from which to study the role that interactions surrounding *maḥi kaṭai* might play in producing and coordinating activities related to place, mediating interactions between area residents, and connecting them to other domains and places. These differences between interactions were in frequency and intensity rather than in type, however.<sup>28</sup>

### *Three Focal Shops*

#### *Anbu kaṭai*

Located in *King's Community* just opposite a large apartment block, *Anbu kaṭai* was considered a successful and typical *maḥi kaṭai*. *Anbu* had opened the shop, in 2000 as a way to earn an income after he completed school. He had studied up to 10<sup>th</sup> grade at a local Tamil medium school and lived with his

---

<sup>28</sup> *Pushpa kaṭai* is the location for most of the conversations transcribed and analysed in this dissertation because the space in which is located was relatively quieter than that of the other two shops. Although I recorded examples of similar interactions in all three of the shops that I studied, interactions at *Pushpa kaṭai* tended to be the most complete and audible. Similarly, because larger numbers of customers were likely to be present at the same time in the mornings, creating overlap that made individual utterances difficult to transcribe completely, most of my examples come from interactions that happened in the afternoon.

parents, his wife, and his baby daughter.<sup>29</sup> *Anbu*'s mother watched the shop in the middle of the day when there were very few customers so that he had the opportunity to return to his house, eat, and take a nap. However, all of the work of provisioning and the majority of sales work was performed by *Anbu* alone.

Like other members of his family, *Anbu* was Roman Catholic and indicated this affiliation by keeping a calendar with a Christian icon in the shop. Yet, he described his views as atheist and had little enthusiasm for religious activities. His defining passion was his devotion to the Tamil film star *Rajinikanth*. He kept images of *Rajini* throughout the shop and kept the title and release date of his next film pencilled to a beam of the shop's awning in chalk.

*Anbu kaṭai* served people who lived in the nearby apartments, many of whom were described as "middle class" or relatively wealthy, and people described as poor who lived in huts and worked in a nearby flour mill. The shop also attracted less regular customers, who travelled past it on their way to the main bus stand or who attended functions at two nearby marriage halls.

### *Majeeda kaṭai*

*Majeeda kaṭai* was located in *Vishnu's Lake* on the well-travelled road that lead from Thanjavur to nearby villages. It had been opened in 2002 after *Amlan*, the shopkeeper and owner, returned from several years spent working as a painter in Oman. *Majeeda kaṭai* was never particularly busy or successful, and it closed in late 2007 when *Amlan* returned to work abroad.

*Amlan* and his wife *Majeeda* were members of a large Muslim family that owned several jewellery stores and other shops located closer to the center of town.<sup>30</sup> They hired *Rājēswari*, a *Thevar* Hindu woman in her late teens, to do most of the work of keeping the shop. *Amlan* did all of the provision purchasing and kept the shop after nightfall when *Rājēswari* went home.

*Majeeda kaṭai* was visited by people who lived in *Vishnu's Lake*, by people from surrounding areas who visited nearby temples on Friday nights, and by people travelling to and from Thanjavur and surrounding villages. Its most regular customers were the family members of policemen and laborers living in nearby houses..

### *Pushpa kaṭai*

*Pushpa kaṭai*, which I described at length in earlier sections, was opened in late 2006. However, *Karthikeyan*, the primary shopkeeper, and *Pushpa*, who did much of the work of running the shop, had kept a similar grocery shop in a different part of the city for nearly a decade. They lived in the building adjacent to the shop with their three school-aged daughters.

Like many shopkeepers in Tamil Nadu, *Karthikeyan* and *Pushpa* were *Nadar* Hindus. Although members of *Pushpa's* family did other kinds of work, all of *Karthikeyan's* brothers and many of his cousins kept similar shops elsewhere in the city. *Karthikeyan* had done shopkeeping work for most of his life, and claimed never to have considered entering another field. His time and energy were devoted almost entirely to caring for the shop and the needs of his daughters. Like *Anbu*, he started work at five am seven days each week and usually ate and slept at around eleven pm after closing the shop.

*Pushpa kaṭai's* customers were mostly new area residents. Some of them described themselves as "middle class" and lived in small houses similar to those owned by the shopkeepers. Others, many of whom worked part-time in nearby fields, described themselves as struggling to get by. The shop occasionally received business from people who were passing through on their way to a nearby village, yet most of its customers were regulars.

---

<sup>29</sup> *Anbu's* father worked as a security guard at a local bank, and his family had no hereditary ties to shopkeeping. He said that he floundered during his first two years of business, but had learned to run things properly after that. The fact that he had attended a nearby school and was known to many people in the area seemed to have helped him to get his start in the business.

<sup>30</sup> *Majeeda* occasionally came to the shop to keep *Amlan* company but never did any work. In fact she usually ducked behind the counter and hid when customers, especially men, who she did not know came to the area. However she seemed to know quite a bit about how the other family businesses were run and often fiercely negotiated on their behalf via a mobile phone.

## *Producing and Naming Places on the edge of Thanjavur*

I have given pseudonyms to *King's Community*, *Vishnu's Lake*, and *Pushpa Nagar*, but the status of these sites and bounded places is more ambiguous than these names suggest. *King's Community* had fairly well understood boundaries and was recognized by people throughout my study area. There was greater confusion in references to *Vishnu's Lake*. When describing where they lived, residents usually mentioned the names of several landmarks when giving directions or writing addresses on letters. Despite a clearly connected set of streets and houses, an active social life, and increasingly active businesses, most people were unsure what to call *Pushpa Nagar*. Most residents arranged to have their letters sent elsewhere and gave directions by explaining that it was on roads that lead from *Thanjavur* to a nearby village. Although it was a practiced place, *Pushpa Nagar* was not yet “real” from the perspective of many institutions. This made its shops and streets a particularly interesting place to listen and watch as residents attempted to come to terms with the locality and its infrastructure problems.

Although for the sake of clarity I have named *Majeeda kaṭai*, *Pushpa kaṭai*, and *Anbu kaṭai*, they, like most shops of their kind, were usually treated as nameless by both shopkeepers and their customers, who usually referred to them simply as “the shop” as in “*nāṅ kaṭaikku pōrēṅ*” (I’m going to the shop). Most shops had names that appeared on receipts given by those distributors who kept careful paper accounts, but when I conducted the census of *maḥi kaṭai* in my study area several shopkeepers needed to hunt down a receipt in order to tell me what their name was. In many cases, the name of the shop was usually that of the shop owner and primary shopkeeper. Although *Karthikeyan*,

*Pushpa*, and their customers had to think for a moment when I asked them what the name of their shop was, the fact that it was named after *Pushpa* was advertised by already fading paint on the house entrance part of the structure that named it “*Pushpa kaṭai*”.

Customers who lived in *Pushpa Nagar* area first referred to *Pushpa kaṭai*, which opened in 2007, first as “the new shop” and later simply as “that shop”, sometimes pointing or “the shop in back of the sugar cane field”. *Anbu* insisted that his shop lacked a name, so, following the conventions of distributors, and some of his customers, I have named it after him. Similarly, *Amlan* said that his shop was named *Majeeda* after his wife, although he certainly wouldn’t post her name or share it with most people—indeed, since the distributors were unlikely to know his wife’s name, this naming seemed to be little more than a private compliment between them. Such inside jokes were relatively common. Some companies, such as *Brooke Bond* (in the photo below), offered shops signboards that also served as advertisements for their products.



**Figure 1. Shop with advertising signboard. The name of the shop is the name of the primary shopkeeper.**

Those small *mafi kaṭai* that were named for something other than the shopkeeper were usually named after a favoured god or relative. Since people often gave the names of favourite gods to children, there was often quite a bit of overlap between these domains. One shop located near *Pushpa kaṭai*, which had a sign advertising it as “*K.R.S. Stores*,” took its initials from the names of the shopkeeper’s three beloved daughters.

As well as familial ties, shop names sometimes reflected shopkeepers’ aspirations and views of their businesses with respect to others in the area. My favorite explanation for a shop name was that given by the owner of ‘Indian Store,’ (see photo below) who explained that:

...since shops selling things from Burma and Singapore are given names like “Burma Bazaar” and “Singapore Store” and my shop sells things from India, I have named it “*Indian Store*.”

When I noted that, following this logic, all grocery stores in the area might be named “*Indian Store*” the owner laughingly explained that only he had thought to call his shop “*Indian Store*.” There was clearly more to this naming: not only did it avoid advertising caste and religious affiliations, as many of the larger shops in town did, but the choice to use “store” (written in Tamil script), rather than *kaṭai*, in the sign name suggests that the fun of “*Indian Store*” lay both in its breadth: emphasizing all of India rather than just the Southern states through which most of the products sold in *maḥi kaṭai* came, but also imagining an audience that was pan-Indian or perhaps even international. Although the later parts of the sign advertised *maḥikai* (groceries), *pāl* (milk), and *cool drinks* (a local name for soft drinks at any temperature), its cheeky imagining of an audience and adjoining stores that sold things from beyond India is part of what creates the persona and perhaps the network connected to this shop.



Figure 2. The signboard for "Indian Store" a shop located in *Vishnu's Lake*.

The sign for “Indian store” is in many ways at least as accurate in its implied field of representation as the names that I have given to the shops on which I focus. Although the forms of circulation that I am best able to trace empirically are those that occur within nearby households, neighborhoods, or the city of Thanjavur, many of the transactions, rhythms, and actors that participated in *maḥi kaṭai* networks occupied far larger scales. These shops were often sites for discussions of national politics, transnational business, oil prices, and other far-reaching systems of circulation. Because the shops on which I focus were located on the edge of the city in spaces that were seen as partially separate from the relations that defined it, they made ideal sites from which to study the ways in which the city as a political and social entity was connected to smaller interactions and

transactions on the street. Conversations with people living in other parts of Thanjavur confirm that most of the observations that I made in shops on the northwestern edge apply in other places as well.

### *The Metapragmatics of Everyday Commerce: An Overview*

The dissertation can be divided into three general sections: Chapter Two and the Conclusion provide an overview of the ways in which participants in transactions in small shops understood the relationship between linguistic, social, and fiduciary forms of value. Chapters Three and Four draw on observations, interviews, and other ethnographic materials to examine the relationship between practices of speaking and the spatial/temporal location of shops and shopping transactions. Chapters Five and Six examine the ways in which subjects, credibility, and related understandings of value are worked out through specific instances of speech and writing.

Although most anthropological writing on talk and trade focuses on bargaining and other forms of explicit negotiation, in typical *maḥi kaṭai* shopping interactions haggling is the exception rather than the rule. In the Thanjavur neighborhoods that I studied, careful evaluation of prices, artful talk about the quality of goods, and explicit negotiation were described as important only in the relatively rare cases in which purchases were made from strangers. In provision shopping encounters, both shopkeepers and customers described themselves as striving to build the sorts of knowledge and familiarity needed to minimize risk. Successful customers, and those whom shopkeepers valued most, were those who could conduct transactions without saying a word.

Yet this does not mean that talk was an unimportant or incidental part of shopping interactions. I argue that, in normative *maḥi kaṭtai* transactions, talk was evaluated in terms of its ability to produce and maintain a sense of familiarity and predictability among participants. From the perspective of *maḥi kaṭtai*, *speaking well* or *good speech* (*nalla pēcu-*) was defined not as bargaining but as the sort of talk that kept the need for bargaining at bay.<sup>31</sup> Rather than being those who spoke correctly, politely, or in a high status dialect, the people described as *speaking well* were those who spoke in ways that served to build and maintain familiarity and the relationships that it supported. This language ideology played a critical role in shaping interactions in *maḥi kaṭtai*.

Although I am primarily interested in outlining the ideology of *speaking well*, participants' metapragmatic commentary on such talk, and its connection to other domains of transactions and interaction, I conclude by arguing that, rather than treating the "phatic" function of language as marginal or subservient to other aims and evaluations of language use, linguistic anthropologists, especially those interested in trade, must embrace it as one of the main things that people do with words. I return to these themes, and to the questions raised by attention to linguistic and semiotic ideologies, in chapter seven with a brief discussion of the ways in which participants in transactions throughout India may access and secure the value of money. I use the question of how particular words and things can work, or fail, as money to explicitly explore the relationship between interactions and transactions and between the value of linguistic signs, material objects, and the relationships through which they circulate.

---

<sup>31</sup> For the remainder of the dissertation I italicize *speaking well* in order to emphasize its status as a local ideology or evaluative schema. I do this instead of using *nalla pēcu* (good speech) because the Tamil phrase can be used to mean other things, such as prescriptively correct speech, in other contexts.

## *Metapragmatics of Space and Time*

Chapters Three and Four examine the metapragmatic frames that govern the interpretation of transactions and interactions within the lives of Thanjavur's residents. They cover related and in many ways inseparable sets of material from different perspectives. Although I try to keep the perspectives of and differences between these groups in view at all times, Chapter Three is written primarily from the standpoint of customers, whereas Chapter Four focuses more directly on conversations with shopkeepers and their suppliers. Similarly, I suggest that spaces in the city are produced by time: distances that are "too far to walk alone" become shorter after nine pm and rhythms of activity are likely to be associated with and shaped by particular places. Wholesalers in the main vegetable market use calendars and clocks differently than workers in *maḷi kaṭai*.

Chapter Three seeks to situate shops within the lives of their customers by asking how interactions in and around *maḷi kaṭai* related to other domains of life. I argue that physical spaces surrounding shops worked as metapragmatic frames—as implicit and explicit classifications of contexts that govern signs and their meanings (Silverstein, 2003). These metapragmatic frames shape interpretations of presence, dress, and speech, and the ways in which these understandings serve to mark shops and their visitors as distinct from other places and people. I investigate the ways in which the meanings assigned to shops as spaces positioned them as a resource within the life of the city, and the ways in which interactions in *maḷi kaṭai* were implicated in the formation of publics that shaped the social and moral lives of their regular customers.

In contrast to activities in the more crowded and central parts of the city, or even in houses and other domestic space, interactions on the roadside have a body of possible observers and overhearers that is both limited and indefinite. I depart from anthropological traditions that treat the “ordinary” and “everyday” as natural and unmarked categories of activity, by examining the ordinariness of interactions in and around small shops as something that people actively create and maintain. Shopkeepers, their customers, and others who gather on the roadside to talk usually describe their conversations as *cuma* or *kisu kisu-nu pēcu*, as “chatter without any particular purpose.” Yet, given that it often rehearses or resembles participation in actions described as purposeful events and that *speaking well* is stressed as critical to business, it is important to ask how and why such talk might come to be understood as about nothing in particular. Although participants in conversations generally address direct interlocutors, roadside conversations are simultaneously shaped by the possibility of bystanders who might overhear, see, or receive reports of interactions. I argue that these expectations about overhearing allow talk and action on the roadside to be efficacious while simultaneously allowing participants to refuse the responsibilities entailed by participation in an overt event.

Chapter Four draws on this understanding of *mafi kat̕ai* as places to explain how shopkeepers work to coordinate multiple systems for the organization of action and expectation. Each of these systems has separate cycles of demand and delay that may be associated with particular persons, institutions, or political and moral stances. I refer to the temporal models assigned to and abstracted from these systems as rhythms of expectation. Because they act as hubs for the transmission of objects and information,

conversations in *mafi kaṭai* produce and transmit rhythms of expectation that define participation in neighborhood life. Yet actions in shops often fail to match expectations, and people carrying out transactions must constantly work to evaluate, interpret, and manage delay. In conversation, shopkeepers and their interlocutors constantly work to access, transmit, and co-construct these disparate cycles of events, including: the material decay of objects; the routine requirements of household life; the actions and expectations of wholesalers, agents, and product suppliers; Hindu ritual calendars; infrastructure schedules; and the timing of *bandhs*, strikes, and other mass political events. I begin by examining the ways in which rhythms of expectation shape participants' evaluations of goods and transactions, and the resulting ways in which shopkeepers struggle to produce and exert control over time. I argue that, rather than collapsing these disparate cycles into a single pulse of uniform commodity flow, conversations in *mafi kaṭai* work to manage the temporal gaps between expectations and events by regimenting their association with persons, groups, and institutions that are embedded in other scales of social life. Attempts to coordinate actions in neighborhood shops are therefore a means by which broad categories of social difference (class, caste, religion, and political affiliation), and associated struggles for dominance, are made visible and salient in everyday life.

### *Responsibility, Credibility, and Voices within Circuits of Commerce*

Chapters Five and Six focus more narrowly on discussions about debt and responsibility to examine the ways in which the metapragmatic frames that I outlined in Chapters Three and Four shape the interpretation of speech and writing in interactions. Chapter Five suggests that, despite differences in their ages, education, and experience,

*maḷi kaṭai* shopkeepers and many of their interlocutors used a surprisingly similar set of techniques to manage situations in which the potential conflict of interest latent in their roles as “for-profit shopkeeper” and “thrifty customer” threatened to erupt into overt aggression, anger, or accusations that might damage relationships and reputations. Although I discuss other approaches to this problem elsewhere in the dissertation, in this chapter I focus on the ways in which conversations in shops worked to frame the positions of buyer and seller, and the competing claims to responsibility and knowledge that they entailed, as belonging to shifting and fragmentary subjects that could be rendered accountable without falling prey to direct accusation. Drawing on an analysis of participant roles in two conversations, I argue that the ease with which shifts in the assignment of responsibility to subjects were accomplished highlights the ways in which transactions in *maḷi kaṭai* were normally understood as taking place between actors other than the people who were directly present. In particular, I suggest that these conversations draw and depend on the assumption that the default *maḷi kaṭai* customer, or at least the sort of customer who can buy on credit, is a household, rather than an individual speaker, and that responsibility for the household is divided unequally between its members. As well as suggesting some of the ways in which our understandings of voices and subjects must be situated within particular contexts of credit/debt transactions, this argument helps to explain the somewhat paradoxical Tamil stereotype that women are “softer” than men but should be feared as fierce fighters in business relationships.

Chapter Six examines the ways in which the dilemmas, strategies, and assumptions about participant roles described in Chapter Five inform the use and interpretation of writing. There is a widely distributed and relatively long-standing

literature that associates carefully written account books with honest shopkeepers and successful business practice. Organizations as different as the Indian Government, anti-corruption NGOs, and product suppliers all support the association between carefully written accounts of transactions, responsibility, and good organizational behavior. Yet in Thanjavur, India, some of the most legible, precise, and scrutinized accounts kept by shop workers—those at government-run ration shops—are generally understood to be false and corrupt. In contrast, the less-legible and frequently elliptical accounts of credit/debt kept in small privately owned shops are more likely to be accepted as accurate. Drawing on a comparison of accounting practices in each of these locations, I outline two competing ideologies of writing and their implications for the definition of subjects, obligations, and relationships in each of these domains. I argue that the kind of writing used in *maḥi kaṭai* is neither exclusively, nor primarily, about creating a transparent record of transactions. Instead, its presence or absence serves to distinguish between kinds of debt and to index the relationships on which the shops depend. I argue that differences in the interpretation of writing in *maḥi kaṭai* and ration shops are mutually informing and constitutive. They help to produce and maintain distinctions between circuits of commerce frequented by overlapping groups of people and to create possibilities for trade and transformation. By tracing the ways in which language ideologies and metapragmatic frames work to define the participant roles, social locations, and moral evaluations assigned to two circuits of commerce, Chapter Six suggests how many of the distinctions that I trace in Chapters Three and Four might be applied to commercial interactions, divides, and debates that occur outside of Thanjavur.

## *Coda*

In this dissertation, I consider the minute details of mundane interactions not simply because they are the substance of lived human experience (see Goffman, 1982), but because they are ciphers through which to discern larger systems, scales, and possibilities that cannot be observed directly. Although, at many points, I attempt to sketch systems of exchange, differentiation, and possibility that extend far beyond what I observe, I am less interested in outlining them as complete and static entities than in tracing the ways in which they work as dynamic, and often conflicting, processes. Transnational markets, money, publics, politics, and histories are created and made salient in small and concrete moments in interaction. Miyazaki (2007) cites Edmund Leach as explaining that his descriptions:

...are largely *as if* descriptions—they relate to ideal models rather than the real societies, and what I have been trying to do is to present a convincing model of what happens when such *as if* systems interact. (1979 [1954], p. 285)

My approach to the relationships between interactions in shops and broader systems of exchange in which they participate is similar. Although I focus on observed details and make frequent use of transcribed recordings, my aim is not simply to describe what happened but to suggest the ways in which it might shape possibilities for action, both by people living on the edge of Thanjavur and by others who engage with them.

Conversations about shopping, especially ones in which people attempted to help me to avoid being cheated, were full of debates and doubts about the relationship between observable details and less accessible fields of possibility.

*For example, in September 2006, on one particularly memorable occasion, I came across two friends from Tamil University at the main bus stand and explained that I*

*was going to Tilakar tiṭal market to buy some vegetables on my way home.<sup>32</sup> They insisted that I should not buy the vegetables myself because vendors would know that I was foreign and charge me exorbitant prices. Instead, they suggested that I tell them what I needed, wait behind the nearby Pilliyar temple, and allow them to buy what was needed in my place. I countered with a proposal that they accompany me to buy vegetables at my usual market stall and then tell me after the conversation if I were quoted a price above what they would expect to be charged. I went to the stall where I usually bought vegetables and asked the rate for ¼ kg of beans. I was told the amount (unfortunately, I was neither taking notes nor recording the interaction), and asked my friends if the quoted price was reasonable. They said that it was, and the shopkeeper, noticing what was going on, asked half-jokingly if I had doubts about him. I explained that because I was foreign my friends wanted to check that I was getting fair prices. He then explained, in the jokingly pedantic tone of someone playing the role of “cultural instructor” (while indirectly chiding my friends), that I was a regular customer who bought at his shop daily and had been introduced to him by another regular customer, so he’d give me a fair price.<sup>33</sup>*

Everyone involved in these interactions considered the ways in which broad social categories, relationships, histories, and predicted futures might influence what would be said in my interaction with the market stall worker. Although my friends were interested in what the vegetable seller would say to me, they evaluated it as fair and meaningful in relation to their expectations about current market prices and the way in which the vendor might have acted in a different possible interaction. In conducting this study, I frequently borrowed shoppers’ strategies and instructions in modes of interpretation as methods for ethnography and analysis.

---

<sup>32</sup> I tried to make daily purchases at each of the three focal shops in which I carried out observations—both as a means of “checking-in” and as a way to ensure that shopkeepers profited from my presence. However, a fresher and greater variety of vegetables were available at the market near the main bus stand. On days when I went to the university I tried to shop there, too.

<sup>33</sup> As I walked them back to the bus stand, my friends said that the price I was charged for the beans at the night market was less than they would pay for beans back in their villages. They said that the lower price was probably available at this market because it was closer to the wholesale market through which the beans, which were not grown locally, would have entered the district. Most people seemed to expect that the prices of non-local vegetables (especially those classified as *ērīkliṣkāy* (English vegetables) as opposed to *nāṭu kāy* (folk vegetables), which required cooler climates) would be higher in villages than in town.

## Chapter 2:

### **“Strangers Will See You Only as Profit”: Familiarity and Obligation in Shop Interactions**

“The strategies of honor are not banished from the market...he may boast of having managed to strike a bargain without laying out a penny in cash, either by mobilizing a number of guarantors, or, better still, by drawing on the *credit* and the *capital of trust* which come as much from a reputation of honor as from a reputation for wealth. It is said of such a man that ‘he could come back with the whole market even if he left home with nothing in his pockets’ ” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 185).

“In discussing the function of speech in mere sociabilities, we come to one of the bedrock aspects of man’s nature in society” (Malinowski, [1923] 1938, p. 313).

“Speaking well that’s our business” – *Francis (January 2007)*

#### *Beyond Bargaining: The Roles of Speech in Provision Shopping*

When I began to study talk in *mafi kaṭai*, I assumed that the interactional work of shopping would be done through explicit bargaining: through talk about prices and explicit discussion of the quality of goods. Since prices in *mafi kaṭai* are neither fixed nor posted, I expected that most exchanges with customers would include some explicit negotiation over the value assigned to products exchanged. Led by the assumption that these conversations would represent the most interesting site of intersection between

systems of commercial, linguistic, and social value, I listened for them intently during my first few months observing and recording interactions in *Anbu's* shop.

*For example, one morning in October 2006, I witnessed an exchange between Anbu and an elderly woman, who lived up the street, in which the woman insisted that Anbu was overcharging her for laundry soap. She explained, with dramatic frustration, that she could get five bars of the same variety for only Rs 5 at “the nearby Nadar kaṭai”.<sup>34</sup> She insisted that since this price was available elsewhere, Anbu must be overcharging her and should lower his price accordingly.*

*Anbu responded to her repeated and increasingly intense assertions by laughing and insisting that she was mistaken. He calmly and patiently refused her attempts at bargaining by explaining that he couldn't even make up the cost of soap at the wholesale shop if he charged only one rupee per bar of soap and expressed with equal certainty that no one else could either. Several other customers joined in, supporting Anbu's insistence that the price the woman asked for was well below the wholesale rate.*

*Since this conversation included references to different shops, and, through them, allusions to caste differences, price, and honesty, I assumed that I was finally collecting the kind of material that would be useful to understand the connection between relationships, ways of speaking, and regimes of value on Thanjavur's streets. I eagerly returned home to meet with Gayathri, a friend who frequented Anbu's shop, and asked for her assistance in transcribing the exchange. Yet, after listening to the interaction, she asked why I was so interested in a conversation in which one of the primary participants was acting confused and possibly a little bit crazy.<sup>35</sup> When I asked her to explain this assessment, Gayathri first explained that the woman was requesting an unreasonable price and when I objected that Gayathri herself sometimes suggested unreasonable prices when shopping in town, she added that the woman should have realized that she was being unreasonable in light of Anbu's response. I accepted Gayathri's explanation both because she knew the area and the norms at that shop, and because her reaction fit with the responses given by Anbu and other customers who overheard the exchange. Rather than an effective attempt at thrifty shopping, this conversation was viewed as an annoying and vaguely pathetic deviance from normal—and even perhaps from acceptable—behavior.*

---

<sup>34</sup> She might have been referring to a shop located two blocks away that was run by a Nadar Christian, but since small *maḷi kaṭai* are commonly associated with and run by people of the Nadar caste both “*Nadar kaṭai*” and “*“aṇṇaci kaṭai*” (shop + a typical address used for male Nadars) are used as general names for any small provision shop, it's hard to be sure which shop she might be referring to. I never found anyone in the area selling soap at the rate she requested.

<sup>35</sup> Although the word “loose,” an English word used by Tamil speakers to mean “crazy,” was used to describe her, I don't think that anyone assumed that the woman was mentally ill. Instead, the implication seemed to be that she was acting inappropriately.

It took me some time to fully understand why *Gayathri* and other neighborhood residents immediately dismissed the elderly women's speech as faulty, especially because I couldn't believe that customers who did most of their shopping at a *maḷi kaṭai* were so keenly aware of the wholesale rates for laundry soap. After I spent more time in Thanjavur, and did some soap shopping of my own, I gained a sense of prices that allowed me to agree that the elderly woman's request was clearly unreasonable. Yet I don't think that her unrealistically low price expectations alone were enough to explain the laughter of *Anbu* and of fellow neighbors and customers. While the adamancy of the woman's appeals, her insistence on continuing to make the same argument, even when uptake was refused, and her insistence on an exaggeratedly low price might have supported dismissal of her talk as inappropriate I suspect that the primary problem was with the context in which she carried it out.

Both the content and the veracity of the woman's speech were atypical of, and in some ways antagonistic to, the preferred scripts for *maḷi kaṭai* interactions. Although the type of "bargaining" speech that I expected has been described in many sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological studies of talk and shopping (for example, French, 2000; Kapchan, 2001; Seligman, 2005), and is, in other contexts, familiar to and practiced by most of the people described in this study, it was a deviation from the sort of interaction that was expected between neighborhood shopkeepers and their regular customers.<sup>36</sup> The *maḷi kaṭai* shopkeepers that I interviewed, as well as the agents and customers who frequented their shops, described ideal speech in these settings as that which worked to

---

<sup>36</sup> When regular customers do complain about prices they tend to do so much more briefly or in a way that is couched as a joke.

build and preserve relationships. Rather than matching the particular code or dialect used by customers, speaking in an educated way, or speaking in some other way that might be evaluated in terms of style and correctness, shopkeepers and their customers stressed “good speech” as that which maintained relationships and a sense of care or affection.

In this chapter, I take shopkeepers at their word and argue that the creation and maintenance of a sense of connection, familiarity, and trust enacted by activities that they described as *speaking well* (*nalla pēcu*) and *keeping a good name* (*nalla peru*) are the dominant ways in which speech is evaluated—the rule of engagement in interaction, if you will (Irvine, 2010), as well as the primary language ideology through which participants understand interactions in small grocery shops. Although I echo many of my neighbors’ descriptions of the practice of *speaking well* as working to facilitate business relationships, or at least avoiding situations that might damage them, I do not mean to suggest that the ways of speaking valued within this framework are entirely functional nor merely an ends to something else. Instead, as I explain further in Chapter Three, *speaking well* and the relationships that it helps to create can also be understood as one of the primary rewards and pleasures of shopping interactions.

I begin by briefly examining the social domains in which *speaking well* was described as producing trust, or at least minimizing a sense of risk, by both shopkeepers and their customers. I then turn to a more direct examination of how closeness is produced and maintained through talk in shopping interactions and the ways in which shopkeepers and customers attempt to manage situations in which multiple forms of closeness and obligation seem to come into conflict. In conclusion, I trace the ways in which my own misrecognition of the kinds of talk that constituted shopping in *mafi kaṭai*

may have been supported both by shopkeepers' and customers' understandings of provision shopping and by assumptions about commercial transactions that persist in linguistics and anthropology. I suggest that rather than treating the phatic dimension of language, which works to establish and maintain a sense of connection, as marginal or subservient to other aims and evaluations of language use, linguistic anthropologists, especially those interested in trade, must embrace it as one of the main things that people do with words.

### *Differentiating Occasional Shopping and Everyday Provisioning*

I do not mean to imply that bargaining never took place in Thanjavur.<sup>37</sup> Many of my friends, *Gayathri* included, took pride in their bargaining skills, and most people I knew haggled over prices during some shopping encounters. Yet these interactions and the purchases achieved through them were exceptions rather than the rule. Explicit bargaining, in the form of debates about the price, quantity, and quality of purchases, was much more likely to be part of occasional and unfamiliar shopping activities—of those that might be talked about as events. Although friends and neighbors spoke of situations in which merchants had attempted to cheat them and in which they had, almost

---

<sup>37</sup> By bargaining, I mean relatively adversarial speech that attempts to lower prices. In Tamil, this would usually be described as *vilai pēcu* (*vela pēcu*) (talk about price) although the usual Tamil translations given are *uṭṭaṅpaṭṭikkai paṇṇu* (to make a pact/negotiate) or *arukku*. There are, of course, a wide variety of ways and degrees of making requests for lower prices, and regular *maḥi kaṭai* customers did sometimes ask for discounts or say that something cost too much, especially after milk prices were raised. What made these interactions different is that shopkeepers were usually quick to accept or reject customers' statements, and customers usually accepted shopkeepers' responses, or, if they did not accept them, simply moved on to something else. When doing business with less well-known people in town, with travelling salesmen, or in unfamiliar places, customers would often repeatedly insist on another price, ask for a discount, or simply tell the merchant in mock anger, "*kammi paṇṇiṅka*" - "make it lower".

heroically, managed to lower the price using one strategy or another, the mere fact that such events were considered “tell-able” suggests, in retrospect, that they represented interesting deviations from the routines of everyday life, rather than the scripts that constituted it.

Outright, direct, and aggressive negotiations over price were practiced most earnestly in transactions involving people with whom customers were relatively unfamiliar and to whom they had no special introduction. These types of negotiations were particularly apparent during the purchase of objects such as clothing, appliances, or toys that were bought relatively infrequently—during transactions that could be classified as “event-shopping.” When doing business with less well-known people in town, with traveling salesmen, or in unfamiliar places, customers would often repeatedly insist on another price, ask for a discount, or simply tell the merchant in mock anger “*kammi paṅṅiriṅka*” - “make it lower”. They might also make much of testing or scrutinizing the objects that they intended to purchase, in a display of overt suspicion.<sup>38</sup>

The most talked about, and in some ways emblematic, commercial encounters were those whose participants, objects, and location somehow departed from everyday provisioning routines. When neighbors, friends, and family members spent time together, they might talk about what they had eaten or planned to eat on that day or, especially as the price of vegetables rose sharply in the summer of 2008, about increased prices generally. Yet most conversations about shopping encounters focused on event-

---

<sup>38</sup> One-time customers and customer who usually shopped elsewhere might do this when shopping in *mafi kaṭai*. All purchasers were expected to check vegetables for rot and other desired characteristics as they purchased them. Yet it would be rare for regular customers to inspect expiration dates, packages, or products for adulteration. When regular customers in *mafi kaṭai* did this, it was often as a kind of parody or play

shopping. For example, Tamil University students returning from a trip to Chennai were eager to tell the story of refusing to eat for fear of being overcharged for food at *Koyambatu Bus Stand*; my neighbor *Agila* was eager to explain a deal that she had gotten on a toy for her nephew while visiting a nearby temple; *Sushma*, who lived across the street, was eager to update her friends and neighbors on purchases of clothing and jewelry for her daughter's wedding.

Similarly, *Sunitha*, the retired government worker who rented me a room in *Vishnu's Lake*, seemed to particularly enjoy the strategy and skill that might be involved in event-shopping.

*Although Sunitha rarely left the neighborhood, I frequently arrived home to be regaled with elaborate stories of how she had managed to buy items from travelling vendors for an amount that was much lower than their initial asking price, usually half or a third of the first price quoted. The things that Sunitha bought this way tended to be relatively unimportant and of little value, such as fleece blankets in the rainy season, plaster statues, cheap shawls that could be given to friends, or posters with which she decorated the main room of the house. She sometimes achieved lower prices by convincing Sushma, a neighbor who lived across the street, to add additional purchases to the sale, by insisting that items of similar quality could be found for fewer elsewhere or by simply demanding that the price should be lowered. For Sunitha the act of thrifty negotiation and re-telling of the purchase encounter was part of the joy of these purchases. They were not merely objects for household use but trophies that testified to her shopping prowess. She gleefully recounted these interactions both as a sign of her thrift and cleverness and as a way of instructing me about the need for care in certain interactions.*

In making these purchases, *Sunitha* used the same strategies that the older woman was laughed at for deploying in *Anbu's* shop. Yet there are several important differences between these interactions, which are critical to the ways in which they were evaluated by bystanders. While *Sunitha* could easily refuse to buy blankets or statues, there was a general understanding that the elderly woman could not, or was unlikely to, give up soap

altogether. More importantly, *Sunitha* was negotiating with people whose foreign origins (she often described the vendors as coming from northern parts of India) and transient position in the area played a critical role in the interactions. She assumed that it was only reasonable for them to attempt to cheat her. When she told these stories, she frequently stressed that the vendors were visitors to *Vishnu's Lake* and often came from outside of Tamil Nadu. Even if they had become residents of the state and had somehow learned to sell things in Tamil, they were still treated as outsiders.

As Daniel Miller (1998) notes in his study of provision shopping in Northern London, the shopping that people talk about most, what I refer to as event-shopping, is often distinct from the shopping that constitutes everyday life and relationships. When they talked about shopping, and especially when they instructed me in it, most people who lived in the neighborhoods that I studied stressed the importance of taking care to avoid being cheated. I was continuously cautioned to look and think carefully before buying. When described as a general type, *maḷi kaṭai* were no exception to this rule of suspicion. When I told people that I planned to study talk and sales in *maḷi kaṭai*, I was often offered a list of things that I should watch for and ways in which customers were likely to be cheated.

*For example, on November 17, 2006, I noted that Sunitha argued that shopkeeping is actually a relatively easy and profitable business and that, contrary to what I might think, shopkeepers are able to make significant profits. She suggested that these profits are achieved by tampering with scales, adulterating products, and overcharging for basic things. She claimed that one maḷi kaṭai owner, whose shop was located up the main road from us, made around Rs 8000 per month<sup>39</sup>. In the same*

---

<sup>39</sup> I heard several conversations in which other area shopkeepers whispered complaints about this young man. Their hypothesis was that he managed to draw crowds of customers both because his family's property holdings allowed him to work for lower profit margins and because he targeted lower-income people in the neighborhood by buying and selling vegetables that were spoiled, or close to being spoiled, at prices lower than shopkeepers with pickier clients could afford.

*conversation, I asked if this shopkeeper, whose shop she regularly patronized, cheated her in these ways in order to make his profits. She explained that, although most shopkeepers cheat most people most of the time, she did not worry about this young man cheating her because their families are friends. In fact, she assisted his mother while she was giving birth to him, and she is a regular customer. For this reason, he was certain to give her reasonable prices and good quality items. Furthermore, because of my ties to her, he was sure to treat me fairly and would be happy to provide any assistance needed for my project. I then asked if she was likely to be cheated when going to some of the other shops in the neighborhood that she visits on occasion, and she explained that, in these cases also, she was unlikely to be cheated because she is a known long-term resident of the area. She frequently offered either to do my shopping for me, or to give me introductions to the people with whom she did business, so that I could receive the same fair treatment.*

*Sunitha's* description of *mafi kaṭai* shopkeepers in general as potentially dishonest, but the particular local shopkeepers with whom she regularly did business as fair and even generous, was typical of customers who lived in the neighborhoods that I studied.

In retrospect, the observation that, despite being taken as an emblematic kind of shopping encounter, explicitly adversarial negotiation is a relatively rare, and perhaps even deviant, form of talk in provision shopping should not be particularly surprising.<sup>40</sup> Ethnographic accounts of exchange abound with examples of transactions for which explicit negotiation and talk of payment is taken as a sign of failure (Parry 1986; Gregory 1997; Smith 1998; Godelier 1999; Godelier 2004). Caroline Humphrey's (2002) discussion of bribery as a form of failure in post-Soviet Mongolia fits very well with the understandings of interactions explained by friends who told me how to shop in Thanjavur. Arguing against the common assumption that bribes are one of the most common ways of getting things done in post-Soviet Mongolia, Humphrey suggests that

---

<sup>40</sup> This classification refers to talk between shopkeepers and customers that related to the work of commercial transactions. For reasons that I explain in Chapter Three, shops were frequently the site of adversarial talk and even of angry fights between customers and bystanders. They were also commonly places where people vented complaints and grievances about both domestic and more general social and political situations. Customers and shopkeepers sometimes engaged in animated debates and prolonged rounds of teasing or joking, yet they rarely haggled over the price, quality, or quantity of goods being sold.

most potential practitioners make a distinction between explicit bribes in cash and *blat* influence, which may take the form of cash or gifts but draws on networks of mutual aid and is likely to be calculated and enacted differently.

Humphrey suggests that most potential practitioners view explicit in-cash bribery as a form of deviance or failure not because it violates the possibility of fairness but because it suggests that the parties involved lacked the connections and influence needed to get things done without the explicit transfer of funds. Although money and favors may change hands in return for many kinds of services, the need to offer and ask for outright bribes is despised because it highlights participants' inability to reach agreements and influence others to aid them in accomplishing desired tasks through other means. Rather than stooping to outright bribery, people prefer to get things done by exercising the influence of obligations on people to whom they have some personal connection. In her discussion of the local classification of practices that might be glossed as "bribery," Humphrey does not describe the types of speech involved in reaching these agreements. However, differences in the timing, participation frameworks, and material components of these exchanges suggest that the interactions may play a significant role in defining these encounters.

From the perspective of customers living in Thanjavur's neighborhoods, the strategies involved in everyday shopping, successful bureaucratic encounters, and in less explicitly goal-oriented interactions are not entirely separable or distinct.<sup>41</sup> When

---

<sup>41</sup> I avoided focusing my observations on encounters that might be classified as bribery. However, as Caroline Humphrey and David Sneath (2004) note in their discussion of Jonathan Parry's work on as alleged "crisis of corruption" in India, participants' definitions of fair and normal interaction, as well as their understandings of the role of the State, play a significant role in defining what counts as corruption.

conducting business at the registrar's office, police station, or other bureaucratic locations, most of my friends explicitly discussed and planned attempts to contact a relative or friend who worked there (or had ties to someone who worked there) in advance to find out about the procedures and costs involved, and to solicit his/her help in getting things done. On the rare occasions when I had to deal with government institutions, they usually instructed me to employ similar strategies.<sup>42</sup>

The specter of a fully depersonalized market, one in which participants continually try to cheat one another, haunts many conversations about business and the possible perils of shopping. However, among my associates in Thanjavur, it serves mostly as an exemplary and cautionary tale about the kinds of situations that should be avoided. While event-shopping encounters are the appropriate domain for caution, suspicion, and overt bargaining, everyday shopping encounters were shaped by a concern with maintaining relationships by *speaking well*.<sup>43</sup> Both event-shopping and everyday shopping are situations in which customers strive to use talk to tip the literal and figurative scales of a transaction in their favor. Yet these two modes of interaction draw

---

<sup>42</sup> For example, I discovered that the police insisted I get my registration forms filled out at a document processing shop that charged unusually high fees for the work. I discussed the possibility with friends that this might be a sort of indirect bribe *mammul*. *Gayathri* responded to this suggestion, which she thought was likely to be accurate, by checking the costs and system with a friend and cousin who worked at the police station. She asked a third friend to meet me at the police station and introduce me to the officer in charge as a friend of a friend. Similarly, some neighbors advised me to go ahead and make friends with the daughter of a high-ranking policeman, who was interested in discussing music and practicing her English with me, because her connections might prove useful when dealing with similar formalities in the future. Although the offers may not have been entirely sincere, people with connections to bureaucratic, state, and journalistic offices frequently pointed them out to me and explicitly offered to use them in ways that might aid my project if necessary.

<sup>43</sup> In contrast to the travelling vendors, with whom she was proud to bargain ruthlessly, *Shanthi* was careful to maintain friendly and even occasionally supportive relationships with cart vendors who were regular fixtures in the neighborhood. For example, she encouraged a man who daily sold bananas door-to-door in *King's Community* and *Vishnu's Lake* to keep his cart safely locked in the shade of her veranda while he went home to eat his midday meal. For this reason—both she and the cart vendor were proud to declare—her household was never short of bananas.

on distinct language ideologies. I opened this chapter with Bourdieu's (1977) description of *Kabyle* pride in drawing on "strategies of honor" and the "capital of trust" to conduct commercial transactions while holding the need for suspicions at bay because it resonates with what people in Thanjavur told me about their preferred modes for shopping. Most customers sought to surround provision shopping with social networks and routines that kept the risks and suspicion associated with other kinds of transactions at bay.<sup>44</sup>

### *Building Familiarity in Shopping Encounters*

Rather than explicitly negotiating the grounds for fair treatment anew in every exchange, most of my acquaintances in Thanjavur preferred to build relationships with the people with whom they bought and sold things, to draw on the "capital of trust" to guarantee fair treatment in interactions, and to devote a great deal of time, talk, and feeling into the strategies involved in doing this. Even some of my most street-smart

---

<sup>44</sup> Some of the people who described and seemed to successfully pursue these strategies, such as an elderly woman in *Vishnu's Lake* who made her living tying and selling flower garlands, occupied a relatively low and even precarious social and economic status. However, social and economic instability—the inability to receive introductions, to build the histories of interaction required to become familiar or to behave predictably in transactions—could prevent them from working. No matter how well they behaved, temporary laborers who worked on roads and in fields were unlikely to achieve the status of regular customers and so may have spent most of their time living in an everyday that included only event-shopping. People in abject poverty (such as an elderly man who slept in the vacant place near *Manjeeda kaṭṭai* and was rumored to have been abandoned by his family after he went insane) might build consistent networks of pity and charity, but these were unlikely to be as stable as those that could be built through wealthier participation in social relations.

As I explained in Chapter One, concerns with *speaking well* in the neighborhood, and indeed the habit of shopping at *maḥi kaṭṭai*, were least likely to be found among a few very wealthy people who did far more of their provision shopping at larger stores in town. People in households where no one spoke Tamil were even more limited in their pursuit of this strategy. Kashmiri workers in shops at the center of town and government workers who had recently moved to Thanjavur from other states were most likely to be found shopping in fixed price shops. They depended on scale and prices where the mark-up (or fraud, as my neighbors who shopped at small neighborhood stores liked to call it) would be predictable and fixed. Many people who lived in my study area classified themselves as Marathi, Telugu, Malayalam, or Hindi speakers, but most lived in a household where some members were able to speak Tamil and these were the people who were frequently sent shopping.

friends continually complained that they were likely to be cheated in situations such as travel to Chennai, when they didn't know or have a mutual acquaintance linking them to the person with whom they were doing business. Rather than depending on skillful speech at the moment of interaction, most people preferred to do business with merchants to whom they had some sort of tie or to create this tie through introductions and aid by intermediary parties.

The identification and use of kin and friendship ties in attempts to ensure speedier processing, fairer treatment, and better prices was particularly pronounced as a strategy to prepare for bureaucratic encounters. It was also a significant way in which my friends and neighbors sorted through and organized shopping expeditions.<sup>45</sup> Unless they saw themselves as particularly wealthy, or were extremely pressed for time, most people took pains to buy things through people that they knew well, either through prior business transactions or some kind of non-business connection, even if doing so might be slightly inconvenient.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> There were, of course, different levels and types of knowing that would be associated with different expectations about treatment. While I have suggested that becoming a "known person" is similar to the process of creating practical kin described by Bourdieu. People who were said to be like family members or who were recognized as family members often expected and received different forms of treatment. Expectations about what constituted fair or special treatment occasionally differed between parties in a transaction. Failure to meet the financial obligations that other parties viewed as required was a frequent source of tension and rupture in kin relationships.

<sup>46</sup> Meetings with in-laws and possible marriage partners (who were not already kin) were some of the few cases in which people tended not to seek to use connections for aid in buying things. When people came from other locations to view possible brides, they sometimes had members of the family they were visiting meet them at the bus stand to help them with directions but never, to my knowledge, asked for their help in deciding where to buy things. To do so would have violated the need to maintain divisions between the families at these events. Helping someone to get a fair deal was, to some extent, similar to helping to make the payment. The balance between thrift, convenience, and the need to create an appearance of prosperous magnanimity could be difficult to strike. Travel to nearby villages for life cycle rituals (such as a relative's puberty attainment ceremony, or engagement, or an ear piercing at the family temple) was often an occasion for long debates as to whether it was better to buy things in Thanjavur, where better prices and quality could be guaranteed through relationships, or at the ritual site, so as to avoid having to bring things on the bus, possibly allowing them to wilt or spoil in the process. Often these discussions concerned other

Becoming familiar required more than simply being present on a regular basis. Like most of my friends in Thanjavur, *Sunitha* doubted my ability to independently enter into the relationships required to conduct everyday shopping. Throughout my stay in Thanjavur, various friends informed me that I should be careful when buying because, as someone marked as non-local, people would try to make as much profit off of me as possible. Although the title of this chapter is “strangers will see you only as profit,” a more exact translation of the phrase that I translate as “stranger” might be “because they don’t know/aren’t familiar with you they will see you only as profit.”<sup>47</sup> As *Gayathri* explained to me, echoing an observation that was made by many of my friends and associates, “because you are white, when people look at you they will see only profit (*labam*), but if they know you they will treat you well.” As George Simmel (1900) points out in his essay on the stranger, it is possible to distinguish between people about whom nothing is known and people who are known about but remain socially unknowable.<sup>48</sup> Being consistently present and/or known to inhabit a space near a shop might help a customer to secure the privileges attributed to familiarity, but simply being known about was not enough to secure the status of being a “known person” (*nalla terincika āḷ atikamaha vāruvaṅkā*).<sup>49</sup> To become a known party in everyday shopping encounters,

---

factors, such as the ways in which the astrological timing for auspicious events was likely to change the price of fruit or flowers on a particular day.

<sup>47</sup> “*uṅka teriyama eṅṅal lāpām-tāṅṅ pāṅṅpāṅkā*.” In fact, as I explain later in this chapter, people could be known about in ways that damaged their ability to receive fair treatment—or even their ability to participate in—some kinds of transactions. For example, shopkeepers and neighbors alike pointed out that because my skin color, accent, and (by local standards) hilariously fast walk marked me as obviously foreign, anyone who saw me already assumed that they knew a fair amount about me.

<sup>48</sup> I owe thanks to Lee Schlesinger for this observation.

<sup>49</sup> Soon after I rented a room in *Vishnu’s Lake*, I came to *Manjeeda kaṭai* and attempted to buy red peppers to cook for dinner one evening. In response to my request, *Amlan* explained that the only red peppers he had on hand were dried-out and therefore not worth using. When I insisted that he sell them to me anyway,

one had to become a regular customer, a likely regular customer, or somehow connected to someone who held that status.

Special considerations made for regular customers, who were often described using the English phrase “regular customer” or phrases such as “someone who comes daily” (*tinamum vāruvāṛka*) in Tamil, were part of the explicit calculations about, and explanations for, actions made by *maḥi kaṭtai* owners.<sup>50</sup> Although they strove to speak well with everyone, many *maḥi kaṭtai* owners allowed regular customers privileges and services that were explicitly denied to people who were passing through. When recording interactions at both *Anbu* and at *Pushpa kaṭtai*, I saw shopkeepers refuse strangers’ requests for change by claiming that they didn’t have any, only to happily comply when a similar request was made by someone else. These interactions sometimes took place within minutes of each other—ideally, out of earshot of the person who had been refused. Similarly, if a customer came to a shop to make the same purchase on a predictable schedule, an amount of a product that was in short supply might be set aside for him or her. On one occasion, when milk packets were in short supply, *Pushpa* refused to sell the shop’s remaining milk packets to an infrequent customer, explaining that she needed to save them for those who came to buy milk daily.<sup>51</sup>

---

since it was late and I didn’t want to walk any further, he gave them to me for free, saying that since I had moved into a nearby house, he didn’t want me to think that he would sell me goods of poor quality.

<sup>50</sup> There was a widely reported, yet in my experience rarely practiced, superstition/belief (*nampikkai*) that the first customer of the day had an important status. Some shopkeepers (though none in my study area) reported that it was particularly important to succeed in making a sale to their first customer and occasionally cited their belief in attempts to get their first customer to buy something. Yet all of the *maḥi kaṭtai* shopkeepers who I interviewed insisted that regular customers, even those who bought for low amounts, were the most important supporters of their businesses.

<sup>51</sup> Although they took good care of their regular customers, the owners of the shops that I studied sometimes gave what they felt to be relatively poor treatment to customers who were not regulars. For example, although *Anbu* was quick to tell me that his shop’s refrigerator functioned very poorly and that I should not

In interactions, both customers and shopkeepers called on the status of particular people as regular customers in order to justify requests for better treatment or to explain why some people might get service before others. The extent of the privileges that the status could endow was not always a point of agreement.<sup>52</sup> Members of both groups explicitly recognized and commented on the value of the greater knowledge, predictability, and suspension of suspicion that the regular status allowed them, yet no one explained it in quite these terms. The familiarity and predictability embodied by regular customers (and, from the perspective of customers, by the shops that they visited on a routine basis) was a hedge against risk. When people did not have direct relationships with their interlocutors in trade, they often enlisted third parties to provide introductions, work as intermediaries, or sometimes implicitly act as guarantors of good behavior.

Although they helped to ensure fair treatment generally, such introductions were particularly important as a means of securing credit. When people were new to an area or required to make a new category of purchase, they frequently gained introductions to merchants through friends or family members who had the possibility of enriching their

---

buy milk from him, he kept a few packets of milk on hand which he might sell to people who were passing through the area. Similarly, like most other shopkeepers in *King's Community*, he sold packaged goods to regular customers for less than the marked manufacturer's suggested retail price (MSRP). Customers who were simply passing through the area, or who were not regulars at his shop, were less likely to be given this discount. Unlike adulteration of packaged goods, putting generic goods in brand boxes, or tampering with weights and scales, most of these practices were not labeled as cheating (*ettu, emattu*) by people who instructed me in shopping. However, they were reasons to take care when shopping and reasons why many customers sought to shop as regulars.

<sup>52</sup> Customers occasionally asked to be given a little bit more of something because they were regulars. Although the practice was to be expected from all customers, regular customers were particularly likely to expect a little bit extra to be given when things were weighed on the scale (shopkeepers usually measured things exactly and then added a small amount more to show their generosity) or to be given small amounts of cilantro and curry leaves for free when they purchased a large quantity of vegetables. Shopkeepers, in turn, expected their regular customers to allow delays in the return of change or to accept others sorts of in-kind payment (perhaps a piece of candy or an extra piece of ginger) when small coins were in short supply.

relationship with both parties by the transaction of bringing them aid or business.<sup>53</sup> For example, students at Tamil University who stayed in Thanjavur frequently provided introductions for, or even carried out business on behalf of, friends who stayed at the university hostels and did not know shopkeepers in town. Similarly, my neighbors, most of who had spent several years, if not their entire lives, in the city, often took time off to help relatives who lived in villages when they came to town to make purchases.<sup>54</sup>

Although they were often offered as a courtesy, such introductions might entail the assumption of financial responsibility. For example, *Gayathri*'s cousin (*aṇṇāṇ*), *Manohar*, gave one such introduction to *Anbu* on behalf of a friend who used *Anbu*'s shop to buy provisions for a family event. When *Manohar*'s friend disappeared without payment, *Manohar* took responsibility to pay his friend's debt. *Anbu* emphasized that before he would consider giving anyone written credit, he would be sure to give them

---

<sup>53</sup> Providing a shopkeeper and customer with introductions could be a liability if things went poorly. Several people told me, with a fair amount of pride, that they had paid bills on behalf of friends who had bought things from shops and failed to pay for them. When a woman in *King's Community* who sold saris to neighbors on credit and made a profit on the interest (a fairly common side-business for women who stayed at home) failed to collect payments from one of her other customers, she called on the other neighbors, who had provided her with an introduction to the missing party, to help her track the defaulting debtor down. In contrast, when things went well, these introductions could enhance the introducer's reputation with both of the parties involved.

<sup>54</sup> Networks of what Bourdieu describes as "practical kin" were often supported and supplemented by real kin relations. For example, *Gayathri* took a day off from classes at the university to help a cousin who lived in a village buy anklets for his wife who had recently had a baby. He arrived that morning, with his wife, at the house where *Gayathri* was staying, and, after explaining what he wanted, she took him to a jewelry store in town whose proprietor she knew and had a working relationship with (in part because she frequently brought him projects from other University students who stayed at the hostel and needed help getting things done in town). Although her cousin set the price range and made the final payment, while his wife and I sat at the back of the store and gave approval on the style of anklet selected, *Gayathri* did the bulk of the shopping work. She not only introduced her cousin to the merchant but also gave feedback on which models he should show, gently pushed for a "special price," and did most of the work of making the purchase.

As she explained afterwards, her role in helping was not simply to get her cousin a better price but also to act as a style consultant. Because she lived in town and had more knowledge of the "latest styles," such as the current vogue for thinner, less ornate anklets, she'd been nominated to help her cousin to make a selection that would be fashionable. While introductions and mediation of relationships was certainly an important part of helping people to shop, it was neither the only one nor always the most important.

several loans for amounts less than Rs 50 and note how promptly and correctly he was paid back. He also explained that once a family delayed payment for a significant amount of time, he would refuse to give them credit again in the future.

A similar system of introductions and shared responsibility allowed me, as an obvious non-resident, to quickly establish the relationships needed to make purchases on credit and to conduct the recordings needed for my research. Rather than approaching shopkeepers alone, I went with friends who already shopped at the location I was visiting and were able to provide me with a sort of introduction and guarantee of my good behavior. I, in turn, was then held responsible for the debts and actions of the members of these friends' families. When a close friend's family had been far slower than usual for paying for items purchased on account and had avoided coming to the shop so as not to be nagged about it, *Anbu* pointedly mentioned their debt to me while I was at his shop recording conversations. Although he did not directly ask me to pay the balance on their account, he asked me about the family's financial situation and mentioned that their non-payment made things difficult for him.

Whether or not such introductions were available, once the interactions and transactions that constituted a direct relationship had begun, customers needed to speak and act in particular ways if they hoped to achieve or maintain the status of a familiar regular. *Gayathri*, who seemed to enjoy instructing me and others on how best to speak and shop, was a particular master of strategies for becoming familiar.

*Gayatri came with me to an Internet café in town in order to learn how to send email attachments. While she sat next to me, waiting for other tasks to be completed, she struck up a conversation with the young woman who worked as a clerk in the shop, asking questions such as where she had been to school and where in the city she lived, while sharing similar details about herself. After completing this and other passages of*

*small talk, Gayatri proceeded to ask about the costs of different kind of Tamil teaching CDs and what she might do in order to buy one for her nephew.*

*Since her nephew was less than two years old at the time and she didn't have access to a computer at home, I asked Gayatri why she had been so interested in asking about the CDs. Gayatri explained that she hadn't been particularly interested in getting the CDs; instead, she had been particularly interested in getting to know the clerk and in becoming someone who would be remembered by her. Gayatri pointed out that by associating herself with me, a regular customer, finding some common links in their backgrounds, and suggesting her potential as a future customer, she had made it more likely that the clerk would aid her in the future.*

*I don't know whether or not Gayatri ever needed to seek aid from the woman who worked at that internet café, but in the following year, using similar strategies, she was able to use the Internet on credit at a number of internet cafes in the area that did not officially allow it and to buy discounted Tamil teaching CDs in order to conduct a research project. On this and other occasions, the strategy in which Gayathri instructed me was one of getting to know and speaking well with people before she asked for explicit kinds of aid from them.*

Although she often presented it as a strategy by which she might meet some particular end, *Gayathri*, like many of my friends and neighbors, also stressed a general need to *speak well* and have a *good name (nalla pēcu)* in the areas she frequented. She once suggested, as part of a critique of some conspicuously wealthy neighbors who failed to do this, that doing so was important because if, for example, she passed out in the street, she could depend on people in the area to help her before she could be gotten to a doctor or found by her family.

The relationships of familiarity that enabled everyday provision shopping were not a simple, easy, or automatic result of spatial co-presence. Similarly, although many participants in these interactions seemed to find them pleasurable in their own right, I do not mean to suggest that the demands of familiarity were always easy or benign. Despite explicit discussion of tricks and strategies, speakers did not present themselves as fully strategic in, or in control of, these interactions. Many of my conversations with customers and shopkeepers included laments about relationship failures, doubts about the

ways in which words or actions had been understood, and uncertainty about the ways in which recent pasts might shape transactions in the future.<sup>55</sup> Yet all but the most elite of Thanjavur's shoppers seemed to agree that rather than being opposed to sociality, domesticity, and familiarity, trade—even in goods that came from far away and could easily be described as classically alienated—was best carried out through the creation of networks of familiarity, trust, and even intimacy.

### *Phatic Communion in Situations of Ongoing Talk*

Scholars of language and interactions often refer to the aspect of language that serve to create, maintain, and confirm connections as phatic. The invention of “phatic communion” to describe talk that serves to manage connections between interlocutors is usually credited to Bronislaw Malinowski's (1923) appendix on the speech of “savages” in Ogden and Richard's *The Meaning of Meaning*. Embarking on this contextually linked functional analysis, he raises the problem of talk about the obvious and shared conventions, which seems to fill no function:

Inquiries about health, comments on weather, affirmations of some sublimely obvious state of things—all such are exchanged, not in order to inform, not in this case to connect people in action, certainly not in order to express any thought. (1938, p. 313)

---

<sup>55</sup> Shopkeepers spoke quietly but bitterly about customers who had deserted them, especially when these customers now walked by the shop without speaking or had moved away suddenly, leaving debts unpaid. Customers sometimes lamented the need to avoid their usual shop or, with tears in their eyes, the fear that they might be unable to pay a debt when asked to do so. Yet worry about destruction of these ties paled in contrast to people's reactions at having been cheated by friends or business partners or the recollection of situations in which family members had failed to provide expected forms of care or financial support. Despite continual affirmations of trust, care, and familiarity, shopkeepers acknowledged in private interviews an expectation that some of their regular customers would abandon them, occasionally with unpaid debts. Similarly, regular customers—when out of earshot of the shopkeepers—occasionally complained about the quality of products they were sold or insisted that the prices asked were too high. Even under the best of circumstances, the possibilities for trust and expectations for good behavior between shopkeepers and customers were far less than those assumed in relationships between people who were kin.

Malinowski solves the problem of seemingly meaningless talk by concluding that such talk serves to produce phatic communion, ties through language that constitute a sort of basic form of sociability:

...in discussing the function of Speech in mere sociabilities, we come to one of the bedrock aspects of man's nature in society. There is in all human beings the well-known tendency to congregate, to be together, to enjoy each other's company...now speech is the intimate correlate of this tendency, for, to a natural man, another man's silence is not a reassuring factor, but, on the contrary, something alarming and dangerous. (1938, p. 314)

While I agree with Malinowski's assertion that connections through talk, and ordinary talk at that, should be viewed as fundamental to what allows humans to work and get along with each other, there is a critical problem with Malinowski's description of phatic communion as the "language used in free, aimless, social intercourse" (1923, p. 313).<sup>56</sup>

Although it is a near perfect match for the ways in which participants are likely to describe the kind of talk that I wish to highlight, this definition relegates phatic communion to talk that is unmarked in both features and function.

Roman Jakobson defines the phatic function of language as that aspect of "...messages primarily serving to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue communication, to check whether the channel works" (1990, p. 75). All aspects of speech (and perhaps of interaction) which do similar channel management work can be described as phatic.

Although this definition helps to identify instances of language that might be defined as phatic, it is often interpreted to suggest that such utterances are simply a means towards other linguistic elements in an instance of communication, rather than significant social

---

<sup>56</sup> I draw heavily on Malinowski's discussion of the term, not because I believe in definition through alleged baptismal or originary moment, but because his description of the uses of phatic communion comes closer to my own than many of the other versions in circulation.

moves in and of themselves. The claim that scholars of communication must attend to things other than the referential content of speech is now far from novel. My aim is to contribute to examination of the ways in which phatic talk might participate in the creation and maintenance of relationships—to produce social channels that persist beyond those that are created and managed in a moment of interaction.<sup>57</sup>

Rather than simply establishing or confirming what Jakobson refers to as “channel” in a given instance of face-to-face interaction, supportive interchanges that occur in and around *mafi kaṭtai* serve to establish more durable channels that secure trade relationships. Emphasis on displays of attentiveness and care for relationships may be particularly important features of talk in multiple domains of Tamil social life (see, for example, Trawick’s 1992 discussion of the importance of expressions of affection in a Tamil family), but it should not be surprising that exchanges of seemingly idle phatic talk, and other social gestures that have similarly been described as empty, are a critical element of interactions between people engaged in ongoing trade.

In a study of interactions that seem very similar to those that I recorded at grocery shops in Thanjavur, Maria Placenia (2004, 2005) reports that shopkeepers and customers conversing in small shops in Quito, Ecuador devote most of their time to phatic exchange. Yet, rather than suggesting that this finding may represent and inform distinctions between kinds of shopping, or between different possible relationships between shopkeepers and customers, Placenia assumes that this emphasis on phatic talk is equally applicable to all commercial encounters. She suggests that more research may

---

<sup>57</sup> Erving Goffman (1971, 1981), Justine Coupland (2000, 2003), Maria Placenia (2004, 2005), and Julia Elyachar (2010) have examined other versions of this question. Many studies of gossip, such as those by Nico Besnier (2009) and Don Brenneis (1985) deal with similar themes.

be required to determine whether such talk is merely part of what Normal Fairclough (1995) describes as the “pseudo-intimacy” of public encounters, if it is a “cultural trait” of service encounters in Quito, or if it is “language play... aimed at entertaining [that goes] beyond what is required for a courteous and harmonious purchasing/selling relationship” (2004, p. 240). I have no way in which to assess the nature of trade in small shops in Quito. However, based on the resemblance between the talk Placenia describes and exchange in similar shops in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, I suspect that the answer as to why so much time is devoted to phatic talk might be found in an explanation given by one of the shopkeepers she interviewed. Placenia reports that one shopkeeper described the value of “a ‘personal touch’ as being that would make both him and the customer feel more at ease...”(2004, p. 240). While I do not wish to suggest that ideological connections between ways of speaking, relationships, credibility, and kinds of shopping encounters are the same anywhere, I also suspect that similar division between commercial domains via ways of speaking may be present in many other place and have been overlooked by researchers who insist on treating shopping and commerce as a single domain of activity rather than one in which significant social divisions are present.<sup>58</sup>

I do not wish to suggest that enjoyment is not a social end in its own right. Some customers and bystanders reported coming to the shops where I studied because talking to shopkeepers and neighbors was a pleasant way to pass time. Phatic exchanges of talk between shopkeepers and customers may put both parties at ease because they mark the

---

<sup>58</sup> There are already several important accounts that refuse to treat commerce as a uniform domain and take seriously the idea that ways of speaking may play an important role in creating semiotic divisions between domains of exchange (for example, Bauman, 1986). However many of these studies focus on the ways in which ways of speaking signal and mark markets in which cheating and dishonesty are the norm.

domains of “known persons” and “everyday” shopping that help to keep the need for suspicion at bay.

### *Creating Familiarity and Trust in Interactions*

Although I use the words *trust* and *familiarity* to describe these relationships and to evaluate the interactions that have the capacity to produce them, most of the participants talked about them in terms of places and people that were *close* (*nerungiya*), *known well*, (*nalla teriyum*), *had a good name* (*nalla pēr(u)*), or who *spoke well* (*nalla pēcu vāṅka*).<sup>59</sup> As I suggested in the previous chapter, forms and evaluations of talk in *maḷi kaṭai* are different from those in which speakers engage in when at home, in places they describe as public, and in relatively unfamiliar places. As friends and neighbors explained to me soon after I started my project, talk in and around *maḷi kaṭai* could include a wide variety of ways of speaking.<sup>60</sup> During my first months of recording conversations in *Anbu*’s shop, I recorded customers addressing him by a variety of terms: *tampi* (younger brother), *aṅṅaṅ* (older brother), and *nī* and *nīṅka* (the intimate and less intimate second person pronouns). A middle aged-woman, whose speech *Gayathri* described as typical of a villager, called him *kaṅṅu* (literally, “my eye,” but usually translated as “beloved”). Although many textbook representations of speech with shopkeepers use less intimate forms of address, people interacting in *Anbu*’s shop seemed

---

<sup>59</sup> Although the word does not have the same set of meanings as “close” in English, spatial proximity certainly helped to shape these relationships.

<sup>60</sup> People who were used to pedagogical models that focused on “pure” (*cutām*) literary Tamil often questioned my choice of shops as a place in which to study Tamil because speech there could be casual and rough. However, when I explained that I was interested in learning ordinary speech (*catarṅamākā pecu*) and in getting a sense for how people of different backgrounds spoke, they often changed their position to agreeing that shops were an appropriate site to learn such things.

to prefer more intimate forms of address, sometimes adding the intimate particle (ṭa ) when addressing him.<sup>61</sup> Yet like other customers and shopkeepers that I interviewed, they suggested that a wide range of address terms could be appropriate in shopping interactions.

When I asked *Anbu* and other shopkeepers about how they spoke to customers, if they were careful to use particular forms of address or to use words associated with particular caste or regional dialects while avoiding others, they generally replied that how they spoke was unimportant as long as they spoke in an affectionate way.<sup>62</sup> As I got up to leave from conducting a recording/observation session during the first week that I spent in *Anbu*'s shop he explicitly suggested that I could call (and think of him) as either *tampi* (younger brother) or *aṇṇaṇ* (elder brother), depending on which pleased me.<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>61</sup> Similarly intimate ways of speaking seemed to be common at most other shops in the area. One noted exception was *Pushpa*'s speech during the first six months after her shop opened. I went there initially after *Gayathri* told me that a new shop had opened up behind her house in which the female shopkeeper addressed everyone (*Gayathri* explained this laughing and with great emphasis), even children, with the more respectful pronoun *ninga* all of the time. Although this practice seemed to soften as *Pushpa* became more familiar with the area (indeed she seemed to address some children with *ni* all the time even during my early weeks of recording, so it's likely that *Gayathri*'s report was exaggerated), she did continue to speak in ways that were a bit more reserved than the speech of most shopkeepers; she was also much more ready than her husband and other successful shopkeepers to display anger and frustration with customers. I'm not sure to what extent *Pushpa* was aware of this difference in style or conscious of her use of it. When I asked her about it she simply stressed the importance of speaking politely. I have a hunch that it may have reflected the fact that especially during her first six months in the new location, she loathed having to work in the shop and resented the mismatch between her occupation, her education, and her customer base.

<sup>62</sup> Some shop and market workers seemed to speak in ways associated with particular regions and caste affiliations, especially when these affiliations were shared with their customers. Marathi traders in the vegetable market near the old bus stand used Marathi address terms for their Marathi customers (although they usually carried out other parts of transactions in Tamil.) *Karthikeyan* occasionally used address terms marked as *Nadar* – *annaci* instead of *annan* when interacting with other *Nadar* men (some of whom were his relatives) in the shop and when speaking with his brothers. Yet many shopkeepers and customers seemed to switch between kin terms, other affectionate forms of address, and *madam* and *sir* in interactions with their customers.

<sup>63</sup> Despite making this offer, *Anbu* worked quietly and tactfully to find out my age and my position with respect to him. When he asked, I introduced myself as being roughly the same age as *Gayathri*, who had been two years ahead of him in school (which, suggested that I was several years older than he was).

Rather than valuing prescriptive correctness, ways of speaking associated with particular castes, or ways of speaking that are considered polite, discussion of talk with neighbors and in *maḥi kaṭai* tended to base determinations of what counted as *speaking well* as a kind of talk that reflected kindness, investment, and familiarity.

When I asked friends in Thanjavur to identify who in the area spoke well (*iṅke yār-yāru rompā nalla pēcuvāṅka?*), they commonly responded by naming people with whom they spoke frequently and /or for a significant duration. *Gayathri's* first answer to this question was a teacher, who had also briefly acted as a landlord to her mother, who came to her mother's house to chat on a regular basis, often for hours at a time.<sup>64</sup> The entire period of the visit need not be spent in talk; indeed, she might spend time amusing the children who lived across the way or sitting quietly as *Gayathri's* mother completed some task. Compliments on *speaking well* often followed queries about the welfare and projects of various people to whom my interlocutors were connected. They also came at the ends of jokes and other kinds of talk that might be viewed as particularly

---

Although I was a bit older than *Anbu*, he was already married and had been running his own business for five years, whereas I was unmarried and still a student. I opted to call *Anbu* "*annan*" (*elder-brother*) (a role which he seemed to take very seriously) out of recognition of these differences and in order to enforce his expert status with respect to me. He constantly advised me on correct behavior, discouraging me from moving about alone quite so much and suggesting, very politely, that I should go home in the evening, rather than conducting recordings at his shop.

<sup>64</sup> I don't think that it was coincidental that one of this woman's son's was a very successful local shopkeeper. Although the need to *speak well* was certainly greatest for shopkeepers while working in their shops, the need to maintain a good reputation among their customers certainly applied, both to them and to their family members, at other times as well. There were, however, some exceptions in which people made distinctions between shopkeepers and their associates. A family who kept a popular petty shop in *Vishnu's Lake*, for example, was rumored to have two adult sons who were described as "rowdies," one of whom was rumored to have AIDS (implicitly taken as a sign of participation in unsavory behavior). Although this information came up in conversations when the shop was mentioned, it was often softened with exclamations of pity (*pāvām*) and clarification that the shopkeepers were very good people.

affectionate.<sup>65</sup> I confirmed this assertion by asking both *Gayathri* and *Sundar*, a friend from a nearby village who helped us to transcribe recordings, whether *speaking well* would better describe someone who spoke very correctly but like a stranger or someone who spoke affectionately but a bit coarsely. Both of them agreed that the term applied to the latter kind of speech.<sup>66</sup>

Although *speaking well* is associated with particular kinds of language use, descriptions of people as *speaking well* are also likely to refer to kinds of relationships and practices such as kind and attentive actions that are not part of speaking. Face-to-face talk is a critical and emblematic mode of interaction in many relationships, although it is not the only form of semiotic mediation that is used to evaluate them. As Paul Kockelman (Kockelman 2005) observes, gesture, gaze, and body position can be used to support or undermine alignment in interaction. Demonstrating care, giving food, or simply spending time in silent co-presence may also be seen as fulfilling the obligations

---

<sup>65</sup> I took most positive comments about my own speech as remarks on the fact that, as a foreigner, I was making an effort to speak Tamil. However, as my speech became more fluent, comments about me as *speaking well* sometimes reflected the care or humor that that I showed in addressing others. A particularly memorable instance of this use occurred at *Gayathri*'s (very recently met and married) husband's house in Chennai one morning, as she proceeded to "play-fight" with him for having bought her Boost (a health mixture usually consumed with hot milk by children) and given it to her to drink. He did so after she had told him (falsely) that she never drank tea or coffee in the evenings, in order to discourage him from going to the effort and expense of buying powder and making a preparation just for her. She teasingly told him that no one would drink Boost as an adult. He, with slightly more seriousness and some frustration, responded that he did on occasion. In an attempt to help to break the ice between them, I insisted to *Gayathri*, who, at about 4'1" is considered remarkably short, that both her husband and I were occasional Boost drinkers, and that perhaps she wouldn't be quite so small if only she had taken up the practice. *Gayathri* laughed at my attempt at joking, and told her husband, "see I told you she speaks well." He agreed with her.

<sup>66</sup> This use of *speaking well* applies only in the context of everyday life and relationships. Saying that someone spoke well in class, while delivering a speech or performing some other kind of talk, is likely to have a very different meaning.

of, and thereby perpetuating, social ties.<sup>67</sup> As linguistic anthropologists (Irvine & Gal, 2000, etc.) have noted, evaluations of speaking are often conflated with evaluations of speakers, their actions, and their social positions. Although it is certainly applied to certain forms of talk, *speaking well* (*nalla pēcu*) is often used to refer to an evaluation that encompasses other kinds of practices to the people that embody them.<sup>68</sup>

Erving Goffman describes “brief rituals one individual performs for and to another, attesting to civility and good will on the performer’s part” (1971, p. 63) as supportive interchanges.<sup>69</sup> Although he includes “rituals of ratification” that affirm a new status, such as congratulations on a recent graduation, under this heading, Goffman also suggests that these interactions can serve as “reassurance displays” that secure the routines of everyday life. Supportive interchanges include greetings, compliments on new shoes (and affirmation of other details signaling attentiveness or as Goffman calls it “identificatory sympathy”), and similar affirmations of the stability of status or relationships. I find this aspect of supportive interchanges useful because, rather than treating it as a static or natural result of co-presence, it suggests the fragility of everyday routines and relationships.

---

<sup>67</sup> Although the phrase is rarely used to describe it, *speaking well* may extend beyond the boundaries of conversations in which the participants are the speaker and immediate hearer. It is common to express affection for someone by telling another person, who you know will see a friend or acquaintance before you do, that you have asked about them.

<sup>68</sup> As I explain in later sections, the ability for such talk to be taken in lieu of future payment substitutes speech, and the relationships it builds, for money. The ability to exchange one for the other is, of course, only partial and limited to short spans of time.

<sup>69</sup> Goffman uses “ritual” in part because he introduces supportive interchanges as connected to the positive rites—those that require active performance for a supernatural being through its stand-in—described in Emile Durkheim’s (1929) *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Although most supportive interchanges occur in contexts that are removed from those that anthropologists usually think of as ritual, failure to perform them, as when someone passes by without offering an expected acknowledgement or greeting, may often be taken as signaling a change in status or relations.

Drawing on Walter Clarke's unpublished study of the Berkeley police, Goffman offers the example of a cruise-car officer who stopped in front of each liquor store and waited until the clerk noticed him and waved in a relaxed fashion (1971, p. 75). The supportive interchange, supplied by the clerk's relaxed wave in response to the officer's presence, serves to confirm a normative and everyday state of affairs that is subject to continual encroachments of suspicion. In much the same way, talk and interactions between shopkeepers and those with whom they trade are an important means of supporting and renewing the ties of familiarity required to maintain "everyday" shopping interactions. When a regular customer, especially one who is expected to pay a debt, passes by the shop with downcast eyes and without speaking, shopkeepers are likely to note the event and remark that something is amiss.

### ***What it Means to Speak Well in Maḷi Kaṭai***

Although greetings are the most usually noted and emblematic form of supportive interchange, they are a departure from the behavior expected in interactions between *maḷi kaṭai* owners and their regular customers. Greetings may be absent and inappropriate between people who share other locations and interests that facilitate a state of ongoing talk. As Lesley Milroy explains in her work on Belfast neighborhoods, which have dense networks similar to those that I describe in Thanjavur:

...The solidarity ethic and the dense, multiplex network structure, both of which co-occur with perceptions of shared territory, may be seen as encouraging a pattern of phatic behavior where silence at the margins of interaction is tolerable. (1980, p. 97).

From the perspective of the spaces that I studied, in which insiders interacted in relatively constant and ongoing ways, the absence of overt greetings was not only tolerable but an

expected element of unremarkable everyday speech.<sup>70</sup> To explicitly greet or take leave of someone would be to create a threshold or mark a margin that would otherwise not be there.<sup>71</sup>

As I explain in detail later, shopkeepers and their customers usually inhabit something close to what Goffman (1974) calls a state of ongoing talk.<sup>72</sup> In most situations, explicit openings and closings, which suggest that an interaction is starting or ending (as opposed to ongoing) were a sign of potential trouble between shopkeepers and their trading partners, a departure from a shared everyday exchange.<sup>73</sup> Greetings and

---

<sup>70</sup> With “overt greetings” I refer to phrases that would be expected at the openings of interactions between people who do not inhabit a state of ongoing talk. These include phrases (described as *visaricu* (to ask after) or *wish-pāṇṇu* by Tamil speakers) that people in my study area might enter when passing by or entering someone’s house. Because greeting is a locally situated metapragmatic category it is difficult to meaningfully say that greetings are absent from these interactions. What I really mean is that the linguistic and other semiotic cues used to open interactions are much more muted between regular customers, neighbors, and shopkeepers when they gather around shops than they are at other spaces, such as household thresholds, temple, and spaces in the center of the city.

<sup>71</sup> Very small children who arrived at shops carried in people’s arms were consistently an exception to the norm of not greeting or taking leave of people met on neighborhood streets. Propelled and voiced as if they were semi-cooperative puppets, small children were put through the motions of greeting the shopkeeper and other customers—often in ways that marked social positions and distinctions (they might be made to shake hands with me and say hello after being made to *namaskar* and wave to other customers). However, since these children were not yet independently ratified as participants in the ongoing talk that surrounded shops, or even necessarily as humans, I do not think that their greetings had the same significance as those used by adults. Indeed, the fact that they were rarely made to enact social movements other than greeting and taking leave may have helped to mark them as non-participants in everyday shopping encounters.

<sup>72</sup> Goffman (1981) argues that prolonged openings and closings are unlikely in all service encounters because they tend to be focused on a context of transaction rather than a context of conversation. I disagree, both because, as I demonstrate later, transactions may be blended and conflated with other kinds of talk and because neighbors who meet one another near the shop—those who are not engaged in transactions—tend to exhibit a similar non-use of openings and closings.

<sup>73</sup> For example, *Pushpa* greeted a woman, who lived just four houses down the street and had come to the shop to invite me to her house for tea, with an explicit greeting and a hearty “it’s been a long time since I’ve seen you.” Her remarks were taken as an implicit chiding for the neighbor’s audacity in coming to the shop for a social visit after deciding to do her shopping elsewhere. Explicit greetings are used relatively rarely in the Thanjavur neighborhoods that I studied. When I asked people who it was that they greeted on a regular basis, they sometimes mentioned colleagues or office mates, but never co-resident family members or neighbors. Rather than offering an explicit greeting, people who were familiar with each other were more likely to ask what their interlocutor had eaten, comment on some item of news, or ask questions about other mundane details of life (ex: *Where are you going? You’re going to the university, aren’t you?*). Politeness in Tamil Nadu famously requires that greetings and leave-takings always imply that future

leave-taking were treated as appropriate and supportive interchanges when they explained or confirmed breaks in the rhythm of routine interaction that were not also breaks in relationships.<sup>74</sup> In these situations overt greetings repaired situations of ongoing talk that might otherwise be damaged. *Anbu*, for example, seemed eager to answer customers' questions about where he had been when he left his shop for several months due to an attack of dysentery. Customers occasionally notified and took leave of shopkeepers when they were going to leave the neighborhood to visit relatives for holidays and shopkeepers took pains to tell customers in advance when they were going to close the shop and why.

Rather than focusing on greetings, shopkeepers and those with whom they traded stressed the importance of an ongoing reciprocal exchange. Detailed questions about customers' family members and queries confirming inferences about domestic activities were frequent elements of conversation in all of the shops that I studied. Deviations from normal purchases, such as asking for a ½ as opposed to a ¼ liter packet of milk, often provoked questions about whether or not guests were visiting. These questions, which were sometimes provoked by observation of people's movements or inferences from knowledge of schedules and events, were taken as supportive rather than invasive. Conversations about customers' preferences and purchases might also serve as a sort of informal market research that allows shopkeepers to make purchases in types and quantities that will optimize sales while avoiding waste. Yet the frequency and social

---

interactions will occur. To take leave of someone without acting as if you will see them again is a sign of enmity or anger.

<sup>74</sup> Indeed, greeting and leave taking were part of the way in which absences that commented on the state of a relationship were separated from those motivated by some other set of relations. Going away without speaking was often taken as a sign that things were awry or that a relationship was not as close as one of the parties expected.

detail of such conversations goes beyond simply getting a sense of which products are needed and whether or not payments are likely to be made to demonstrate care for, and constitute participation in, some customers' domestic lives.

Shopkeepers' professional interest in seeking out and confirming information about customers' lives and alliances was often impossible to distinguish from other aspects of their lives. For example, *Pushpa* and *Karthikeyan's* overlapping roles as neighborhood residents, parents of school-age children, and shopkeepers, encouraged them to participate in ongoing multi-directional exchanges about household activities and the concerns that shaped them. Questions about which neighborhood pump was still drawing water, when school fees were going to come due, or whether chain snatchings were increasingly common on the road to and from a nearby school simultaneously worked as supportive interchanges with customers and as part of practical life outside of the shop. The same awareness of nearby households and happenings that allowed *Pushpa* and other shopkeepers to function well as residents of a locality may have also been used more strategically to make decisions about the appropriateness of purchases and to cajole customers to make payments.<sup>75</sup>

Interactions between familiar participants in *mafi kaṭai* interactions usually presupposed a detailed knowledge of the location, families in the area, and relationships between them. Like idealized housewives in television commercials for tea powder and other products, *Pushpa* seemed to occasionally draw on her evident roles of wife and

---

<sup>75</sup> Between 2005-2008, only 10-13 of the 16 shop owners in my study area lived in or near their shops (I give a range of numbers because two shops changed hands and two closed during the period of my study). Yet because they usually worked in their shops for seven days each week from six am to 10 or 11 pm, with a three hour break to eat and sleep in the middle of the day, most *mafi kaṭai* owners depended on others in the area of their shop to provide them with entertainment, aid in making change, and other kinds of *ad hoc* information and support.

mother to make implicit claims to expert knowledge about the appropriateness of customer's purchases. While *Anbu* and *Amlan* also occasionally gave customers evaluations of the products they sold, or made suggestions about appropriate use, they seemed to have difficulty in claiming insider's knowledge of gendered household tasks. Across interactions, shopkeepers drew on knowledge of customer's lives and needs to suggest products and actions that might be taken when shopping.

Conversations in *mafi kaṭai* tended to include explicit performances of knowledge about one's interlocutor. Interlocutors' statuses as regular customers, friends, or even as long-term suppliers are often reinforced in conversations through the use of forms of reference that locate participants within a dense network of common knowledge and relationships.<sup>76</sup> Although displays of shared knowledge may have a practical purpose, such as clarifying who is being talked about, its communication may also be an end in and of itself. As Goffman (Goffman 1972) notes, demonstrations of attention to the activities, needs, and relationships of others is an important way of demonstrating and reinforcing closeness and concern. Knowledge about the needs, desires, and situations of kin, as well as the ways in which relationships make such needs relevant to the interpretation of customers' actions, are a particularly common feature of shopping interactions. Even while coordinating transactions, talk between shopkeepers and regular customers often stressed shared knowledge, routines, and investment in their shared location.

---

<sup>76</sup> A potentially distinct relationship, which I have collapsed under the heading of regular customers, is that with other business owners who live in the area. Shopkeepers who worked near other kinds of shops often regularly spent time when known customers were present talking to other business owners in the area and frequently relied on them for minor forms of aid and support. For example, *Anbu* often had long conversations with the men who worked in the tailors shop located next door. Workers in both shops often helped each other by making change and watching the other party's shop if they needed to leave the area briefly.

*Pushpa*, like other shopkeepers, frequently shared news of events with neighbors who were likely to want to act on the events. When an elderly neighbor, who had been ill for several months, died early one morning, she confirmed that all of her local customers were aware of the news and thereby helped to ensure that they were prepared to make the expected trip to his house as would be expected by his family members. *Mayuran* lived on the street near *Pushpa kaṭai* and regularly came there to buy vegetables in the morning.

## 2. “Chettiyar has died”

*Pushpa kaṭai June 25, 2008, about 7:30 am*

1	<i>Pushpa: ceṭṭiyār pōyiṭṭāru</i>	<i>Pushpa: Chettiyar died (literally “has gone”)<sup>77</sup></i>
2	<i>Mayuran: um</i>	<i>Mayuran: huh</i>
3	<i>Pushpa: nakai kaṭai ceṭṭiyār erantuṭṭāruṅka, kalai-le</i>	<i>Pushpa: Jewelry-shop Chettiyar died (using a non-ambiguous word), this morning</i>
4	<i>Mayuran: eppa?</i>	<i>Mayuran: When?</i>
5	<i>Pushpa: nettu night-u reṇṭu maṇikkām kalai-le tūkki vāntāṅka</i>	<i>Pushpa: Last night at 2am they came to take him away</i>
6	<i>Mayuran: oṇṇu(m) teriyalla (pause) reṇṭu keṭu</i>	<i>Mayuran: I had no idea (pause) (give me) two bunches</i>
7	<i>Pushpa: cilarai kōṭuṅka (.) paṇam kōṭutuṭiṅkalā</i>	<i>Pushpa: Give change (.) Have you given the money (checking that he’s put it down)</i>
9	<i>Nila: ampatu-rūpa-tāṅ-ā?</i>	<i>Nila: It’s only 50 rupees, isn’t it?</i>

<sup>77</sup> The word used here is a euphemism for “has died” which translates literally as “has gone+ completive aspect.” It is the source of the joke in a conversation that follows.

Although there are several *Chettiyar* families in the area, and multiple people living in the dead man's house, *Pushpa* assumes that simply mentioning that "(a) *Chettiyar* has gone" is enough to convey they needed information. When *Mayuran* is confused by her first statement—both the person to whom she refers and the nature of what has happened are ambiguous without context—she provides further information. *Mayuran* then asks a question that confirms that he has understood the news and is interested in hearing about it. He then switches to talk needed to conduct a transaction—the purchase of two bunches of *kire*—and *Pushpa* confirms another customer's payment. Conversations in shops often focused on exchanges of news that was rendered salient through shared locations or other shared interests. While some decisions about relevance were based on interlocutors' positions in a shared locality, others were based on participation in much broader spheres of interest and circulation.<sup>78</sup> Rather than sharing news, many of these conversations served to confirm shared experiences: of weather, water supply problems, and power cuts.

Other supportive interchanges were less serious and more artful in nature.<sup>79</sup> Residents of the neighborhoods that I studied often referred to one another by teknonyms—names that referenced their status as the parent of a particular child. Like using a kin-term, referring to an adult as the relative of a child was viewed as respectful because it avoided directly using that person's name. For example, school-aged children in *King's Community* explained that they referred to the woman who lived across the

---

<sup>78</sup> *Anbu*, who was a devoted and passionate fan of the actor *Rajnikanth*, often shared gossip about the shifting release date for his upcoming movies with customers and others in the area who he knew to be fans.

<sup>79</sup> Conversations between shopkeepers and their regular customers often occurred in the key of play or explicit performance (see Bateson, 1973). I explore the implications of this further in Chapter Five.

street from them, whose one-year-old son *Ganesh* they often came over to admire, as Ganesh's mother (*Ganesh-amma*). They explained that they knew her name, but it would be impolite to use it.<sup>80</sup> Although people who used such names for each other also used kin terms and similar affectionate terms of reference, this form differs in that it stresses interlocutor's knowledge about one another.

While use of kin-terms, teknonyms, and other descriptive epithets were expected parts of everyday speech, they might also provide a resource for more nuanced displays of familiarity. In a conversation that I describe in Chapter Six, for example, one of *Karthikeyan's* customers plays with the fact that her daughter and his middle daughter are usually called by the same short name: *Abi*. By referring to him as "Abi's father" (*Abi-appa*) as opposed to greeting him as the father of one of his other daughters, whose names she also knows, she discursively incorporates him into her family. In contrast to kin-terms, which might be used to hail strangers, these forms of address stressed familiarity and connection.<sup>81</sup> The same forms of reference were also used as a third-

---

<sup>80</sup> Such forms of reference were also common between members of families, especially among people who were supposed to avoid calling each other by name. On the rare occasions when she hailed him directly, such as when we needed to get into the house because the door had been bolted to keep her two-year-old grandnephew *Divakar* from sneaking out into the street while other family members were napping, she called out to her niece's husband (who would be *mama* to her own daughters) as "Divakar's father" (*Divakar-appa*).

<sup>81</sup> This conversation also contains an additional example of the strategies for *speaking well* that I describe in Chapter 2: Although *Karthikeyan* and *Ammoru* both know the names of all of the other's children and have many options of what they could call one another, as well as other participants, in the interaction, their choice of reference terms seems to work to create an alignment. *Ammoru's* address of *Karthikeyan* as *Abi-appa* was also a sort of joke between them. As opposed to simply referring to *Ammoru's* school-aged daughter as *papa*, as he does with other girls of similar age in other conversations, *Karthikeyan* refers to her daughter as *Abi*. While the distinction between the *Abis* remains clear in conversation—one buys from the shop while the other lives there—this use of references blends their boundaries slightly, stressing that *Ammoru* and *Karthikeyan* have named their daughters the same way.

person label to describe people being talked about, often in ways that stressed friends and relatives that participants in the conversation had in common.<sup>82</sup>

The conversation below occurred just after four pm, when business was slow and *Pushpa kaṭai* tended to be relatively empty. *Venmani* was an elderly woman who lived on a nearby lane full of small and relatively dingy cement houses. Her status as a regular customer becomes apparent in a stretch of conversation that affirms *Venmani* and *Pushpa*'s shared knowledge of one another, their shared location, and a degree of confidence that allows certain liberties to be enjoyed and taken. *Venmani* begins the interactions simply by confirming that *Pushpa* is there (she had been crouched behind the counter restocking and dusting the shop's shelves) and asking to buy *betel* leaves. *Pushpa* draws on a careful guess as to the intended recipient of her purchase and quickly transforms the conversation into one about *Venmani*'s in-laws and, implicitly, her relationship to them.

### 3. "Take My Mother-in-Law"

*Pushpa and Venmani at Pushpa kaṭai July 5, 2008*

	<i>Venmani: eṅkā?</i>	<i>Venmani: Where (are you)?<sup>83</sup></i>
2	<i>Pushpa: eṅṅaṅka</i>	<i>Pushpa: I'm here</i>
	<i>Venmani: vettale oru ropā</i>	<i>Venmani: One rupee's worth of betel leaves</i>

<sup>82</sup> I find that I can't help but do this same thing as I write my dissertation. There are quite a few people, *KV's* mother and *Divakar's* father among them, whose names I know, but who, given the strength of their relationship to me, I can't quite bring myself to call by name.

<sup>83</sup> *Pushpa* is bending to get something behind the counter as *Venmani* arrives. I'm obviously there since I'm sitting in front of the shop, but I clearly don't count.

3		
4	<i>Pushpa</i> : yāru māmākkā?	<i>Pushpa</i> : For whom? For <i>mama</i> ? [ <i>mama</i> refers to <i>Venmani</i> 's father-in-law] <sup>84</sup>
5	<i>Venmani</i> : m, māmākku-tā(ṅ) apparōm yārukku vāṅkuvāṅkā? attai pōyirucci	<i>Venmani</i> : Yeah, for <i>mama</i> only, after all for whom else would (I) go buying (them)? His wife has gone. [the idiomatic interpretation of has gone + completive aspect is 'has died' <sup>85</sup> ]
6	<i>Pushpa</i> : vāraṭṭum nā, collipputēṅ poiruccu-ṅu conṅṅaṅ-ṅu? (.) collavā?	<i>Pushpa</i> : If (she) comes, shall I say (quotative) that you said (quotative) that she died? (pause) shall I tell it? [this said jokingly]
7	<i>Venmani</i> : pēcu, pōkapōra mātiri pēcuvīṅka ellam	<i>Venmani</i> : tell it, you're always speaking as if you're going to die and all that [she says this as if to her mother in law]
8	<i>Pushpa</i> : eṅṅa, nīṅka-tāṅ-ē ippo pōyirucceṅṅe-ṅkā	<i>Pushpa</i> : What [still joking]?, Just now you said (she) had died (respect particle)
9	<i>Venmani</i> : pōkātuṅka atu ellam, vāṅka	<i>Venmani</i> : It won't die, all of it, come on! [“all of it” refers to her mother in law who she's jokingly wishing dead]
10	<i>Pushpa</i> : nīṅkā tāṅē, conṅṅīṅkā nāṅā conṅē(ṅ) pōyirucu-ṅu	<i>Pushpa</i> : [Playfully] You only (emphatic)(were the one that) said that you said “she died” (quotative)
11	<i>Venmani</i> : attai ippakki iṅka ille, pōiruca, illaya?	<i>Venmani</i> : Mother-in-law isn't here now is she, so she's gone away, isn't it? [she provides unnecessary clarification, which confirms that she is “in” on the joke.]

<sup>84</sup> Although the term *mama* could refer to several other people *Pushpa* and *Venmani*'s shared use of this interpretation becomes clear later in the conversation.

<sup>85</sup> *Pōyirucci* is the non-respectful form of “has gone” plus the completive aspect. It's clear from the line that follows that *Pushpa* understands what *Venmani* means: her mother in law is away for a bit. However the ambiguity of the statement is great enough that when checking this transcript while listening to the recording (just after reviewing transcripts of discussions about someone had died) Ramamoorthy's immediate interpretation of this line was that her mother-in-law was dead.

12	<i>Pushpa:</i> aiyo	<i>Pushpa:</i> Oh dear [Exclamation in appreciation of the joke.]
13	<i>Venmani:</i> maṭattule māmātāṅ irukkīraru, pōirucci	<i>Venmani:</i> Only <i>mama</i> is hanging out in the village square <sup>86</sup> , (she's) gone <sup>87</sup>
14	<i>Pushpa:</i> appa jolly-tāṅ māmāṅku, attai ille-ṅu	<i>Pushpa:</i> Well then it's jolliness only for your father-in-law, "(my) wife's not here" (quotative) [She takes on an imagined voice of the father in law]
15	<i>Venmani:</i> māmāṅku vettala oru ruvaṅkii, oru kāl liter pāl kōṭuṅkā	<i>Venmani:</i> For <i>mama</i> give- (honorific) one rupee's worth of betel leaves and ¼ liter of milk
16	<i>Pushpa:</i> yēṅ tī pōṭavā māṭuṅku eṅṅecu?	<i>Pushpa:</i> Why? Are you making tea? What happened to the cow? <sup>88</sup>
17	<i>Venmani:</i> āmam pōṭuṅkā, ēṅ māṭu karakkalayā? māṭu karakka iṅṅum ettaṅai mani āvuto, ate pāl vikkita cariyukku oru ṭīṭul oṅṅu kōṭuṅkā, oru ruṗā vettala	<i>Venmani:</i> Yes give that please, why haven't (I) milked the cow? The cows still giving milk, but I'm not sure what time it should be milked at. That milk shouldn't be used (for tea) please give (me) one packet of tea powder and one rupee's worth of betel leaves <sup>89</sup> .

<sup>86</sup> *maṭattu* – the word that I translate as “village square” refers to a meeting place, usually in a village, where panchayat meetings might be held. It's also the place where elderly homeless people are likely to spend their time. By suggesting that her father is there, *Venmani* is exaggerating and making a joke of her household's poor circumstance.

<sup>87</sup> Through this part of the conversation *Venmani* uses non-honorific forms to refer to her in-laws, for example *irukkīraru* as opposed to *irukkāṅkā*. It is unlikely that she would refer to them this way at an on-stage event in front of family members with whom she was not intimate.

<sup>88</sup> Since *Venmani*'s family has a cow it's odd for them to buy pre-packaged milk to make tea.

<sup>89</sup> A poor student of anything cow-related, I'm not sure what's happening here. I think it's unlikely that *Venmani* wouldn't know when the cow needs to be milked. Ramamoorthy, who doesn't know the people involved, but knows the area, suggested that *Venmani*'s family may sell the cow's milk for more than they'd save by using it for tea, and that she may be shy or teasingly reluctant to mention this directly. I find this suggestion to be plausible.

18	<i>Pushpa:</i> pāl māṭu karakkalē, tī pōṭa pāyappaṭuriyā?	<i>Pushpa:</i> So even those who are milking a cow are reluctant to make tea with that milk? [This is mock scolding/surprise <sup>90</sup> .]
19	<i>Venmani:</i> āma. oru nuttampatu jīṇī kōṭuṅkā nūru cīṇeyellam pāttatu nālu pērukku inta cīṇi potum illa-ṅka	<i>Venmani:</i> Yes (that's it), Please give (me) 150 grams of sugar. 100 grams of sugar and all won't be enough. For four people this sugar isn't enough (respect particle)
20	<i>Pushpa:</i> itu aṅṅe pērukkā? inta ṭī?	<i>Pushpa:</i> Is this for 5 people? This tea?
21	<i>Venmani:</i> Mh	<i>Venmani:</i> Yeah
22	<i>Pushpa:</i> oṅka viṭṭe taṅkam velaya!	<i>Pushpa:</i> May gold grow in your house! [This is literally a blessing, but said in a sarcastic way – the implication is that <i>Venmani</i> is being terribly thrifty to the point of stinginess.]
23	<i>Venmani:</i> taṅkam velayātu evalavu pōṭaṅum?	<i>Venmani:</i> Gold won't increase. How much (tea powder) should be used?
24	<i>Pushpa:</i> nā(ṅ) mūṅu perukku-tāṅ pōṭuvēṅ. mūṅu perukku pōtum nūru. aṅṅe pērukku potalām āru pērukku pōtalām, nī vēra	<i>Pushpa:</i> I use (that much) for only three people. 100 grams is enough for three people. But it could be given to five people; it could be given to six people. You're of a different mind. [ <i>Pushpa</i> means that the tea powder is sufficient for three, she's being sarcastic when she suggests that it can be used for 5 or 6. The phrase that I translate is "you're of a different mind" is usually

		used teasingly it's similar to "you're weird" or "you're crazy"] <sup>91</sup>
25	<i>Venmani:</i> oṅ-rupa ṭi tūlu (?) illaya	<i>Venmani:</i> (slightly unclear) Is there one rupee tea powder?
26	<i>Pushpa:</i> irukkē	<i>Pushpa:</i> It's here
27	<i>Venmani:</i> cumma taṅṅiye koṅcam vūtti cīṅiya nēraya pōṭa-vēṅṅiya tāṅ nālu pērukku pattātu	<i>Venmani:</i> just give a little lose sugar separately, a lot of it needs to be added, it won't be enough for four people
28	<i>Pushpa:</i> cīṅiya? inta pālukku atu pōtuṅka	<i>Pushpa:</i> sugar huh? For this milk it's enough
29	<i>Venmani:</i> ayaiya, oru rūpa rasna packet kōṭuṅka inta kannakke atula ētirīṅka. kāl liter pālu, oṅṅū vāṅkala kālaiyil-iruntu	<i>Venmani:</i> Oh my, please give (me) a one rupee <i>Rasna</i> packet and add it all to the account. A ¼ liter of milk, since morning (I) haven't bought anything else.
30	<i>Pushpa:</i> m oru rūpaiyā	<i>Pushpa:</i> Hm, one rupee is it?
31	<i>Venmani:</i> m āma kōṭuṅka, nēraya vaicā(l) tiṭṭuvāru	<i>Venmani:</i> Yeah, yes give (it) please, if (I) keep a lot on account (he/she'll) sold
32	<i>Pushpa:</i> aṅṅakki rēṅṅu rūpa cēkkavē illiaya?	<i>Pushpa:</i> On that day (you) didn't give two rupees, wasn't it?
33	<i>Venmani:</i> mm nā(ṅ) oru nālu vāṅkiṭṭu pōṅṅē(ṅ)	<i>Venmani:</i> Yes, I came shopping four times or so

<sup>91</sup> The conspicuous parallelism in this utterance highlights its status as exaggerated and somewhat sarcastic teasing. Like her scolding use of the proverbial blessing and the pun about *Venmani's* MIL it helps to key her speech as playful. I owe thanks to S. Karmegam for this observation.

34	<i>Pushpa:</i> aṅṅakki kōṭutīṅkalā nīṅka?	<i>Pushpa:</i> Did you give payment on that day? You?
35	<i>Venmani:</i> (this part is a bit unclear) āma avuṅkakiṭa atula cēttu coṅṅē(ṅ) nā(ṅ). cari aṅṅāṅkiṭa paṅam kōṭutitāṅka	<i>Venmani:</i> Yes, with him (your husband/ <i>Karthikeyan</i> ) I asked that it be added, I (said) OK give the money to him
36	<i>Pushpa:</i> nā(ṅ) eppaṭi cēkkiratu? vēr eṅṅa oṅṅu reṅṅu nālu aṅcu pāttu pannireṅṅu rūpa	<i>Pushpa:</i> How will I add it/ (softly to self as she calculates) what else one, two, four, five, ten, 12 rupees
37	<i>Venmani:</i> pāl cetukkīṅka	<i>Venmani:</i> Add the milk
38	<i>Pushpa:</i> oṅṅu-tāṅ	<i>Pushpa:</i> Just one
39	<i>Venmani:</i> collrīṅkalā	<i>Venmani:</i> Will you say it (to others in my household) <sup>92</sup>
40	<i>Pushpa:</i> paṅṅeṅṅu rūpa-ṅu	<i>Pushpa:</i> “12 rupees” (quotative particle) [the implication is that she will inform the person who will pay the debt of the bill]
41	<i>Venmani:</i> mm (she leaves)	<i>Venmani:</i> Mhm

In the course of their interaction, *Pushpa* and *Venmani* use a variety of potentially ambiguous reference terms: *māmā*, which can mean maternal uncle, father-in-law,

<sup>92</sup> Although neither *Venmani* nor *Pushpa* recognizes a need to comment on this aspect of the transaction directly, it is clear, by implicature, that *Venmani* is neither the only member of her household who buys on credit at this shop nor the person who is expected to pay the bill. For more on participation frameworks in interactions and transaction see chapter five.

husband, or even a respected male neighbor; *attai*, which could refer to a mother-in-law, an older brother's wife, or some other respected woman; *māṭu*, which could refer to any cow; and *avur̥ka*, which could respectfully refer to any person or persons (him/ her/ or them). Yet in the course of the conversation, without disambiguation or other immediate contextual clues, these terms are unproblematically used to refer to specific people. Similarly, *Pushpa*'s question about which of *Venmani*'s relations the *betel* leaves are meant for seems mostly to emphasize that she already knows the answer. More importantly, the disambiguation that fills the earlier part of the conversation—has *Venmani*'s mother-in-law “passed away” or has she simply “gone away for a bit”?—is not the result of *Pushpa*'s failure to understand what *Venmani* has said, but an invitation to hear something that she is unlikely to say directly (or even to say at all in most settings). By teasingly volunteering to have heard that *Venmani*'s mother-in-law has died and threatening to tell her that *Venmani* is going around spreading this information, *Pushpa* succeeds in inviting *Venmani* into a round of mother-in-law complaint.<sup>93</sup> This stretch of conversation, in which *Venmani* refers to her father-in-law as sitting in the square like a poor man, leads into *Pushpa* gently ribbing *Venmani* about stinginess. While this teasing does successfully encourage *Venmani* to buy more tea and may have influenced her decision to buy a packet of *Rasna*, the main immediate result of this talk seems to be a sense of mutual enjoyment and fun.

---

<sup>93</sup> I do not know *Venmani* well enough to know the extent to which her complaints about her mother-in-law are sincere, as opposed to good-natured deployment of a stereotypical attitude for comic effect. Yet the possible seriousness of her feelings is not important for the sake of my argument. What matters is that the kinds of comments that pass between her and *Pushpa* are not ones that she would be expected to make openly in the house where she resides, nor among her own relatives. Female friends of the same age certainly complained to each other about their mother-in-laws. Such talk was a common source of jokes and comic material. Yet participants in such talk, whether serious or not, were usually quite concerned that their remarks not make it back to their particular mother-in-laws. The only recordings that I was asked to delete during the course of my study were stretches of talk in which people complained about their in-laws.

Rather than suggesting a lack of information on either side of the conversation, *Pushpa* and *Venmani*'s interaction continually draws upon and thereby illustrates their shared knowledge. Questions about *Venmani*'s household's cow, comparisons of routines for preparing tea, and confirmation of the amount of debt that will be asked for when the responsible party comes to pay it, can all be taken as signs of care and mutual engagement. While some of this talk might be interpreted as that of two neighbors passing time together, the context of the shop and attention to the amounts of debts suggests other possibilities that may be at play in this interaction. Like the liquor store operator's friendly wave to a passing policeman, *Venmani*'s queries about the amount of her household's debt, and her acceptance of the amounts named by *Pushpa*, may serve as signals that conflict is unlikely and payment as expected should soon arrive.

*Pushpa* and *Venmani*'s interaction sounds like an effortless source of mutual pleasure. However, most shopkeepers, and some of their customers, described *speaking well* with admiration and noted that it was a skill that could take considerable emotional and interactional work. I began this chapter with a discussion of my mistaken assumption that *speaking well* in shops would entail successful and explicit bargaining because I think that this assumption reveals broader misconceptions about what shopping is, and can be, in relation to other domains of social life and activity. Trust and familiarity are sometimes depicted as things that happen between people automatically, as a sort of pre-existing state that may be cut or damaged by commercial interaction. In contrast, discussions of closeness and familiarity with people who conduct trade in Thanjavur suggest that the creation of these relationships, and the everyday routines that they enable, requires attention and care.

## *The Importance of Not Getting Angry*

I use the words *trust* and *intimacy* to describe these relationships and to evaluate the interactions that were assigned the capacity to produce them. However, most of the participants talked about them in terms of places and people that were close (*nerungiya*), known well (*nalla teriyum*), spoke well (*nalla pecuvanga*), and had a good name (*nalla peru*). Unlike *speaking well*, which tended to emphasize and evaluate interactions between people, concerns with having a good name tended to be used to describe the possibilities of, and potential problems with, continuity between interactions. Shopkeepers and their interlocutors insisted that *speaking well* was important because mundane conversations had the ability to persist spatially, socially, and temporally beyond the boundaries of an instance of interaction. Having a good name was not simply a question of *speaking well*, but also of taking care that one would be spoken about as *speaking well* and acting correctly in other ways. *Anbu*, in particular, took pains to caution me about what I must do in order to create and maintain a good name. Although helping other people and *speaking well* were important behaviors, he insisted that I should think about contexts other than those of the immediate conversation when evaluating my speech and actions.

*When I was recording and observing interactions at Anbu's shop one evening in January 2007, an elderly Brahmin man came in, with the excuse of buying some small items, and began to ask me if I knew of any (Hindu) temples in the US that required a priest. I tried, multiple times, to explain that there weren't any large Hindu temples in the area where I came from, and even if there were, people were not likely to consult with an obvious non-Hindu when seeking out a priest. The man persisted, explaining that his son had trained to be a priest and that he would like to get work in the US. Since he was very insistent and seemed to be on good terms with Anbu, I agreed to let him write his name and contact information in my notebook, saying that if I happened to hear of people who were looking for a priest, I would give them his son's details.*

*Anbu was quiet and, I thought, supportive of this encounter. However, after the man left the shop and was clearly out of hearing distance, he scolded me harshly, saying “don’t give a recommendation to that man’s son.” When I asked why, Anbu pointed out that I knew nothing about the man, and if he got work on my reference and then misbehaved I could be held responsible and might get a bad name (kettu peru) because of him. I tried to explain to Anbu, as I had to the older man, that I was unlikely to find any such work and had taken the man’s details simply to make him happy enough to go away. By instructing me in this way, Anbu made it clear that although having seemed to support his customer during the encounter, he did not want me to think that he offered any kind of support or recommendation for this customer.*

*Although he spoke kindly to all customers and tended to treat all of them as if he had close relationships, Anbu made it clear that those to whom he would facilitate an introduction were a relatively small subset. On a different occasion, a woman who lived in the apartment block across the street came and invited me to the house to meet her son. Anbu, who, true to his elder-brother role, usually cautioned me about speaking to anyone unknown to me, practically insisted that I go, saying that her son was a very good man (rompa nallavan).*

Like others in his profession, *Anbu* insisted that a good name depended not only on *speaking well* to others, but on taking care to evaluate the ways in which one’s speech, action, and associations might be reported. His care to scold me for the same action that he seemed to support in the presence of his customer is suggestive of some of the more general paradoxes that came with managing relationships while keeping a shop. Since, as *Anbu* explained, business depended on *speaking well* to everyone, he sometimes experienced difficulties when he had to speak kindly to people whom he did not want to be seen as supporting in front of others. Since overhearing—by people who knew and cared enough to report behavior—was common in and around *maḷi kaṭtai*, conversations in and around the shop needed to address, or at least be evaluated in terms of their effect on, a larger pool of potential interlocutors than those who were immediately present.

*On the first day that I conducted a recording/observation session at their shop (in January 2007), Karthikeyan and Pushpa demonstrated the sort of care required to meet the conflicting needs of multiple customers without directly showing anger to any of them. I was seated on the step in front of the shop with my notebook and recorder in hand when, after sitting there and meeting people for roughly 90 minutes, a man came*

*and shook hands when introducing himself to me. He asked some of the usual questions about my project and what I was doing, then sat down on the step next to me and continued to talk. He explained who he was, that he worked as a clerk, and, in great detail, that he had an ATM card, which he insisted on showing me. The encounter made me extremely uncomfortable, both because the man's affect seemed odd and because by local norms it was extremely inappropriate for him to sit next to me. Yet I was unsure of what to do, since he was a customer of the shop, I was a guest of it, and by Western norms, which he may have been attempting to emulate in a display of cosmopolitanism, nothing he was doing was particularly inappropriate.*

*I sat there, befuddled by the oddness of his speech, trying to figure out how I could leave without being rude and avoid being seen sitting next to a strange and overly familiar man, thereby potentially getting a bad name for myself. Gayathri suddenly appeared and said that I was needed at her mother's house. She later explained that, while I had been talking to the man, Karthikeyan had run into the house and whispered to Pushpa about what was happening. Pushpa then ran across the rice field behind the shop to Gayatri's mother's house (located in a block of houses behind the shop) to explain what was happening to Gayatri's mother, who then sent Gayatri to the shop to provide me with a polite excuse for leaving. As everyone involved later explained to me, the bank clerk, who was known to be an alcoholic and a person of bad character, was drunk.<sup>94</sup>*

*Karthikeyan's use of a circuitous means to end what he saw as a problematic interaction may have been shaped by my ambiguous role as a foreign researcher, and yet I think that it represented a kind of action that he was often forced to take in order to avoid overt conflict with people who were customers of his shop.<sup>95</sup> To openly confront and possibly anger the bank clerk would risk future business with him or with anyone with whom he was associated. By going, unseen, to enlist the aid of someone else in the neighborhood to intervene, Karthikeyan and Pushpa both preserved my respectability and avoided having to openly comment on their customer's behavior.*

---

<sup>94</sup>After this episode, Gayathri's mother debated going with a friend to the clerk's house to scold him for speaking to me while drunk. I don't think that she ever directly took action, but she, and most of the other people who I became friends with in the neighborhood, consistently warned me never to go down the road to the section where his house, and the houses of several men who were said to be similarly ill-behaved, were located.

<sup>95</sup> Karthikeyan and Pushpa often employed similar dodges, such as leaving the area or switching positions in order to avoid dealing with customers who might become angry. Clerks whom I observed working in a phone and photocopy booth near the center of town, who were also not the owners of the shop, seemed to take far fewer pains to avoid angering customers and often told stories of having yelled at or thrown out men who came to the shop while drunk.

When I pressed them for detailed descriptions about how to speak in order to succeed at their business, shopkeepers often mentioned “not getting angry” (*kopam vārātu, kopam irukkamatēṇ*) as an important element of what they must do to succeed in *speaking well*. As *Francis*, a *Nadar* Christian owner of a successful shop near *Vishnu’s Lake* explained in an interview, “If I get angry and say something that makes you upset, you may stop shopping here, and tell other people not to shop here as well. If that happens a few times my business will decrease.” Similarly, when I asked *Rajeeswari*, the paid worker who ran *Majeeda kaṭai*, what was most difficult about her job she explained that, “no matter what people do, I can’t get angry or say anything. Even if you do something that makes me angry I won’t show it at all.” The art of speaking as a shopkeeper or, to a lesser extent, as a successful regular customer, lay in confronting situations of potential conflict in ways that avoided direct antagonism.

Ruptures in relationships between shopkeepers and customers certainly occurred. However, in most situations where customers’ requests needed to be refused, shopkeepers seemed to seek a way in which exchanges could be slowed or halted without damaging relationships. The following interaction between *Pushpa* and *Sneha* provides a simple example of how this might be done.<sup>96</sup> It is no coincidence that this interaction occurs on July 4<sup>th</sup>, a date by which *Sneha’s* family, which buys on credit on a monthly basis, should have paid down their debt.

#### **4. “I’ll give you lemons at a discount, but you cannot buy mangoes”**

*Pushpa and Sneha at Pushpa kaṭai July 4, 2008,*

---

<sup>96</sup> I examine this problem further in Chapter Five and suggest reasons why *Pushpa*, as opposed to her husband, so often succeeded in doing this.

*This interaction began when Sneha, a woman who lives nearby on a street perpendicular to the one on which Pushpa kaṭai is located came to the shop, asking the price of lemons (which fluctuated frequently depending on the size of the lemons, how juicy they were, and how quickly Karthikeyan though they might go bad). Sneha agrees to buy a few after Pushpa offers her a slight discount on the originally quoted price. After Sneha finished buying the lemons, Pushpa asked her how much she bought on credit on the previous day.*

25	<i>Pushpa: enṅa nēttu kaṅakku?</i>	<i>Pushpa: What was yesterday's account (debt)?</i>
26	<i>Sneha: nētu patiṅōru rūpayā?</i>	<i>Sneha: Yesterday('s) (was) 14 rupees wasn't it?</i>
27	<i>Pushpa: ha (..) m paṅṅeṅṅu rūpa</i>	<i>Pushpa: ha (.) yeah, 14 rupees</i>
28	<i>Sneha: m</i>	<i>Sneha: yeah</i>
29	<i>Pushpa: m apparam iṅṅaki oṅṅu collurīṅka</i>	<i>Pushpa: hm well then, today you mentioned just one thing</i>
30	<i>Sneha: paṅṅaṅṅu rūpayā itaiyum cētukkōṅka</i>	<i>Sneha: add this 12 rupees to it also</i>
31	<i>Pushpa: ēṅ, nūtimuppattēlu, nūtampatu, nūtiempatu rūpa vāntirucci</i>	<i>Pushpa: Why, 137..150..it's come to 180 (she's adding)</i>
32	<i>Sneha: illa nālakki kuṭutārēṅ nālakki caṅikkilame (something inaudible) kuṭutu oṭiya pōyituvē(ṅ) appaṭiye</i>	<i>Sneha: no, tomorrow I'll give the money, tomorrow is Saturday, give, I'll run and give it just like that (She stumbles a bit while saying this)</i>
33	<i>Pushpa: nīṅka pāṭṭukku irukkatīṅka nūti empatu rūva kiṭṭe irukku</i>	<i>Pushpa: You're being heedless, (your balance) has come to 180 rupees (this is said in an almost joking way)</i>
34	<i>Sneha: ille ille, nāla kaṅci paṅam ṭāṅ-ṅu koṭuturuvēṅ nālakki illaṅ-ṅā(l) nālakalici (.) māṅka evalo-ṅka?</i>	<i>Sneha: No, no, (I'll) get the money tomorrow. Certainly! (emphatic onomatopoeic slamming sound) I'll give the money tomorrow exactly, if not tomorrow the day after tomorrow (.) how much are the mangoes?</i>
35	<i>Pushpa: maṅka-ella nīṅka vāṅkikiṭa maṭṭīṅka</i>	<i>Pushpa: You can't buy mangoes and all that (respect particle)</i>
36	<i>Sneha: cari right</i>	<i>Sneha: OK right</i>

37	<i>Pushpa</i> : patiṅāru-rūva kilo	<i>Pushpa</i> : (they cost) 16 rupees (per) kilo [she says this is a rather severe monotone]
38	<i>Sneha</i> : ceri veṅṅām, nīṅka colliṅṅkaṅ-ṅa right urle pōtumā? ciṅṅatu ella veṅṅāmā?	<i>Sneha</i> : OK, (I) don't need/want (them). What you said is right. [as Pushpa weighs the potatoes] are there enough potatoes? Do you need any of the little ones? <sup>97</sup>
39	<i>Pushpa</i> : ciṅṅatu-ellam ventam ite kūṅṅa irukke	<i>Pushpa</i> : No need for the small ones and all, even what you have given is over (weight)
40	<i>Sneha</i> : m ite pōṅṅuṅka peruca eṅṅtukkiṅṅu ciṅṅata pōṅṅuṅka illa peruca poṅṅuṅṅu ciṅṅata eṅṅtukkoṅṅka	<i>Sneha</i> : Yeah, out this one (in), take out the big one and put in one of the small ones, no, put the big one and take out the small one  [She continues helping <i>Pushpa</i> to weigh the potatoes]
41	<i>Pushpa</i> : ēṅṅavatu koṅṅuṅka	<i>Pushpa</i> : Give (me) something or other  [ <i>Pushpa</i> is requesting a bit more to make up the weight. This is the last audible line of their conversation.]

When *Sneha*'s offer of payment, in line 32, is halting and indefinite, *Pushpa* emphasizes her indebtedness by suggesting that *Sneha* has not paid attention to her account.<sup>98</sup>

Seemingly flustered, *Sneha* promises payment again in reply and quickly corrects her promise of payment “tomorrow” to allow a few more days. *Sneha* then inquires about the

<sup>97</sup> She says this because *Pushpa* needs to get potatoes that will come close to the round amount of weight that *Sneha* wants to buy. Weighing vegetables, especially large ones, often involves a bit of back and forth in which customers and shopkeepers exchange those vegetables that the customer has selected for those that will allow the shopkeeper to reach or slightly exceed the selected balance. Shopkeeper and customers usually aim for the selected amount, but will never put less than asked for. In most cases, the shopkeeper will place fruits and vegetables on the balance so that it slightly exceeds the amount requested. However this last amount is often made up of vegetables that are of lower quality and will spoil soon. On one evening, for example, *Pushpa* pushed the amount of tomatoes I was buying far over the requested weight by adding several which were close to spoiling.

<sup>98</sup> This interaction can be contrasted with line 26 of the conversation with *Venmani*, in which *Pushpa* asks a question—the amount of *Venmani*'s earlier purchase—to which she clearly knows the answer. This affirmation of shared knowledge serves as an indirect reminder that *Pushpa* is thinking about a debt that should have been paid.

price of mangoes, a move that might be taken as either genuine interest in the mangoes or as an attempt at repair. In a much quieter voice *Pushpa* explains that *Sneha* can't buy mangoes. She may soften this statement slightly by using the more respectful address - *nīka*. *Pushpa* uses the same address earlier in line 29, but more of her utterances in this conversation avoid direct address. The effect of this utterance is to forbid *Sneha* from making a purchase, though it is phrased more as budget advice or a statement of fact. *Sneha* calmly accepts *Pushpa*'s correction (perhaps making a bit of a jab in order to restore her pride by responding in English) and resumes collaboration with her when buying potatoes, a much cheaper and more necessary commodity.

*Pushpa* supports her denial of mangos, which partially cuts off *Sneha*'s ability to buy on credit, by mentioning their very expensive price. *Sneha* offers explicit reassurance that she accepts *Pushpa*'s denial as non-hostile “*ceri venṭām, nīka colliṅkaṅ-na right*” (“OK, there's no need, what you said is right”). While this conversation is focused more directly on shopping than on *Pushpa*'s interaction with *Venmani*, it covers far more than the business that is immediately and overtly at hand. Neither *Pushpa* nor *Venmani* address issues of trust and reliability directly, though much of their talk serves to note a problematic lag between past purchases and expected payments. *Sneha*'s general affability, her direct promise of payment, and the fact that she has chosen to come to the shop and interact with *Pushpa*, all suggest that she will eventually deliver the payment required to maintain their relationship as shopkeeper and customer.

### *The Phatic Labor of Everyday Shopping*

*Speaking well* was not simply a barometer of the health of relationships or the credibility of their participants. Instead, it served as a language ideology that linked ways of speaking and related semiotic activities to evaluations of subjects and relationships in ways that produced and perpetuated a particular mode of commercial interaction. *Mafi kaitai* shopkeepers and their customers recognized talk that seemed to be about non-commercial matters as part of the substance of shopping transactions. Rather than appearing only in overt statements about language use, evaluations of interactions, and associated comments on the behavior and value of particular customers this system of evaluation, which privileged the production of phatic communion, was also apparent in the tempo and organization of shopping interactions. Whether or not they made use of speech, actions that produced and emphasized alignment in interaction were likely to be classified as *speaking well*.<sup>99</sup>

Instead of attempting to serve all customers as efficiently as possible, shopkeepers seemed to focus on carrying-out and even prolonging spoken interactions with customers.<sup>100</sup> Rather than waiting on one person at a time, shopkeepers usually tried to maintain an interaction with everyone who was standing directly in front of the shop counter, often by taking one request at a time from each person who was present. Similarly, customers often expanded opportunities for spoken and unspoken engagement

---

<sup>99</sup> As Kockelman (2005) and Elyachar (2010) observe, gestures and other “paralinguistic” activities that produce the channels required for interactions are part of communication and speech. I refer to them separately here, not to suggest that they can or should be distinguished from other elements of language, but rather to suggest the ways in which, by including other forms of action and alignment, Tamil shop-goers understandings of what goes into *speaking well* call for an expansion of the category of speaking to cover more than the production of sound symbols.

<sup>100</sup> If a regular customer was clearly pressed for time, items might be grabbed quickly, and he or she might be served before other people who were already present.

at the shop by collaborating with each other and with the shopkeeper to carry out transactions in which they were not one of the immediate principals—frequently by helping to pass items back and forth, repeating things that had not been heard clearly, or by helping to make change.<sup>101</sup>

It was not necessary to speak or even make audible sounds in order to be counted as “speaking” at a *maḥi kaṭai*. Although “good speech” was the primary practice associated with ongoing and reliable participation in commercial transactions, nods, gestures, the return of an empty soda bottle, and, significantly, the placement of coins owed on the counter, could all be interpreted as signs of *speaking well*. In fact, the ability to carry out a full transaction without anything being said might be the mark of a true regular customer.<sup>102</sup> At all three of the shops that I studied, a man might walk towards the shop, raise two fingers to his lips, receive a cigarette, place a coin on the counter and walk away without saying anything that might disrupt a shopkeeper’s conversation with another customer.

Similarly, relationships between shopkeepers and customers were signaled and shaped by the mechanical ways in which objects moved between them. Although, as *Anbu* explained to me, plastic “carry bags” (usually described by this English phrase) could be purchased very cheaply and most shops kept several stacks on hand, the use of plastic bags to contain purchases was relatively rare in transactions between shopkeepers

---

<sup>101</sup> All customers, even those who rarely went to the shop, might do this, but regulars were more likely to participate.

<sup>102</sup> Interactions without speech usually occurred when the shop was very busy, when someone had a mouth full of *betel* nut, or when loud noises (such as a poorly maintained motorcycle or drilling for a nearby well) made speech and comprehension difficult.

and regular customers. On planned and routine trips, most regulars came to the shop prepared with a cloth *mañca/pai* (one of the normatively yellow bags given out by jewelry shops) or with a re-usable plastic shopping basket. Even when shopping trips were unplanned, shopkeepers were more likely simply to place items in the hands of their regular customers, rather than placing them in plastic carry bags. Unknown and transient customers were, in contrast, more likely to have their goods placed in a plastic carry bag. Shopkeepers were also more likely to give infrequent customers items that were encased in packages.<sup>103</sup>

Although one-time customers were more likely to be travelling and so in need of some form of temporary carrying mechanism, bagging also had implications for the definition of relationships. One-time customers, or those who lacked a relationship with the shopkeeper, were also more likely to be overtly suspicious about the goods that they were given, and so to require the presence of a familiar branded package as an assurance of quality.<sup>104</sup> *Sunitha*, and other people who lived in my study area, suggested that it was important to exercise greater caution when buying unwrapped or unpackaged items (i.e., loose versus packaged sugar or oil from the shopkeeper's bottle, rather than oil in a packet) because they were more likely to be dirty, adulterated, underweight—due to a fixed scale—or not what they were presented as being. While some of these problems might be accidental, others were the result of deliberate subterfuge. A sales

---

<sup>103</sup> Shops often contained both objects that were wrapped and objects in packages that had been either to sell their contents in part or to check for and demonstrate quality.

<sup>104</sup> Unlike the wealthier people who bought goods at “Departmental Stores” most *mañ kañai* customers bought goods on an “as needed” basis. Although some items, such as tea powder, pickles, and toothpaste, were sold in small one-use portion packets as well as larger sizes, shopkeepers opened the boxes of many items that came in bulk, such as candies, cigarettes, and mosquitoes coils, and sold them to customers individually.

representative for “Elephant” brand mosquito coils, a relatively poorly known manufacturer of a product that was normally associated with other, larger brands, admitted that his representatives suggested that shopkeepers place their slightly cheaper product in boxes that came from other well known companies, such as “Good Knight,” and hand them to customers when they requested that brand—insisting that customers would be unable to tell the difference.<sup>105</sup> Whether or not such moves should be considered cheating depended on the relationship between shopkeepers and customers and the ways in which routine transactions shaped expectations. Regular customers often recognized that the products they were given “loose” were adulterated or of different quality than those that came sealed in plastic. Some *mafi kaṭai* shoppers refused to buy certain products, such as cooking oil, in unpackaged form for this reason.

A routinized relationship with a shopkeeper or trader was not necessarily seen as a guarantee of good quality, hygienic, or unadulterated products.<sup>106</sup> Instead, these relationships allowed for trust because customers could be reasonably assured that the

---

<sup>105</sup> I include “or customers who lacked a relationship with the shopkeeper” because some of the wealthiest and most status conscious people who lived in my study area rarely shopped at small *mafi kaṭai* and despite being known to live in the area, failed to become close to shopkeepers. When members of a doctors’ family who lived in *Vishnu’s Lake* but usually shopped elsewhere in the city went to shop at *Majeeda kaṭai*, which was located within sight of their house, they made a great fuss about the dustiness of boxes and checking expiration dates. *Amlan*, in return, charged them the MSRP and thereby denied them one of the benefits that regular customers would expect to receive.

<sup>106</sup> As I explain at greater length in Chapter Four, definitions of what counted as acceptably pure, juicy, clean, and fresh varied between households and social classes. Rather than selling the best products possible, shopkeepers sought to provide products and prices that their customers would find acceptable. There was some difference between shops in this respect. For example, one of the shops in *Vishnu’s Lake* was known for selling particularly low-quality vegetables to the area’s most impoverished residents. However, these differences were also marked by times of day. Shopkeepers often lowered prices of quick-to-spoil items later in the morning, when people who were likely to buy lower quality items at lower prices tended to shop.

degree and type of substitution, spoilage, dirt, or adulteration would be predictable.<sup>107</sup> Even if customers were not given a genuine “Good Knight” mosquito coil when they asked for the product, they would probably be given the same product that they always got when they asked for a coil by that name. Adulteration and other forms of modification were occasionally overtly recognized and even embraced. For example, several of my neighbors in *Vishnu’s Lake* explained that they saved time by buying watered down milk from a man who sold it off of his bicycle from a pail because if they bought pure (or at least purer) milk in a plastic packet at the *mafi kaṭai* they would have to water it down in order to provide tea for their household for the same amount of money. Others recognized that products sold without packaging were cheaper—and therefore a better “value”—or the only option available for what they had to spend. The smallest cooking oil packets might cost Rs 5, but a customer who came to the shop with a bottle to fill from the shopkeeper’s supply could request only one rupee’s worth of oil.

Differences in the use of packaging, and of carry bags in particular, also served to signal and enact boundaries in ownership between shopkeepers and customers. As James Carrier (1993) notes in a discussion of Christmas gifts in the US, acts of wrapping and

---

<sup>107</sup> This explanation of trust as produced through regular contact overlaps with Anthony Giddens’ discussion of trust as built through continuity ( see his Giddens, A. (1984). *The Constitution of Society : Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Berkeley, University of California Press.; Giddens, A. (1990). *The Consequences of Modernity*. Stanford, Calif., Stanford University Press. Giddens suggests that potentially threatening situations, such as riding in an elevator, come to be seen as free of danger when they are incorporated into regular action, in much the same way that I suggest shops and shopping interactions are rendered non-threatening and respectable by their classification as “everyday.” My explanation differs in that I stress the production of familiarity as the result of active, and occasionally explicitly reflexive and strategic, participation by the parties involved in producing the routine.

Although I think that it applies in all cases, this emphasis on familiarity and routine as requiring effort is particularly important in understanding interactions between *mafi kaṭai* shopkeepers and their customers. Because they inhabit a place where even salaried workers may be paid irregularly, where infrastructure fails unpredictably, and doubts about the quality of objects are present by default, many of the people described in this study overtly struggled to act and live predictably in ways that the subjects of Giddens’ discussions do not.

bagging help to mark and make transformations in the type and ownership of objects.<sup>108</sup>

In transactions between shopkeepers and customers, bagging may help to mark the moment in which ownership of the object is transferred from shopkeeper to customer. Sharp delineations between moments of ownership are likely to be of particular importance in transactions that have a clear endpoint and in which participants do not know each other well. In contrast, the non-use of carry bags between shopkeepers and regular customers suggests a more ambiguous delineation of boundaries of ownership between buyers and sellers and between households and shops.<sup>109</sup>

When it succeeds, phatic talk in *mafi katai* establishes not only a channel for communication in a given interaction but maintains relationships that promise to enable transactions beyond a given moment. Shopkeepers and customers allowed talk to work as a sort of guarantor or security. By taking present instances of good speech as a promise of future actions, they allowed speech to build and maintain the boundaries of everyday shopping interactions. Rather than working only in a given instance of interaction, repeated patterns of phatic talk had the ability to bridge temporal gaps between moments of transaction. Greater attention to acts of routine, “everyday” shopping, as opposed to emblematic purchases made from strangers, may lead

---

<sup>108</sup> Similarly, Thomas Hine (1995) suggests that product packaging is seen as valuable and important in situations where customers worry about unpredictability and are suspicious of shops and of shopkeepers. In much the same way that the introductions by guarantors may assure shopkeepers of customers’ creditworthiness, packaging vouches for the reliability of goods (For a discussion of the development of vending machines as a means for displacing responsibility see Seagrave, 2002).

<sup>109</sup> I doubt that either the shopkeeper or the customers that I interviewed, all of who insisted that the practice of bagging goods was simply a means to easy transport, would agree with this analysis. However, it fits well with much of what people did say about the differences in relationships between shops and households.

researchers to pay attention to the ways in which talk that seems to be about nothing in particular can play a critical part in commercial interactions.

Although they were described as “speaking”, the characteristics and behaviors associated with *speaking well* were judged and valued in relation to other kinds of exchange. As I explain in Chapters Five and Six, as well as providing the confidence needed to secure a basis for routine transactions, spoken interactions were critical to securing and guaranteeing purchases on credit. As all but one of the 16 *maḥi kaṭtai* owners that I interviewed in my area census explained, giving credit is a critical part of their business, and one of the main reasons why customers may buy at their shops as opposed to cheaper wholesale shops or the main market located downtown. Cash, especially change in usable amounts, is hard to come by for many residents of the Thanjavur neighborhoods in which my study was conducted, and even those who have cash at home may not be able to obtain it from family members or carry it with them at times when purchases are needed. Payment in full at the time when goods are delivered is rarely demanded by people who know each other in Thanjavur. During the course of my fieldwork I was allowed and encouraged to delay payment with retailers ranging from workers at the vegetable night market, most *maḥi kaṭtai* owners, the company from whom I purchased purified drinking water, workers at the phone recharge office, workers at a photocopy booth, and the women who did my ironing. In all of these cases, speech, in the form of the promise of later payment, was treated as interchangeable with money.

I have argued that *maḥi kaṭtai* shopkeepers and their customers explicitly and implicitly evaluated forms of talk and action with respect to their ability to build the trust or confidence (*nampikkai*) needed to maintain everyday shopping relations. They

insisted that, when speaking in and around a neighborhood shop, code choice, adherence to prescriptive standards, and even overt markers of politeness and respect (*mariyātai*) were relatively unimportant. Instead, *mafi kaṭai* shopkeepers and their customers stressed the importance of speaking in ways that emphasized attentiveness and concern for maintaining relationships. Conversations between regular participants in *mafi kaṭai* interactions were shaped by a language ideology that associated *speaking well* (*nalla pēcu*) with the maintenance of phatic communion. These ideas about speaking are associated with a particular type of everyday commerce and with the patterns of routine action and familiar relationships that define and produce it. In the following chapter, I examine the ways in which expectations and evaluations of talk related to understandings of *mafi kaṭai* as particular kinds of places and to the political and moral possibilities with which they were endowed.



**Figure 3. A crowd of regulars buying vegetables around noon in *Vishnu's Lake*.**

**They would not normally wait in a line, but chose to stand this way for the photograph. (*February 2007*)**

## Chapter 3:

### The Space of the Shop and its Implications: Addressing the Possibility of Overhearing on Thanjavur's Streets

During the first half of 2007, *Rājēswari* was employed from nine am until six pm each day as a worker in the shop that I call *Majeeda kaṭai*. Although she had spent several years doing sorting work in a garment factory in Chennai, she now lived with her married elder sister and brother-in-law, her nieces, and several cows, in a house located a few streets behind the shop. The wages paid by *Amlan*, the shop's owner, who stopped by daily to provision the shop and to work the counter after nine pm, were less than she had made in Chennai. The constant presence required by shop work left *Rājēswari* without official breaks to eat or attend to other bodily necessities.<sup>110</sup> Yet, despite the

---

<sup>110</sup> When *Amlan* ran the shop by himself, he tended to take long breaks in the middle of the day (when few customers were likely to arrive). I was surprised that he didn't allow *Rājēswari* to keep similar hours, and I suspect that, since her wages were paid on a daily basis, he assumed that it made more sense to keep her there all day. *Rājēswari* usually brought a lunch from home, but had to slip off to a brushy area near the lake in order to relieve herself. She found this situation a bit awkward, since the patch of ground was close to the temple, but couldn't leave the shop unattended for longer stretches of time.

Finding spaces and times at which to urinate was an acute problem for most of the women I spoke with who worked in shops alone for long stretches of time (it may have been a problem for male clerks as well, although I didn't talk to them about it). Many of them discussed strategies such as drinking as little water as possible so as to avoid needing toilet breaks. Several mentioned that they had developed kidney stones and similar problems, likely as a result of these strategies.

demanding hours and low wages, *Rājēswari* seemed to relish working in the shop. It allowed her a respite from the demands of living in her sister's house—where she occupied an economically and socially marginal position—and allowed her to enjoy a few stolen privileges, such as slipping free cheap candies to her favorites among the neighborhood children. More significantly, shop work allowed *Rājēswari* to inhabit the role of an expert observer of and mediator in neighborhood life and relations.

On the morning of February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2007, *Rājēswari* asked if I was going to come to the shop to conduct observations that evening. When I replied ambivalently, she insisted that I be sure to arrive at four pm. She teasingly refused to explain what was going on, but limited her instructions to asserting once again that I should be sure to be there by four pm and to bring my recorder with me. I dutifully arrived at the appointed time and saw members of a drum performance group getting down from the back of a truck and building a fire to heat their drums in preparation for playing. Through *Rājēswari*, I learned that *Cilantro Kingpin*<sup>111</sup> and the other men who spent time in the marriage hall located next to the shop had commissioned this drum group to travel from Madurai, a larger city in a nearby district, and play as part of the welcoming program for a visit from M. Karunanidhi, Tamil Nadu's recently re-elected Chief Minister. That night, around five pm, the road in front of *Majeeda kaṭṭai* and the adjacent ground in front of the small

---

<sup>111</sup> *Cilantro Kingpin*, a name that mimics the Tamil epithet by which he was known in *Vishnu's Lake*, was usually listed as one of the three most powerful men in the area. With his younger brothers, he controlled wholesale trade in cilantro and remaining areas. Since an illness had left *Cilantro Kingpin* unable to attend to work in the market, he now spent his time and money on other ventures. These included building a *Mariamman* temple in *Vishnu's Lake*, organizing the temple festival, building and renting out a marriage hall located next to *Majeeda kaDai*, and, most recently, actively supporting the DMK. He was also rumored to be involved in various illegal activities. Although he was intensely disliked by the people who I lived with and knew best, he was often named as one of the most powerful people who lived in *Vishnu's Lake*.

Pillaiyar temple on the opposite side of the street was transformed into the site of a politically and socially efficacious performance: a rehearsal (*aṭukkuppārkkku*) for a drum performance and dance program commissioned in honor of the new Chief Minister. Close to 60 people from the neighborhood gathered on and around the stoop in front of *Majeeda kaṭai* to watch the event.

Why did so many people come to watch the rehearsal rather than the designated real event? How, without any official announcement, invitation, or organization, did they know when and where to watch it? Why, given the variety of other options in the area—such as the space in front of the temple, the steps of an adjacent marriage hall, and the space of the road itself—did people gather to watch the rehearsal from the space in front of *Majeeda kaṭai*?

In order to answer these and related questions, this chapter examines the role that shops such as *Majeeda kaṭai* played in the social lives of their surroundings. I argue that the physical spaces surrounding shops work as metapragmatic frames: implicit and explicit classifications of contexts that govern signs and their meanings (Silverstein, 2003), and I trace the ways in which the possibilities associated with shops as spaces relate to customers expectations and experiences in other domains of life. Although concerns with distinctions that might be labeled as public/private or inside/outside frequently played a part in shaping the physical design of shops and the ways in which people used them, *maḷi kaṭai* do not fit neatly into any of these domains.

Instead, I propose that *maḷi kaṭai* are best understood as a “backstage”, a place in which action happens but is not overtly recognized or recorded in the ways that it might be in other spaces, such as households and parts of the city recognized as public.

Because they provide a space in which people can be hailed indirectly, as overhearers instead of fully ratified participants, shops enable modes of conversation and participation that refuse reflective characterization. I argue that, paradoxically, this framing of shops as spaces endows them with unique possibilities for speech and action that comment on, respond to, and potentially play a role in shaping events that are understood as happening elsewhere, both in the center of the city and beyond it.

Like many other language ideologies, understandings of what it meant to *speak well* in a *mafi kaṭai* were grounded in spaces as well as in assumptions about the particular people who might move through those spaces.<sup>112</sup> As I explained in the previous chapter, overt bargaining, displays of suspicion, and even aggression were expected features of “event” shopping encounters in which customers made relatively rare purchases from people to whom they had little connection. These transactions tended to occur when people moved beyond regularly frequented locations. However, this sort of talk was considered out of place in everyday neighborhood shopping encounters.<sup>113</sup> At the same time, regularly frequented *mafi kaṭai* were often sites for

---

<sup>112</sup>As I hope to show in this chapter, understandings about persons, commercial domains, and geographic spaces support and reinforce each other, as well as the ideas about language with which they are associated. In their discussion of the semiotic processes that produce language ideologies, Irvine and Gal (2000) suggest that multiple levels of association that link ways of speaking to places and the people who frequent them are common.

<sup>113</sup>For reasons that I explain later in this chapter, *mafi kaṭai* shopkeepers attempted to avoid such talk in all interactions with customers. However, infrequent or one-time customers did attempt bargaining and express overt suspicion about shopkeepers and their goods. For example: a well-dressed family travelling down the main road in front of *Amlan*'s shop--probably on their way from Thanjavur's main bus stand to a nearby village—made a great fuss about the fact that they were charged Rs10 (the MSRP) for a packet of biscuits. Although *Amlan* remained calm and cheerful during the interaction, he grimaced in response to their accusatory tone after they left.

gossip (*kisu kisu-nu pēcu*), complaints, and jokes which participants were unlikely to engage in elsewhere.<sup>114</sup>

Shops and their surroundings are, as Jan Blommaert, James Collins, and Stef Slembrouck say of neighborhoods, simultaneously “real, material, and symbolic space” (2005, p. 206). Although I make some observations about the material forms of shops and associated spaces, I do not mean to imply that space should be understood as separate from social relations.<sup>115</sup> Instead, I examine the ways in which an understanding of *maḥ kaṭai* as a particular kind of place participates in the enactment and evaluation of interactions that take place there. As Pernille Hohenen observes in her study of a Lithuanian marketplace, a shop or market is simultaneously both a specific physical location and a “morally invested ‘practiced place’ ” (2003, p.17). I begin by describing the processes of semiotic mediation through which *maḥ kaṭai* were characterized as a “backstage” to other domains of social life, followed by an exploration of the

---

<sup>114</sup> I do not mean to imply that *maḥ kaṭai* were the only spaces in which such talk might occur. Men were expected to engage in this sort of talk and conversation with workers and co-patrons in tea shops, while women regularly engaged in it with neighbors in front of their houses, at water sources (when washing clothes), or with household members and visitors with whom they were comfortable. The hallways and grounds of universities between classes, as well as buses and temples (especially during temple festivals) were other places where people were likely to gather with intimates and engage in relatively disrespectful or candid talk and joking.

<sup>115</sup> I do not mean to suggest that grocery shops are entirely unique in this regard. *Maḥ kaṭai* offer forms of sociality similar to those found in tea shops, which many of the people who I interviewed for this study and other ethnographers of social life in Tamil Nadu (Cody, 2009; Venkatchalpathy, 2005) describe as emblematic spaces for talk about both distant and local events by (male) neighbors who know one another. Although residents of Thanjavur and Chidambaram tended to identify visiting and spending time in tea shops as a practice associated with rural and working class men, such shops were present at the heart of the city and many of the men that I spoke with, including university students, reported visiting one each day. Anyone passing by can stop and purchase tea at the tea shop and such stops can provide an opportunity to treat or talk to companions. Although stops by strangers seem to be common, especially in tea shops located near transit hubs such as the old bus stand, tea shop customers who linger and talk at length to people who did not accompany them there tend to be regulars.

implications of this characterization in spoken interactions, moral evaluations, and political campaigns.

I hope to demonstrate that the place-defining practices that shape communication and commerce in *maḥi kaṭtai* anchor moralities and political possibilities simultaneously. I focus on three interrelated themes: (1) the ways in which people’s evaluation of actions and interactions in and around *maḥi kaṭtai* defined them in relation to other kinds of space in Thanjavur; (2) the ways in which these metapragmatic frames positioned shops within the lives of their customers; and (3) the ways in which assumptions about participation and presence in *maḥi kaṭtai* allowed them to work as anchors for particular forms of “publics.” In order to explain how understandings of place informed participants’ participation in the drum performance rehearsal, I must first explain the place of *maḥi kaṭtai* in the everyday life of Thanjavur and surrounding *pancayat* unions.

### *Locating Non-Places*

Small shops are critical conduits for the flows of goods and gossip that set the pace of neighborhood life and can easily be studied or understood as institutions in their own right.<sup>116</sup> Yet *maḥi kaṭtai* were not normally treated as places where things happened or even as places at all.<sup>117</sup> Most people who spent time near shops—with the notable

---

<sup>116</sup> By institutions, I mean places that people explicitly associated with an overt code of conduct, with moral dispositions, with political possibilities, or with particular stakes of interaction. Going to a wine shop or the part of a temple in which an important god was visible were associated with particular ways of speaking, dressing, moving, and interacting. Reports of going (or not going) to these places were newsworthy and might be interpreted as saying something about the character of the person who went there. People who almost never went to *maḥi kaṭtai* were members of a marked social category: at least for people who lived in my study area, people who went to them more often were simply “people.”

<sup>117</sup> My survey of neighborhood residents suggests that temples were, in contrast, the most “place-y” of places. When asked to draw what was in their neighborhoods (*iṅke eṇ-eṇṇa irukkintrāṇa/ uṅkā/vīṭṭukku*

exception of shopkeepers—treated the shops as part of the invisible fabric of the everyday, as “non-places” to use Marc Augé’s (1995) term.<sup>118</sup> In contrast to other domains, such as schools, offices, domestic spaces, and political meetings in which patterns of speech and action were likely to be more regimented, *maḥi kaṭai* were viewed as both uninteresting and unremarkable.<sup>119</sup>

---

*pākkatil-le eṇ-eṇṇa irukku oru traviṅ pōṭṭiṅkā(!)* most people drew the temples first and some young children stopped at that.

<sup>118</sup> As Augé observes, considerations of place must consider two distinct but complementary issues: both how “spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure), and the relations that individuals have with these spaces” (1995, p. 94). The spaces surrounding *maḥi kaṭai* are home to a distinctive set of practices and so might be understood as places in relation to a particular end; they do not, however, achieve the status of “place” in customers’ explicit metapragmatic commentaries.

I find Augé’s discussion of non-places useful for thinking about the significance of spaces that are unmarked and treated as unremarkable, yet his definition of the term differs from my discussion of *maḥi kaṭai* in several significant ways. Augé described non-places as products of “supermodernity” that are encountered as disembodied from specific histories, identities, and relationships. He suggests that they are emblematically the forms of space encountered when travelling. Because they are produced by practices that constitute everyday relationships, localities, and morality, and because they are sites in which actions are likely to be remembered and talked about, *maḥi kaṭai* do not fit with Augé’s definition of “non-place.” Yet I am not convinced that “non-place” works as an absolute description of the way in which space is encountered or related to; rather, it seems most useful as an antidote to the way in which certain kinds of fixed and bounded places, such as “the village” and “the community,” have been nostalgically imagined by anthropologists.

Some people in Thanjavur suggested that trains, crowded sections of the city, and distant locations such as Chennai offered a refuge from the kinds of scrutiny that people were likely to encounter when near their houses or in places considered public. For example, some university students used train travel, crowds, and trips away from places where they were known as a cover for meeting with boyfriends, wearing daringly short *kurtas*, or engaging in other kinds of experimentation. While modes of presentation in both these socially disconnected spaces and the spaces that surrounded *maḥi kaṭai* were described as “free” (using the English word) they were also very different. Actions and interactions in neighborhood shops created histories, reputations, and memories, whereas those engaged in during travel (if successful) did not.

<sup>119</sup> As I explained in Chapter Two, most neighbors, customers, and bystanders whom I met while conducting ethnographic fieldwork in and around such shops considered them mundane, unremarkable, and therefore unsuitable as an object of study. I was often told that if I wanted to learn about Tamil language or culture I should go to town to hear political speeches, to temples to see rituals enacted, or even go to people’s houses to experience hospitality. When I explained that I was spending time in *maḥi kaṭai* in order to get a sense of how people in the area spoke to each other in an ordinary way (*cumā, sataranamāhā*) my interlocutors often accepted that this was a fair idea.

None of this means that the spaces surrounding small *maḥi kaṭai* were inhabited or commented on as disorderly. The familiarity, comfort, and relative speed with which most people moved through interactions in them suggest the opposite. Similarly, participants’ lack of interest in defining the order or meaning of interactions in *maḥi kaṭai*, should not be taken to mean that they were *liminal*. Rather than

On occasions when *maḥi kaṭai* shopping was talked about, members of the households in which I stayed usually referred to it by saying something like “*nā(ṇ) kaṭaikku pōrēṇ*” (I’m going to [the] shop), when explaining what they were doing, or “*avaṅkā(!) kaṭaikku pōrāṅkā(!)*” (s/he/they are going to [the] shop) to explain a household member’s absence. The shop in question was usually not specified further; without qualification, *kaṭai* referred to the *maḥi kaṭai* at which shopping was normally done. Although they usually did most of their shopping at a single location, many households regularly patronized several of the shops located in their area. If a desired item could not be obtained at the first shop they tried, they might move on to one or two others while continuing to describe the activity in the same way. Provision shopping might be defined by a particular need or goal, such as the absence of a needed object, but it could often be accomplished without an overt shift in the frame of space or action.

### *Pantries on the Street: Shops in Relation to Domestic Life*

When I asked why they shopped at a particular *maḥi kaṭai*, most people explained that they did so because it was close (*pākkatil*) to the place that they happened to occupy.<sup>120</sup> Although it was a preferred attribute for many kinds of shops, physical proximity was a particularly important attribute for provision shopping because it often occurred as a subordinate part of some other activity. Many regular customers, especially

---

thresholds of ambiguity, openness, and indeterminacy, *maḥi kaṭai* were located squarely within the unremarkable (or un-marked if you prefer) frame of the everyday. To draw on Bourdieu’s (1977) category, *maḥi kaṭai* like many other provisioning spaces, were located within *doxa*.

<sup>120</sup> For most customers who came in the morning or evening, this was the place where they lived. Yet people also came to *maḥi kaṭai* from offices, construction sites, fields, or marriage halls where events were held.

those who did not have access to consistent refrigeration or the large amounts of cash needed to buy provisions in bulk, described trips to the shop as part of morning routines like preparing tea and coffee or preparing food for the day. Customers who could afford to buy items on a weekly basis frequently went to a nearby *mafi kaṭai* to fill spur-of-the-moment needs, e.g., to replace cooking oil that ran out while making *dosai*, to buy yogurt to replace that which a baby had spilled during lunch, or to get thread to mend a torn school uniform. Shoppers often came to *mafi kaṭai* in the midst of activities: needing to replace remote control batteries while watching TV or refill a pen in the middle of writing a homework assignment. People occasionally came to *Pushpa kaṭai*, which was located near an irrigation pump that served as a water source for much of the neighborhood, in order to buy soap in the midst of washing clothes or bathing children. Because most regular customers, even those who were not allowed to purchase large amount on credit, might be allowed small gaps of time between purchases and payments, people often treated *mafi kaṭai* as extensions of households and other activity spaces, essentially as pantries on the street.<sup>121</sup>

Shops' locations influenced these purchases not only because they were close to people's dwellings but also because they offered an intermediate space in which a variety of activities and exchanges could occur. Although purchases linked to household needs were common, shops were also linked to other domains of activity. People walking with friends might stop at the shop to treat them to cigarettes, soda, or snacks. Similarly, people often stopped at *Anbu's* shop to treat themselves to a soda or packet drink on a hot

---

<sup>121</sup>I discuss criteria for credit worthiness and related distinctions between customers in Chapters Five and Six.

day when carrying heavy goods, such as kerosene or rice from the ration shop.<sup>122</sup> People who kept cows and goats near *Pushpa kaṭai* usually bought their cattle feed there in the evening, even if they lived closer to the center of town. Similarly, rather than bringing incense, camphor, matchboxes and other objects used in worship from home, many people bought them from a shop located close to the temple.<sup>123</sup> The location of a shop was a critical part of the service that it provided to customers and other who moved through its space.

Customers and passersby regularly received services from shops that weren't part of their official offerings. For instance, most shopkeepers allowed neighbors and regular customers to store objects at their shops while in the midst of travel and transport,<sup>124</sup> to make change for large bills, or to borrow small amounts of money. Many shops kept a bicycle pump which could be used by neighbors who didn't want to pay to have their tires filled by a mechanic or who needed additional air in their tires in order to get to the

---

<sup>122</sup> This use of *maḥi kaṭai* resembles Daniel Miller's (1998) description of shoppers in the UK purchasing a "treat" in order to reward them for the act of shopping. Yet treats might be incorporated into other activities as well. Wealthier children might be taken to the shop to select a snack or a treat as they moved between school and after school tutorial sessions or allowed to make a visit and selection themselves. The trip to the shop alone might serve as entertainment, especially during power cuts or school holidays. Less wealthy people, even elderly women who worked for a meager daily wage, might occasionally take children or grandchildren to the shop to buy them 25 paise-worth of candy. In contrast to other places such as the US, where gifts must be turned into gifts by wrapping, such treats were valued because the recipient could see how much they cost and could participate in the work of selection.

<sup>123</sup> Large temples usually had associated shops devoted specifically to this purpose, but smaller ones, such as the *Pilliyar* and *Mariamman* temples in *Vishnu's Lake*, were usually served only by local *maḥi kaṭai*. Since *Majeeda kaṭai* was located close to both of these temples, *Amlan* regularly supplied the goods that local Hindus used for worship. Although there were two other shops located close to the temples (one run by a *Reddiyar* related to the family that had built the *Pilliyar* temple and one run by *Kallars* until 2007 when it was rented to a *Nadar* family), no one seemed to hesitate to buy objects used for worship from a Muslim. In fact, most people found it very odd that I asked about this.

<sup>124</sup> *Amlan* allowed cooking gas cylinder deliverymen to keep cylinders at his shop, so that they could be delivered one-by-one to neighborhood residents, dramatically decreasing the physical labor required to do the work. The men offered no formal return or thanks for this service but occasionally purchased a soda or *pak* from *Amlan* while in the midst of doing the work. Similarly, *Karthikeyan* frequently allowed people to keep produce that they were transporting from the fields at his shop for short amounts of time.

mechanic. All shops kept large bottles of drinking water that any passerby could drink from on request.<sup>125</sup> Shops also provided anchors for the exchange of news, gossip, and various sorts of situated information. One afternoon, a woman who lived in *Vishnu's Lake* came to *Majeeda kaṭai* seeking advice on whether or not to get rabies shot and on where one might be most easily obtained, after having been bitten by a particular neighborhood dog. Similarly, people who were passing through the area frequently stopped at shops to get directions to the houses of particular area residents and to coordinate other kinds of social and political actions.

Because they were occupied seven days a week, shops also provided a way in which activities on the street might be watched and known about, becoming what Jane Jacob's (1961) calls "eyes on the street."<sup>126</sup> For example, one afternoon while the rest of

---

<sup>125</sup> I never saw anyone who asked for water refused it while in Thanjavur. People walking on the road could obtain water from most houses, and cart vendors and others going from door to door were often offered it when they stopped at a house, even if the residents weren't interested in buying anything. Some households, even *dalit* ones, seemed to make a distinction between the vessels offered to strangers, who were usually not permitted inside, and those offered to friends and family members. I didn't notice any caste distinctions in provision of water at shops, though many shopkeepers did seem to keep separate bottles for use by themselves and close associates and for use by customers in general. At *Amlan* and *Karthikeyan's* shops, the drinking bottle used by the shopkeepers was kept in the fridge, while the one for customers and passersby was kept under the counter. Occasionally, semi-regular customers asked if they could get a drink of water from a bottle that was kept cool. In several cases when customers made such a request, the shopkeeper denied that such a bottle existed, offering them a drink from the common bottle instead.

Shops were not the only providers of drinking water. During the hot season, political parties and other groups interested in social service frequently constructed temporary shelters at bus stops and other likely gathering places and equipped them with a clay water pot and a tumbler. I never saw anyone drink from those in my area however, and since they were left in the open untended, I doubt that the water was particularly good. In contrast, the water provided by shops was tended by and associated with a particular person and was likely to be consumed by people with whom they hoped to maintain a positive relationship; it was therefore probably the best of the free water sources. However, customers who could afford it seemed to prefer to purchase small plastic bags of water or orange punch, which they could puncture with their teeth and drink while walking.

<sup>126</sup> Adult *maḥi kaṭai* shopkeepers seemed comfortable filling this role, and many, like *Rājēswari*, seemed to enjoy the expert status that it allowed them. The unofficial responsibilities assigned to shopkeepers, however, were occasionally complex and conflicting. *Dhanya*, a 14-year-old girl who worked the day shift at the phone booth that *Gayathri* operated in the evenings, once found herself caught between these

the household was napping, *Vaijayantimala*'s three-year-old son managed to run out of the house and "escape" down the street. He was caught and carried home by the owner of a nearby shop, who explained that he had seen the child running alone in the road and gently scolded us for letting him out unattended. Similar services provided by shopkeepers included helping blind people to read things, offering directions to owners searching for lost cattle, and relaying news from town. Although they occasionally complained about people who came in just to chat without buying anything, many shopkeepers seemed to enjoy providing these services, especially since they were often requested at points when business was slow and thereby broke the loneliness and tedium of time spent in an empty shop.<sup>127</sup>

While some presentations were certainly described as more careful (*patiramaka*) than others, I do not mean to imply that speech on the street was necessarily more

---

conflicting demands when a male customer requested that she get on the phone and ask to speak with a particular girl. She then handed the receiver back to the customer. The next day the girl's parents, who had apparently learned about the man's call from their daughter, stormed into the phone booth – the location of which they had learned via caller ID -- and spent nearly half an hour yelling at *Dhanya* for having assisted her customer in making the call. They demanded that she provide his name and address and, when she insisted that she didn't know them, asserted that she should have made it her business to know these details as well as to listen to conversations and prevent romantic phone calls from happening. *Gayathri*, with whom I later discussed this event, suggested that *Dhanya*'s inexperience was largely to blame for the problem. Even in a phone booth located in a relatively crowded and public area near the center of town, phone calls were not expected to be entirely anonymous.

<sup>127</sup> Whether or not they made purchases, some customers suggested that their chief purpose in coming to the shop was to escape whatever they happened to be doing elsewhere. A woman who worked in the apartment complex opposite *Anbu*'s shop often came over in the late morning to complain about her employers. *Anbu* usually provided minimal responses to her complaints, which clearly put him in an awkward situation, but other residents of the apartment complex were occasionally sympathetic. Like *Venmani*, many shoppers used provision-shopping trips as an excuse to complain about relatives. Others used such trips to complain about minor ailments, to discuss politics, to share good news, or to seek entertainment.

Since I spent time in certain shops on a regular schedule, people often came there to ask me questions about the US, to ask for help writing or translating things in English, or simply to interact with me. Although my presence and the presence of the recorder certainly enhanced the entertainment value of these encounters, many of these events, such as small children coming to the shop to show off new clothes or a bucket of tadpoles that had been caught in the lake, were equally likely to have occurred at times when I was not present.

authentic or less strategic than speech in houses and other kinds of places. As Goffman (1959) explains, backstage areas where people prepare for the performance of self in other places are simultaneously the site of a particular kind of performance. I aim to suggest that, because they were dismissed as unremarkable, *maḥi kaṭai* provided a useful “off the record” space for many of their regular customers. When I surveyed neighborhood residents about where they needed to speak politely, respectfully, or properly (*mariyātaiyāka*), the most common answer was at home and when speaking with family members.<sup>128</sup>

Shoppers and bystanders’ dismissals of *maḥi kaṭai* as everyday spaces for unmarked action paradoxically allowed the roadsides surrounding shops to work as sites of unique, interactional, political, and moral possibility. As suggested by *Pushpa*’s conversation with *Venmani* in Chapter Two, *maḥi kaṭai* were frequently sites for complaints and conversation that participants could not engage in while officially “on-record”. By “on-record” I mean contexts in which the stakes and meanings of actions and interactions are explicitly delineated. The term is relative. When speaking in a classroom during class hours, a professor and student might expect to be held accountable in ways that differed from those that applied if they spoke in the hallways before class had started. Although I describe interactions in households and institutions, such as schools, political meetings, and government offices, as being more “on-stage” than interactions in *maḥi kaṭai*, each of these context also had times and spaces that could be

---

<sup>128</sup> This chapter draws heavily on a survey of 15 households – five located near each of the focal shops that I studied. I asked people living in each house to draw maps of the area in which they lived and to discuss the ways of speaking and dressing that were required in each different kind of space.

described as relatively front or backstage.<sup>129</sup> A young woman might be held accountable for her actions very differently when speaking with in-laws in front of guests in the central part of a house than she would be when washing clothing at an irrigation pump behind the house. Similarly, *Pushpa* tended to sit on the step that marked the entrance to her house while tying jasmine flowers, combing her hair, or chatting with me and would shift back to the entrance of the shop (located just two steps away) when customers arrived or *Karthikeyan* left and shopkeeping work had to be resumed. Shops were frequently the sites of actions of actions and interactions that participants might hope would remain unacknowledged.<sup>130</sup> Numerous men who came to *mafi kaitai* to buy and smoke cigarettes, a common but stigmatized pleasure in Tamil Nadu, and admitted that they would not smoke them at their workplaces or while at home.

Many of the interactions that took place between people who met each other near the shop passed as genuinely unplanned, unserious, and unimportant. Yet some other interactions seemed to use the key of “backstage” and “off-record” provided by the space of the shop in order to mitigate the consequences of speech and action that might have been problematic if carried out elsewhere. *Dayaakar*, a relatively well-off man who

---

<sup>129</sup> My discussion of the scalar nature of the semiotic logic that defines “front” and “backstage” spaces is similar to Gal’s (2002) discussion of the public/private distinction. There are two critical differences between the logic that I describe and public/private, however. 1) Public/private tends, at least in Gal’s use, to overlap with explicit local understandings of the meaning of space. Both “public” and “private” are marked categories. In contrast, “backstage” spaces are likely to be unmarked and unrecognized. 2) Shifts from “front” to “backstage” can occur when the same set of actors are present, such as in the shift between people entering a marriage hall and chatting while they wait for the event to begin (when it might be permissible to utter *aiyo* or other inauspicious expressions) to when the wedding is marked as occurring (when such exclamations are to be avoided). Although they are more likely to occur in less visible spaces, “backstages” may occur in domains that are either public or private.

<sup>130</sup> They were, as I explained later, aware that they might be seen by neighbors, gossiped about, and remembered by others who were present, yet these mentions and memories had a different status than those that recorded actions in other domains. Someone who openly smoked in the place where they lived was recognized as “a smoker” in ways that someone who only smoked covertly at a shop might not be.

occasionally made small loans to his neighbors, often approached people for repayment while they were buying things at *Pushpa kaṭai*.<sup>131</sup> By approaching people in the space near the shop, on the pretext of taking his baby daughter out for a walk, he made the interaction both more difficult to avoid and potentially less embarrassing than it would have been if he had visited them at their houses. Since I do not pretend to have access to speakers' intentions or to know the full consequences of their interactions, my goal is to suggest the possibilities allowed by conceiving of shops as spaces, rather than to insist that particular actions were strategic, planned, or effective.

The spaces surrounding shops could provide a space for the enactment of something like what Michael Herzfeld (1996) describes as cultural intimacy: play with, and recognition of, those aspects of behavior and associated identity which provide insiders with assurance of their common sociality but are considered “a source of external embarrassment” (1996, p. 3). Although Herzfeld is primarily concerned with the ways in which such open secrets shape participation in the nation-state and national identity, I hope to have suggested how they might also work to cement much more local forms of solidarity.<sup>132</sup>

### Maḷi Kaṭai as a “Backstage”

---

<sup>131</sup> Although there were certainly days on which he casually walked back and forth waiting for someone in particular, I don't want to overstate the strategy of *Dayaakar's* actions. He lived directly next to *Pushpa kaṭai* and often came over seemingly just to stretch his legs or to chat with *Karthikeyan*. *Dayaakar* was known to be Telugu, but had spent all of his adult life in Tamil Nadu and spoke Tamil fluently. He frequently joked with neighborhood children and seemed to be genuinely well-liked by many people who lived in *Pushpa Nagar*.

<sup>132</sup> All solidarities are built in part through exclusion. There were, as I have already suggested, people who lived and spent time in the neighborhoods that I studied without participating in the social lives of small grocery shops. There were also some people, such as a homeless man who slept in front of *Majeeda kaṭai*, whose actions placed them on the margins of social being and acceptability.

The “off-record” character of speech around some shops seemed to be of particular interest to women of roughly my own age, many of whom were recently married and living with in-laws.<sup>133</sup> Different expectations about dress, speech, and behavior applied to different places and relationships in the household. For example, the dress and speech that might be appropriate while bathing a child in the back part of a house would certainly not be appropriate while entertaining visiting senior relatives in a front room. Yet most people, even older men, did not describe their houses as places in which they could be particularly relaxed about speech and dress. Most people depicted the central parts of their houses as locations requiring the careful presentation of self as polite, calm, and appropriately groomed.

Shops frequently provided a “backstage” to preparations for visitors, with a neighbor or less necessary household member hastily sent out to procure the sodas, snacks, or other items required to entertain a guest. The struggles necessary to keep up the appearance of a well-managed household were often talked about and dramatized on the street.<sup>134</sup> Regular customers in *mafi kaṭai* frequently commented on and explicated

---

<sup>133</sup> *Harini*, one of the women I interviewed, lived in *Pushpa Nagar* with her husband, her young daughter, and her husband’s mother. She explained that, when in the house with her husband’s family, she was careful to wear a sari, speak respectfully, and behave well. When she went to visit her parents and sister, who also lived in *Pushpa Nagar*, she said that she often wore a nightie and felt free to relax. She explained all of this within earshot of her mother-in-law who, rather than worrying that *Harini* could not relax in the house where she usually stayed, seemed to take this as a sort of compliment.

<sup>134</sup> A commercial for Nescafe Sunrise that aired during the summer of 2008 did a particularly clever job of making fun of the competing demands placed on younger women and of suggesting the pride that might be taken in successfully managing the multiple presentations of self that familial roles required. The commercial begins by showing a young man and woman shopping in a “departmental” store. The woman has relatively short unbound hair and is wearing slacks and a t-shirt – a style that marks her as potentially in violation of the norms and hierarchies associated with a large, “traditional” household. The man, who is revealed to be her husband, receives a call on his mobile and announces that some of his relatives who missed their marriage have come to their house to meet them. The woman smilingly explains that she’ll make a purchase and return to the house. The camera then shifts to a shot of the husband waiting with the conservatively dressed in-laws while his wife, who takes a moment to smirk and wink at the camera, quickly slips into the house through an open window, changes into a sari, applies *kajal* to her eyes, and transforms herself into an ideal daughter-in-law. At the same time, she adopts a slower walk and a lowered

the negotiation and artifice needed to fill familial roles. In contrast to economic and social models that depict inherent opposition between depersonalized market transactions and less alienated forms of exchange within the domestic sphere (Simmel, 1900; Gal, 2002), interactions in *mafi kaṭai* continually drew on knowledge of, and occasionally directly participated in, exchanges that shaped familial roles and relationships. As I explain in Chapter Five, conversation in *mafi kaṭai* frequently made the artifice, effort, and strategic calculations involved in family life explicit. Revelations of tensions over control of money, conflicting priorities, and negotiated preferences sometimes occurred in the course of ordinary shopping activities. Yet *mafi kaṭai* also provided a space in which customers could explicitly comment on, re-enact, or strategize about demands placed on them by family members, often in ways that were unlikely to be possible or permissible while at home.

The work of performing household duties and meeting the frequently conflicting and difficult demands of family life was often featured in jokes and play in *mafi kaṭai*. *Vanitha*, a relatively young woman who lived several houses down from *Pushpa kaṭai*, was notorious for running up to the shop in the evening in an exaggerated hurry, taking a considerable amount of time to talk while making purchases, and then suddenly protesting that she must get home before her husband and running off again. On one occasion, other women at the shop jokingly shouted “run” (*ōṭu -ma*) as she was leaving,

---

gaze that are more likely to please her new in-laws than the confident demeanor that she demonstrated in the store. She then slips back out through the window and re-enters the house through the door, as if just having returned from the shop. She touches her relatives’ feet, they pay her compliments, and she’s met with amazed approval from her husband as she serves Nescafe Sunrise.

Rather than simply providing the material ingredients (in the form of coffee powder) necessary for a careful presentation of perfect womanhood, the commercial suggests ways in which shopping, by providing a brief respite from the household and the surveillance that is likely to occur within it, allows family members to reconcile some of the conflicting demands that may be placed on them. The commercial can be seen here, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mEE0201GCjk&feature=related> (as of May 19, 2010).

acknowledging her demeanor as a sort of exaggerated comedy routine on wifely duty and care. In ways that parallel Miller's (1999, 2001) discussions of grocery shopping in the UK, acquiring provisions in *maḥi kaṭai* was a situation in which shoppers could imagine, respond to, and rework a model of their households' needs, while simultaneously acknowledging that meeting these needs could be a chore.

Revelations of household roles as requiring effort, strain, and subterfuge were frequently made by female shoppers, who explained that they “must run” or sacrifice their own preferences to meet the demands of other family members. A regular female customer at *Pushpa kaṭai* often plaintively asked that the shopkeepers refuse to reveal to her husband that she was buying things on credit, for fear that he might scold her. She did this fairly loudly, knowingly within earshot of many of her neighbors as well as my notebook and tape recorder. While there certainly may have been real concerns underlying her protestations, the volume and drama with which they were performed suggest that they may also have been an attempt to explicitly present herself as a conscientious wife and a person belonging to a family for which purchases on credit were not routine.

In other cases, conflicts with family members over money may have been enacted loudly in the spaces in and around shops, where speakers were certain to know that their talk would have been overheard, as a way in which to indirectly explain their financial situations to shopkeepers. Although access to mobile phones was becoming increasingly common during the time when this study took place, *Pushpa kaṭai* had a one-rupee “calling box,” similar to the type of pay phone that used to be common in the US,

mounted on the wall just outside of the shop.<sup>135</sup> People in need of money, who expected remittances from family members staying elsewhere, might announce their situations by discussing their need for money from this phone. On two occasions, I observed people who had just made such calls walk over to discuss their debts and financial worries with *Pushpa* in ways that assumed that she had listened to their conversation.

### *Proximity, Propriety, and Being Seen: Assessing Space on Thanjavur's Streets*

Not all shops,(and not even all small *maḥi kaṭ ai*) were equally endowed with the ability to serve as a backstage. Metapragmatic frames delineating the implications and allowances of types of space in Thanjavur were common to most of the people who lived in the neighborhoods that I studied. However, the ways in which they applied to particular spaces shifted depending on the social locations, networks, and habits of particular shop-goers. The spaces of shops that were seen as socially and spatially close were distinct from those located elsewhere. As I explained in Chapter Two, shopping excursions that departed from everyday routines were marked events that required special concern for self-presentation, especially on the part of younger women. When the women with whom I lived during my first few months in Thanjavur went on monthly trips to buy provisions in town, to buy clothes before holidays or to make other rare

---

<sup>135</sup> Although *Pushpa* and *Karthikeyan* let it be known that they disliked people doing this, they permitted regular customers to save money by placing calls to the recipient's cell phone, hanging up before the call was answered and letting the person to whom they wished to speak call them back on the calling box. Since *Karthikeyan* usually kept the family's only cell phone, other family members usually used this method to reach him while he was out buying supplies. People occasionally called in to the calling box and waited for the shopkeeper, or whoever else might answer, to run and find the neighbor with whom they wanted to speak.

purchases, they were careful to enact changes in dress, demeanor, and social alignment that marked these encounters as occurring outside of the house.

For example,, one afternoon at lunch in January 2007, *Vaijayantimala*, one of the women who I had stayed with during my first months in Thanjavur, asked if I might be available to accompany her to a large clothing store in town that evening. She whispered that one of her cousins, who worked there as a clerk, had noticed that some attractive earrings that had gone on sale, and *Vaijayantimala* was eager to buy them as a present for her mother. The store was relatively close to her house but getting there meant walking past the main bus stand, where *Vaijayantimala* did not feel it was appropriate for her to go alone. She explained that since *Gayathri*, who normally accompanied her on such trips, would need to stay late at the university, I was her next best choice of escort.<sup>136</sup> When I met *Vaijayantimala* at the house that evening, she was wearing a new polyester sari and was careful to neatly comb and tie her hair into a bun before we left. As we passed over the canal bridge that marked a commonly recognized boundary between *King's Community* and busier sections of the city, she lowered her voice and slowed her pace to a more leisurely gait.

Most of the women who lived on *Vaijayantimala's* street and in *King's Community* generally recognized the bridge over the canal as a sort of boundary between the center of the city (where care for the presentation of self was required) and the

---

<sup>136</sup> *Vaijayantimala's* husband was staying with his parents in their village at this time. Both her mother and her aunt, who sometimes accompanied her on shopping trips, were feeling too ill to walk around, and her sister, who lived nearby, needed to stay at home to look after her young children. For women like *Vaijayantimala*, whose husbands tended to stay elsewhere, the norm of not going outside of the neighborhood unaccompanied made event-shopping, going to doctor's appointments, and carrying out other errands, difficult exercises in social coordination.

relatively “backstage” streets of *King’s Community*.<sup>137</sup> *Vaijayantimala*’s mother, the most conservative member of the household, did not like any of us to move past there alone. Although she grudgingly allowed *Gayathri* and her younger sister to cross the bridge by themselves when they left for work early in the morning, she insisted that they travel with others if they were leaving to shop or go to the university later in the day. Even *Gayathri*, who was famous both in the neighborhood and among fellow students for her ability to travel alone, and for a brazen willingness to flout social convention, insisted that we not ride double on a bicycle, be seen in wet clothing, or do anything else that might be seen as worthy of comment when moving beyond this point. Like *Vaijayantimala*, she tended to lower her voice and straighten her dress when moving across the bridge.<sup>138</sup>

---

<sup>137</sup> As Susan Seizer (1997) and others have noted, the norm of not moving around alone applies to women from a variety of social classes. However, adherence to this norm was less extreme for women who occupied extreme places on the socioeconomic spectrum. Impoverished women (especially those who lived apart from male relatives) who made their living selling fruits or flowers from carts or from cloths on the ground, travelled through parts of the city alone. Concerns about contact with strangers, which were laced with implicit concerns about sexual propriety, were also applied less strictly to elderly women and young girls than they were to other women. On busses, in theaters, and in other kinds of public spaces, the bodies of the elderly or the young were occasionally used as buffers between groups of men and women.

<sup>138</sup> Like other young women who worked as clerks in shops, *Gayathri* adopted a variety of strategies for preserving respectability while working as a clerk in a phone booth/photocopying/document-processing shop near the center of town. Although she operated the shop alone from six to nine am and from six to nine pm between 2004-2006, she arranged for the shop owner’s father-in-law, who lived in a house nearby, to sit on the steps of the shop and act as her “bodyguard” in the evenings. She pointed out that he would be unable to provide real physical assistance if a problem arose but noted that the men who worked in and frequented the adjacent barber shops and tea shops would be happy to help her. *Gayathri* also explained that she was careful to wear a sari as opposed to a *salwar kameez* because it made her look both taller and older. She was adept at giving the cold shoulder to men who behaved inappropriately. *Gayathri* did not hesitate to scold or glare at those who seemed to intentionally touch her hand while paying for services and verbally scolded anyone who came to the shop drunk. Although her hours in the shop were long and the pay was relatively meager, *Gayathri* later described her job as having given her an opportunity to learn how to interact and judge people from a variety of backgrounds. As arrangements were being made for her marriage, she suggested that this experience gave her confidence in accessing potential partners that her mother, who had married an uncle and spent her entire life within the confines of a single household, did not have.

Although *Vaijayantimala* described her changes in dress, accompaniment, and demeanor as necessary for going “outside,” she did not make these modifications when moving through spaces located much closer to her house.<sup>139</sup> When going to nearby *mafi kaṭai*, such as *Anbu*’s shop, she often went barefoot and in a nightie, perhaps with a towel thrown across her shoulders in simulation of a shawl.<sup>140</sup> She wore the same outfit when visiting the houses of nearby neighbors and when chatting with them on a pile of construction sand, which formed a temporary play and meeting space for women on the street one summer. *Vaijayantimala*’s was the way in which many women dressed in most backstage situations, yet she and her neighbors refused to be photographed like this. Especially when going to the shop early in the morning, many people wore the clothes they had slept in, incomplete clothing (some young girls wore just a *kurta*), or in a state of grooming that was in some way incomplete. Although they were certainly aware that neighbors could see them, being seen like this at the shop did not fully count socially.

---

<sup>139</sup> Many people who usually wore shoes when they went out did not wear shoes when they went to the shop; some people wore shoes when visiting the shop and others (especially two elderly women from rural areas) took off their shoes when reaching the shop, even though they often still stood in the road when making their purchases.

Shopkeepers whom I questioned about these practices said that they did not particularly care whether or not shoes were removed. Many of their own framing practices were equally ambiguous. Like most other *Hindu* women whose family had not recently confronted tragedy, *Pushpa* drew a *kolam* – a closed lattice design in white chalk meant to represent rice flour -- on the threshold of the house after sweeping in the morning and evening. Although she sometimes drew a second smaller design in front of the shop, when traffic and her mood permitted, she often left the shop threshold as a practice space for her youngest daughter. On other days she allowed the threshold of the shop to remain empty, rendering it less bounded than the threshold of the house.

<sup>140</sup> “Nightie” was the word used to describe a loose fitting and usually ruffle fronted dress that many women wore while sleeping, relaxing, and doing work in and around their dwelling. Although nighties were not considered acceptable dress for going to town or welcoming guests, they were what many women wore during much of their time at and near their dwellings. Where nighties could and should be worn was frequently a topic of debate and discussion. University students who wore them outside of the women’s hostels and women of similar ages who wore them in the road in the middle of the day or were slow to change them when a guest arrived were sometimes scolded by other, usually older, women.

People living near the shops that I studied classified police stations, government offices, busses, larger shops in rarely frequented locations, main roads, parade grounds, and streets closer to the bus station as public places. Neighbors in *Kings Community*, *Vishnu's Lake*, and *Pushpa Nagar* drew different boundaries around these spaces, which some people described using the English word “public,” while others described in Tamil as *potu iṭam* (public place) and some spoke of as simply as *veḷḷye* (outside). Yet most people agreed on the ways in which movement through these spaces ought to shape concerns about dress, speech, and care about action, particularly on the part of young women.<sup>141</sup> When entering a *potu iṭam*, people were expected to wear shoes (if they had them), take note of their appearance, and present a version of themselves that was suitable for all audiences. The dress and grooming considered appropriate to such places overlapped with the ways in which most people would allow themselves to be photographed. Speech in these spaces could take many forms, depending on one's interlocutor. Schools, offices where people worked, and similarly bounded yet outside spaces were associated with expectations of polite and careful speech that needed to be respectful. They were also, as I explained in the previous chapter, places in which people said it was necessary to be careful (*pattiramākā*).

---

<sup>141</sup> Although people who lived in the neighborhoods that I studied reported very similar norms for women's dress and behavior in public places, their willingness and ability to adhere to these norms varied. When she first started working in *Amlan's* shop *Rājēswari* wore a nightie or a man's shirt over a torn *salwar kameez* because she did not have access to other clothes. *Amlan* soon arranged for her to wear some of his wife's old clothing so that she would be dressed more appropriately. Although members of their families agreed that it would be better if *Gayathri* and *Dhanya* did not spend so much time in the center of town by themselves, especially in a situation where they had to deal with strange men, their family's economic situations made this sort of work a necessity. *Gayathri*, who claimed to enjoy this work and other excuses to act like the man in her family, continued to run errands in the city, even after her job had ended. *Dhanya*, who always seemed to be ill at ease in the phone booth, quickly transferred to doing work in a paper-making factory. Very elite women, such as engineers who worked overseas, sometimes advertised their status by walking outside in jeans and shirts.

Most people explained the decision to shop at a place that was nearby (*pakkatil*)<sup>142</sup> as a matter of convenience, speed, and avoidance of exertion. Even though relationships with shopkeepers were considered important, most people said they would change where they shopped if a new shop opened that was closer to their house. Although the majority of my neighbors in *King's Community* were fond of *Anbu* and longtime customers of his shop, when a new small shop opened on the corner of the cul-de-sac on which they lived, many of them began to frequent it. Neighbors who made the switch treated the rationale of going to the closer shop as obvious, and even *Anbu* seemed unfazed by their decision to switch.<sup>143</sup> Most shoppers, especially adult women, treated travel to and from the shop, which was usually carried out by foot or on a bicycle, as a chore that was best kept to a minimum.<sup>144</sup> Although complaints about the physical demands of travel in the heat were common justifications for these concerns, especially among older people, considerations of appearance and reputation were equally common.

### *Marking Spatial Distinctions with Gendered Bodies*

---

<sup>142</sup> People usually use *pakkatil* to refer to spatial closeness and *nerunjiya* to refer to social/emotional closeness (*nerunjiya nanban* meant “close friend”; *pakkatil-le nanban* meant “friend who lived or sat nearby”).

<sup>143</sup> I suspect that their willingness to switch may have been increased by the fact that this shop was owned and operated by members of a family who had lived in the neighborhood for the last 20 years. Although most people had not had not engaged in commercial transactions with these neighbors before, they had exchanged occasional favors, such as watching over the family’s mentally disabled son and attending life-cycle rituals celebrated at each other’s houses.

<sup>144</sup> Exceptions to this rule were small children looking to escape the house with the excuse of adult responsibility. Especially as they were first learning to ride bicycles, young children seemed eager to run errands for their neighbors and family. Even *Gayathri* reported that after she had first learned to ride at around age 10, she enjoyed travelling to the store. A second exception to this rule, which I was unable to confirm directly, seemed to be a young man and woman who enjoyed walking with each other while travelling to and from *Anbu*’s shop.

Scholars of space, social distinctions, and morality in South Asia frequently chronicle the ways in which concern with the movement of women's bodies (particularly the bodies of middle-class or would-be middle-class women) move through space. A gendered semiotic logic that associates women with "inside" and men with "outside" can be used to explain many aspects of the ways in which people moved through space in Thanjavur. Men were usually understood to be the primary owners of shops, for example, and were the ones to leave the shops, often in the care of women, to get vegetables or wholesale goods from shops in parts of the city that were usually understood as "public" (*potu itam*) by residents of the areas that I studied.

Susan Seizer's (1997, 2005) ethnographic accounts of image and reputation management by "special drama actresses", women who flout norms of respectability by performing in street-theater troops, capture many elements of this dynamic. As Seizer notes, and my conversations with people in Thanjavur confirm, the actresses that she studied inhabit a marked and relatively marginal slot with respect to Tamil women who come closer to fitting a respectable bourgeois ideal.<sup>145</sup> As Amanda Weidman (2006) explains in a review of Seizer's study: "actresses, in performing publicly, in interacting with unknown men publicly, transgress the norms of 'respectable' Tamil women." This stigmatization of actresses and other women who are seen as moving around in public, draws on ideological oppositions that can be placed in relation to spheres that are "inner" and "outer"—at the level of the house or the nation—and enables a "series of other parallel synechdochally related oppositions: private/public, home/world, women/men,

---

<sup>145</sup> Most of the actresses in Thanjavur were rumored to live in a different part of the city, much closer to the wholesale market.

middle class women/lower class women, family women/prostitutes” (2009, p. 754, see also Nanerjee, 1990, 1998; Weidman, 2003).<sup>146</sup>

In the conclusion of her analysis of a Tamil comedy routine, Seizer argues that the message is that “to avoid actual confrontation with any actual public, one must learn to internalize the public’s attitude so thoroughly that one never trips upon needs to go consulting anyone outside” (2005, p. 273). Respectable occupation of space, particularly by women, requires the ability to anticipate the ways in which one’s actions will be seen and interpreted. Seizer cites Partha Chaterjee’s (1993) argument that it is precisely through such internalization that middle-class women have learned to perform the respectability of staying at home while moving out and into the world. Chaterjee argues that women’s ability to move around, for example, through schools and government offices, and get things done, depends on their ability to embody and enact signs of domesticity and virtue. Dressing in a carefully draped sari, rather than letting it slip in revealing ways or carrying other signals that appropriately justified one’s presence as part of an interactive “front” (see Goffman, 1959), allows women to move in public space without being negatively sanctioned for, or perhaps even recognized as, doing so.

The challenge of performing and moving through spaces marked as public—particularly of being seen by unfamiliar men, while managing to maintain an image of

---

<sup>146</sup> There are, of course, differences in the application of this standard. Movement and action in “outer” spaces, where one can be seen, possibly spoken to, and possibly groped by unknown men, is less restricted for very poor women who must work in such spaces (selling vegetable or hauling goods at one of the main markets, or doing construction work) or by very elite women, who are more likely to roam around alone or dress in relatively revealing clothing. Movement is also less restricted for young girls and for older women. For example, one afternoon *Anbu’s* mother scolded me and told me that I had to start leaving the shop before dark because it was not appropriate for a woman to be there at night. I responded (playing the fool in an attempt to maintain access to the more interesting men’s conversations that tended to happen at that time) that *she* was still there, so I hadn’t realized it was inappropriate. She briskly explained that she was a gray-haired grandmother, whereas I was not, in a way that allowed no further words on the subject.

respectability—resembles situations that women from a variety of backgrounds considered as they went about getting things done. I find a useful resonance between Seizer’s discussions of the ways in which drama actresses must “create the inside” while interacting with the outside in order to appease the demands of respectability. Like the actresses studied by Seizer, many of the women who visited the shops that I studied in Thanjavur and seemed to pass successfully as models of domestic virtue, appeared to relish discussion of ways in which to achieve their desired ends within the constraints of respectability. It is not the strictures of virtue that must be internalized but models of how they may be interpreted and applied by others—as well as a sense of what and where relevant audiences might be.<sup>147</sup> Some women certainly may have felt fear, awkwardness, and embarrassment when venturing into places that they did not know well and confronting people, especially men, who might see and comment on them. Yet I think that internalized constraints on movement, and related metapragmatic framings of speech and action, can be better understood as the reflexive considerations of being seen and talked about by particular groups.

While there was certainly a range of perspective, pleasures, and personalities between individuals, the locus of evaluation about women’s behavior and movement in and around the spaces I studied was not usually framed as an internal voice so much as

---

<sup>147</sup> When finding a temporary residence for a woman who needed to live apart from her husband, recruiting aid for two university students who wished to register an inter-caste marriage as a “safety” against parental pressure, conducting illicit love affairs, or engaging in other matters that they wished to keep “off-record,” women who lived in my study area attended not only to what members of a unified “public” might think but to particular ways in which reports might circulate though and be made significant by particular people, places, and publics. Considerations in organizing interactions included: the spatial and social locations of particularly gossipy people; the limits of social networks (how far and through whom news might travel); and the participants’ vulnerability in the face of reports.

Although the stakes were usually lower, similar considerations informed more mundane interactions and movements on the street.

the reflexive voice of people who *might* talk about one's behavior. Rather than expressing concern with what they were seen to be doing, or even with what others did, people gathering on the street, and the women who counseled me on how to move through it, consistently evaluated behaviors in terms of what others might see, hear, or perceive one as doing.

*Shortly after arriving in Thanjavur, I attended a matinee at a local theater with several female graduate students from Tamil University. The women engaged in a long discussion of who should go to buy snacks for us during the intermission. By selecting a matinee on a relatively unpopular day for the movies and by choosing seats that were inconveniently close to the screen, they had managed to secure a place in the theater in which we could not easily be seen by other audience members and where we were surrounded only by other women. Poorna, one of the few women who lived in Thanjavur, had money that she wanted to use to buy snacks for the rest of the group. Yet, she explained, if she went to purchase them, boys standing in the snack line might mock her, and people who knew her might witness this mockery.<sup>148</sup> She gave the money to Arul Mozhi, who came from a far-away district and stayed at the university hostel, and suggested that she and another woman from out of town get the snacks instead. Although Arul Mozhi also seemed reluctant, the students eventually agreed that because she was unknown to most people in the crowd, she was unlikely to be mocked or, at least, that this mocking would not matter. (October 2005)*

Assessments of likely bystanders, viewers, and overhearers played a similar role in shaping participants' understandings of space and its relationship to presence, dress, speech, and other signs when shopping.

### *Addressing Possible Overhearers: Neighborhoods as Conversational Entailments*

Assessments of the "closeness" of particular shops were, as in many ethnographic cases, based on more than physical distance. When I asked *Kannama*, a university

---

<sup>148</sup> Mocking (*kiṇṭṭil paṇṇu*) could refer to light and pleasant teaching amongst friends or family members. Yet, when applied to women moving alone in relatively open spaces, it usually described much nastier cat-calling and sexual comments that might be taken as mildly threatening. Most women I spoke with agreed that the problem was not as pronounced in Thanjavur as in some other parts of India and Tamil Nadu. This mocking was similar to "Eve-teasing" described in North India (see Mankekar, 1999).

student who stayed with her aunt in *Pushpa Nagar*, why members of her household shopped at *Pushpa kaṭai*, her immediate response was to shrug and explain that it was located close by. In response, I noted that there were two very similar shops located just across the main road, an even shorter walk from the house in which she was staying (in fact, they were almost visible from the terrace on which we sat while having the conversation). *Kannama* explained that although they were not very far away, these shops were not really the closest because while crossing over to the shops she would be forced to see and be seen by anyone who might be passing along the fairly busy main road, including unknown people. Because they knew most people on the relatively low-traffic sidestreet where *Pushpa kaṭai* was located, *Kannama* and her aunt felt that they could go there alone, with wet hair, or in their nighties—in much the same state that they often sat in front of the house in the evening reading, cooking, or talking to neighbors. Crossing onto a busier road required them to dress and act in ways that were more suitable to public presentation.

Like many other women who gave similar responses, *Kannama's* concern seemed to be not only that she might be seen by people whom she did not know but also that she would be *seen being seen* by people she did not know by other people that she did know and that members of this second group might talk about or think ill of her.

*Vaijayantimala* and other women in her family usually did not patronize *Francis's* shop, even though they said that they were very fond of him and of other members of his family, because going to his shop required them to cross the same busy road where, as

*Gayathri* explained, there “would always be many men hanging around.”<sup>149</sup> Definitions of places that were close enough to go to without constituting a shift in activity—and consequently a shift in what it meant to appear in backstage guise—could shift over time. Although we traveled back and forth constantly during most days, *Vaijayantimala*’s mother felt that the distance between the house where I stayed in *Vishnu’s Lake* and her house in *King’s Community* was too great for any of us to travel alone, or to be seen travelling alone, after nine pm. Similarly, although members of her family regularly went to *Anbu*’s shop in their nighties between 2000-2007, after they started to visit the new shop closer to their house more regularly, they decided that, as non-regulars, they could now go there only when dressed in the clothes that they would wear when making a marked trip outside.

### *Overhearers and Other Second-Order Addressees*

I often refer to the space “in and around” small shops because their spatial and social boundaries are hard to fix. *Maḷi kaṭai* usually took the form of a room enclosed by shelves for products on three sides and by a counter, which also houses goods for sale, on the fourth. This part of the shop is occupied exclusively by the shopkeeper and, on

---

<sup>149</sup> There were likely to be men present at any shop, of course, but it was women’s relation to these men that was important. As *Gayathri* explained, boys who knew her and knew her male cousins were unlikely to mock or make comments about her, although people who were strangers might. I suspect that people occasionally performed a reverse form of these calculations. Since smoking was a stigmatized and (in areas where it could be seen) exclusively male habit, I failed to interview smokers about their choices of shops in which to buy cigarettes. Yet, based on observations of who *did* buy and smoke cigarettes at the shops that I studied, I suspect that many men chose to do so at shops far from their homes. Still others seemed to prefer to send someone else, ideally a young child, to buy cigarettes at the shop on their behalf.

occasion, by close friends or family members who have dropped by to pass the time.<sup>150</sup> Shopkeepers usually treat this space as being both on display (in the sense that they tend to fix their hair and dress before entering it) and interior (in that they remove their shoes before entering).<sup>151</sup> Yet outside of this space, which is defined and filled by the shopkeeper's body, the boundaries of shopping interactions are more difficult to define. Shops are often physically extended beyond the central interior space by a table or rack that displays vegetables for sale, by hanging displays of snack items, by crates of soda bottles, or by an awning, concrete step, or swept patch of dirt that defines the space occupied by customers. If no one else was present, a customer, prospective customer, or passerby who wanted to speak with the shopkeeper usually entered this space.

There were, of course, exceptions to this pattern of interaction. Many customers, such as those swinging by for a cigarette or other small item, were able to enact their transactions while remaining outside on motorcycles with their engines running. Some regulars at *Pushpa kaṭai* seemed to enjoy carrying out their transactions with *Karthikeyan* by letting him toss them their purchases while they tossed him coins in return. When several people were at the shop at once, customers might gather into groups. One group

---

<sup>150</sup> Some shops, such as those run by *Karthikeyan* and *Francis*, have a private door or opening that connects them to other parts of the shopkeepers' house. Others, such as *Amlan* and *Anbu's* shops, must be entered and exited through a moveable part of the counter.

<sup>151</sup> This "on-display" aspect of occupying the shop was particularly apparent in adjustments made by *Pushpa* and *Karthikeyan*. *Pushpa* often combed her hair and fixed the pins in her sari while standing or sitting on the front step of her house (which was attached to the part of the shop on which customers stood). *Karthikeyan* frequently rewrapped his *veshti* standing in this space or in the road in front of the shop before entering it. Although the location of these "backstage" actions in a more visible place may have been motivated by the lack of space within the shop, they also marked it as a place where shopkeepers were on display and felt the need to exhibit good behavior. The side of the front step of *Karthikeyan's* house was equally in full view of customers, but it was a common place for *Pushpa's* family to put rubbish and for *SriDevi*, their youngest daughter, to urinate when she was small. This suggests that, like their neighbors, the shopkeepers recognized the open front part of the shop as a sort of "backstage."

might press towards the shopkeepers while the other carried on their business from outside. Most shopkeepers had the ability to carry on transactions with multiple people at once, and fellow customers, who were often eager to get things done quickly, often helped to hand coins and goods back and forth over the space. The shop was extended further by networks of small children who were frequently recruited to act as runners, carrying objects, coins, and messages between nearby places and a particular shop. Although most children were likely to act as messengers for their own households, there were several who might act on behalf of neighbors as well. It was impossible to know the identities of everyone involved in a transaction simply by looking at who was near the shop.

Since most houses kept their doors and windows open and many routine activities took place outside, there was a constant exchange of sound between interactions in the shops and actions that took place on surrounding streets, in nearby houses, and in other adjacent locations. Because, as shopkeepers noted, it was impossible to tell who might come at any point in time, it was important to speak as if all conversations in the shop might be overheard. Shopkeepers stressed the importance of behaving well in interactions, not only because they were concerned with maintaining good relations with particular customers but also because they considered the ways in which their treatment of a particular customer might come to reach others.

As *Anbu* observed, it did not matter whether or not he had good reason to express anger to a particular customer; even if the person to whom he was speaking understood that his anger was justified, someone who overheard part of the conversation might not. It was indeed common for regular customers to arrive at the shop and take sides in

interactions that were already in process.<sup>152</sup> Although shopkeepers occasionally whispered negative things about people who lived in the area from within the space of the shop, they generally did so somewhat cryptically without naming names. Much more commonly, they and their customers seemed to avoid making comments that they did not want overheard—particularly comments that might damage their reputations and relationships if they were reported away from the shop by anyone other than the immediate addressee.<sup>153</sup>

Although the relatively “off-record” character of most shopping interactions meant that bystanders were not ratified participants in conversations, possibilities of overhearing shaped interactions that occurred around a *mafi kaṭai*. I spent nearly three to four hours each day sitting at *Pushpa kaṭai* with *Pushpa*, and the first hour that I spent there was usually fairly quiet. However, she made a point of walking me partway home as I was leaving, if there was something she wanted to tell me that she did not want others to hear. One evening, she wanted to get my opinion on a disagreement that she had had with her next-door neighbor, *Bhavani*. Although we had spent a considerable amount of time sitting together at the shop earlier that day, she did not mention her worry until we had walked father down the street and almost to the main road.<sup>154</sup>

---

<sup>152</sup> For examples of this phenomenon see Chapters Four, Five, and Six.

<sup>153</sup> These concerns with possible reports do not contradict my characterization of interactions in shops as relatively “backstage” and “off-record” because they fit with the distinction between shops and other kinds of space. Overhearer is a participant role that depends on an interaction being bounded enough to make a distinction between primary and secondary addressees, yet open and intelligible enough to allow interpretation and potentially relevant participation by others. Overhearers were understood as salient and significant audiences for interactions in and around shops because they provided one of the ways in which talk in this “off-stage” space might affect and participate in other domains.

<sup>154</sup> There were some situations in which such avoidance of overhearing was impossible. For example, *Pushpa* could not avoid having customers overhear when she used the one-rupee calling box to scold her

Under other circumstances, such as when people assumed that conversations over the calling box had informed *Pushpa* and *Karthikeyan* of their financial circumstances, utterances in the shop seemed to be designed explicitly to be overheard. One evening, when two women were in the midst of insisting to *Karthikeyan* that their husbands' wages were lower than he claimed they were, and so implying that he should give them a better break financially, *Pushpa* loudly scolded her daughter for turning on a light, explaining that "your father isn't a wealthy man who can afford to waste electricity." It was difficult to determine the intended audience for some conversations or even if participants took audiences into consideration at all. Yet some loud quarrels between neighbors and family members were clearly performed as a way of reaching wider audiences and, perhaps, of eliciting support from others in the area.

*One evening in July 2008, two women who lived in a nearby house were engaged in a particularly loud disagreement in the yard, about where one of the women's family members should have parked a truck. One of the women involved in the quarrel stormed off in the direction of Pushpa kaṭai. She arrived to see Dayaakar and Karthikeyan talking and guessed, correctly, that they had been discussing her quarrel (the volume and intensity of the fight had made it impossible to ignore). Keeping her voice loud, presumably so that other neighbors could continue to hear her side of the story, the woman clearly explained her position to them. She even leaned over to address my audio-recorder directly.*

Such an explicit performance, especially one aimed at being reported, may seem to conflict with my earlier discussions of the space surrounding *maḷi kaṭai* as "backstage" and unremarkable. Yet I think the same metapragmatic frame that classified interactions in and around small shops as "backstage" or "off-record," in comparison to similar actions in other kinds of places, is what informed and enabled the enactment of these

---

husband over the phone. Yet most people either avoided saying things that they did not want to be heard or reported out of the shop, or found ways to keep references vague enough that only those "in the know" might interpret them. I suspect that this is one of the reasons why no one objected to me recording conversations in shops.

interactions. The frame provided by the space of a shop that was socially close allowed people to do and say things, and even to be reported as having done and said them, in a way that avoided the sorts of responsibility and accountability that would be required if they were to be recognized as doing them in a different sort of place. For example, in August 2008:

*Nirupama, an elderly woman who lived up the street from Pushpa kaṭai spent the better part of one week complaining to neighbors going to and from the shop that her son-in-law was refusing to make any financial contribution towards the support of his wife or his children, all of whom were currently living with her. She claimed to have recently learned that he was putting money towards the education of his sister's children and threatened that she would rally other family members and go to the police station in protest if he did not soon start sending payments to his own children as well. She explained that she was reluctant to go to the police, but if things did not change, saw no option but to do so (August 2008).*

I was unable to learn how the situation was resolved, or if going to the police station was even a viable solution (most neighbors agreed that taking this sort of family quarrel to the police would only cause embarrassment and further trouble). Yet *Nirupama* stopped complaining. I suspect that announcing her trouble to neighbors and overhearing relatives may have provided her with a way to rally the support needed to resolve the problem or at least with a way in which to alleviate her grief. Making the same sorts of statements near the police station or in a more crowded part of the city might have constituted an event that could cause embarrassment or rupture within her family; loudly announcing her reluctance—and thereby implicitly threatening—to do so within the space of *Pushpa kaṭai* did not.

### *The Overhearing Backstage Public*

Readers interested in explicit forms of power and overtly political events may wonder why, having promised a discussion of politics and morality, I have spent so much time discussing non-places in which, in the words of those who frequent them, nothing of real importance happens. Although in preceding sections I focused primarily on the possibility of being overheard by people who enter the place in which talk occurs, such direct overhearers are not the only, or even the most significant form of, second-order addressees. As *Anbu* and other shopkeepers pointed out, it was important to avoid acting in ways that might produce negative reports, such as expressing anger at customers in situations where their remarks might be heard and reported. Spatial proximity, on the roads leading to and from shops, the verandas and courtyards that bordered it, and other potentially shared spaces such as temples and bus stops, increased the likelihood of reported speech. The position of shops within specially anchored social networks extended the likelihood that talk and action would be heard about far beyond the range in which sound could travel.

Unlike instances of direct overhearing, which could occur only at the moment of interaction, reports of others' speech and actions also had the ability to extend speech and action into later moments and to produce reputations and memories that might alter the flow of trade.<sup>155</sup> As I explain in the next chapter, the temporal coordination of speech and action, which draw on the same metapragmatic frames that locate *mafi kaṭai* in spaces, plays a critical role both in the evaluation of conversations in shops and in the enactment and transformation of domestic and political relations understood as happening elsewhere. Shops served as anchors for social networks and chains of reported

---

<sup>155</sup> Although other participants in an interactions could also do this, overhearers were particularly significant because they provided a means through which other actors could be involved.

conversation. The same wider audience of possible overhearers, recipients of reported speech, and indirect participants that *Nirupama* seemed to hail with her tale of woe might also be involved in broader and more explicitly political attempts at organization and influence.

As I have explained, participants in interactions surrounding shops described such interactions as distinct from what happens in “public” (*potu itam*). The networks that shop interactions may indirectly address, which define the reputations that shopkeepers worry about, are also distinct from and assumed to be more limited than the singular “public” (usually referred to as *potu mākā*/in Tamil) that is hailed in news reports and speeches by politicians.<sup>156</sup> Because they are reflexively acknowledged evaluating bodies, however, the networks that coalesce and potentially overhear around shops might be described as “backstage” or peri-publics. As places where people who know and are known to each other gather, occasionally read newspapers, and often discuss political and social events, the spaces around shops have much in common with the emblematic salons and coffee shops that Jürgen Habermas ([1962]1989) identifies as the basis for a European public sphere. They are also similar in that anyone (unless terribly drunk or otherwise disruptive) can patronize these businesses, although not everyone is considered an equal member of its public.

“Public” is, as Michael Warner (2002) notes, a double-edged designation. “The public” in the sense of Habermas’ public sphere, and the public of democratic imagination, are totalities. At the same time, that public may in a given moment take the form of a more finite group, such as a crowd witnessing a particular event in a physically

---

<sup>156</sup> See Chapter Four for an example of this public being hailed as distinct from “customers”.

delimited space. Warner describes his use of “public” as denoting a third variety of relationship: one that comes into being through engagement with texts and their circulation. While speech and reports of speech circulate in ways that are different from text, assumptions about the potential witnessing of events, overhearing of talk, and circulation of resulting reports create similarly indefinite projections of a consuming and evaluating audience.

Like the text-centered publics described by Warner, the networks indirectly addressed by the possibilities of overhearing in shops are:

...indefinite in their constitution, include relations and possible reports of speech amongst unknown persons and strangers, are self organizing [though, as I explain in detail later, roles played by participants in organization are certainly unequal], are constructed through actions, work historically according to the temporality of their circulation, participate in a kind of poetic world making, and [most interesting from the point of the issues that I address here], implicate forms of address and assumed audiences for action that are both personal and impersonal (2002: 54).

Public is a useful term (in contrast to “market,” “crowd,” “community,” and other possible labels that could be employed to ties created through practices of contingency and co-presence) because it is explicitly reflexive. More than these other forms, publics are formed because they are addressed in speech and action. As Warner explains: “A public might be real and efficacious, but its reality lies in just this reflexivity by which an addressable object is conjured into being in order to enable the very discourse that gives it existence” (2002, p. 51). In shops, the public as addressee most often makes its presence felt not through direct responses in conversation, but because its projected possibilities shape the forms that utterances and actions may take. When they seek to avoid getting angry so as not to produce negative gossip, avoid mentioning competition directly for fear of giving offense, or loudly announce the misbehavior of others whom

they hope to censure, people speaking in and around shops address not only their interlocutors but also the likely chains of reported speech that may flow from the interaction. The “backstage” public of the shop is, to abuse Michael Silverstein’s (2003) framework, a second-order addressee.

Yet the organization of, participation in, and responsibility for the effective “publics” hailed by conversations in and around *maḥi kaṭai* is also importantly different from Warner’s “publics” in this respect. Although probable overhearers and further transmission through reported speech were explicitly described and sometimes strategically deployed by people engaging in interactions around particular *maḥi kaṭai*, the “backstage” framing of these interactions could buffer participants from the responsibilities of participation that are usually assigned to publics. In contrast to the print-publics of newspapers and televised addresses, in which the utterances of the writer/speaker tend to be directly oriented towards the probability, and indeed the hope, of circulation, speech in shops was generally oriented towards circulation not because this was a desired outcome but rather because it was viewed as inevitable. Warner suggests that, “anything that addresses a public is meant to undergo circulation” (2005, p. 91). Speech and action in the spaces surrounding *maḥi kaṭai* is not explicitly addressed to a public. Instead, like a stage whisper, it is understood to come with a probability of circulation attached.<sup>157</sup>

---

<sup>157</sup> Although Warner’s discussion attends to the intentions of speakers (or content producers) and to the content of the material that they produce, an important aspect of this distinction lies in the degree of responsibility that circulation entails for hearers, readers, and other kinds of audiences. Unlike readers of particular newspapers or direct participants in coffee shop debates, passersby on the road near a particular *maḥi kaṭai* could plausibly argue that they did not mean to hear what was being said. Public speech entailed by hearing the sounds of political speeches, religious discourses, and music broadcast over loudspeakers at temple festivals and political meetings might share this “backstage” quality of deniable responsibility. Although broadcasts, such as the speakers that *Cilantro Kingpin* commissioned for the *Mariamman* temple festival in *Vishnu’s Lake*, often addressed a ratified audience of addressees, they might, like the rehearsal

The possibility for wider second-order circulation of most speech in the space of shops was usually acknowledged as a potential source of trouble to be managed rather than as a resource to be exploited. The strategic possibilities of probable overhearing and later circulation resulting from shops' location on the edge of more overtly public space were occasionally overtly recognized, however.

Ramnath, *the owner and operator of the maḷi kaṭai near Pushpa kaṭai, which Kannama described as "less close" because it required crossing the main road, explained to me in January of 2007 that he was in the business of shopkeeping because it allowed him to get to know people and build contacts that he needed to advance his political position. This explanation for Ramnath's business may have been influenced by the fact that I first interviewed him about it several days after a local election in which his candidacy for the pancayat had been successful and by the fact that most of the shops and shopkeepers in that area described business as sluggish at that point in time. I am certain that profit-making was also part of his goal in keeping and maintaining the shop. However, I think that he was sincere—and not terribly different from many other shopkeepers in the area—in recognizing in shopkeeping the possibilities for knowledge and social positioning whose benefits extended beyond financial gain. Ramnath suggested that by keeping a shop, he was able to get to know most of the families who lived in the area, to have them owe him debts from time to time, and to become a known and liked person. Following in the wake of his successful election to the local panchayat, he suggested that he would attract greater attention within the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (the Dravidian Progress Federation, commonly called the DMK), a party he had long supported and in which he was working to increase contacts and visibility.*<sup>158</sup>

It is difficult for me to be sure of the extent to which *Ramnath's* shopkeeping served as a sincere campaign strategy, rather than simply a way to earn money and pass the time before he moved on to pursue other ambitions. He proudly gave me several copies of his campaign flier, which he kept behind the counter in his shop, and suggested

---

that I describe later in this chapter, also be interpreted as indirectly addressing members of other groups, who could refuse overt participation in an event and even complain bitterly about being forced to overhear it—as many residents of *Vishnu's Lake* did.

<sup>158</sup> The sincerity of *Ramnath's* discussion of his priorities was demonstrated to me later in the year. With increasing regularity, he began to shut his shop or turn it over to a friend in order to attend DMK meetings and help plan various political functions. When I returned to Thanjavur in the summer of 2008, I found that the shop, now much neater, but with a more limited inventory, was being kept by an elderly woman worker. She explained that *Ramnath* had stopped working in the shop altogether, in order to enter into politics.

that his customers were among those who had helped to campaign for him in the election but overt signs of the ties between his commercial activities and political ambitions were tenuous. His shop and shopkeeping work were not mentioned on the flier, nor were in any way suggested by his choice of campaign symbol.<sup>159</sup> Similarly, although he kept posters of DMK party members tacked to the wall that helped define the awning of his shop, many of them were placed at odd angles so that their presence might be interpreted as structural rather than politically significant. In contrast to more overt cases of political decoration, such as the posters that *Ramnath* helped to install in other parts of the city for political meetings, or decorations that appeared on marriage halls hosting political functions, the material composition of *Ramnath's* shop positioned it as politically neutral. The most obvious and legible items of decor, a set of flags advertising packets of spices and a display of packaged chips, focused on making products available to shoppers. To the extent that the shop served as a campaign platform or means of dispensing political information, it did so covertly.<sup>160</sup>

---

<sup>159</sup> In order to facilitate voting (especially by people with minimal literacy skills), Indian candidates for office are invited to select a graphic symbol, usually an ordinary object, to represent them in the election, along with their name, party colors, and other identifying signs. Chosen symbols, such as the drum, sometimes suggest caste alliances; others, such as the airplane or the paint roller, suggest ambitions and possibilities. *Ramnath's* chosen symbol was a bucket. I can imagine issues and desires that this choice might have tried to evoke, as water supply was a significant issue for people in the area (though *Ramnath's* bucket was not a water-carrying pail, but the sort of bucket which might be filled with water for household use). *Ramnath's* explanation, however, was simply that “buckets are everywhere and people see them often, this way when they see the bucket they will be reminded of me.”

<sup>160</sup> *Ramnath's* stated goal in keeping the shop was very different from the goals claimed by *Karthikeyan*, who described himself as in business only to make the money needed to educate and support his family. The constraints that these objectives placed on the two shopkeepers in interactions were very similar. Both *Ramnath* and *Karthikeyan* stressed the need to speak in a way that would not make customers angry and would allow them to be spoken of well in the neighborhood. Although *Ramnath* had earned his money in other ways, I was never able to confirm what they were; he was described as charging prices and offering goods in ways that were similar to *Karthikeyan's*.

*Efficacy without Responsibility: The Possibilities of Backstage Interaction*

Like *Ramnath's* covert campaign through shopkeeping, the drum performance rehearsal with which I began this chapter is an example of an implicitly political performance that was rendered successful through its enactment in a domain marked as apolitical. Although I was the first observer to arrive, and thereby able to take advantage of one of chairs that *Rājēswari* had saved for me behind the shop counter, it soon became clear that this rehearsal was expected to be witnessed. *Rājēswari* insisted that I turn on my recorder and check the levels during the drummers' warm up session, showing a concern that she never had on nights when I came by to record talk that she considered uneventful. Her attention was mirrored by men from the sponsoring group, who came over to the shop several times to make sure that I was in place and to ask why I had not brought my camera. I suspect that they were the ones who'd encouraged her to tell me to come there in the first place, though she seemed almost as eager as they were to make sure I witnessed and recorded the performance.

As the drum performers' warm-up session continued, other area residents who were regular customers at the shop began to gather under its awning. They first stood in groups and then, as the crowd grew to nearly 60 people and the official performance began, in neat rows of impromptu stadium seating: some on chairs from the shop and the marriage hall, others on the small concrete ledge at the edge of the shop's platform, and still others sitting on the packed dirt in front of it. The set of neighbors, regular customers, and frequent bystanders who, as I explain in later sections of this chapter, normally took part in conversations at *Majeeda kaṭai* as a potential and secondary audience, had assembled and transformed themselves into an audience in the most

explicit and recognizable sense. Although no official notice of the drum performance had been sent out, and members of the crowd that gathered to watch it insisted on describing it as a rehearsal, the space surrounding *Majeeda kaṭai* was briefly shifted out of the framework of unremarkable, inconsequential everyday action, and into a situation that was anticipated and enacted as a recognizable event.

The people seated around me were careful to distinguish between the program that took place in front of the shop that evening and the fully licensed “real” event that was to occur in the center of town on the following morning. The shifts in the ways in which talk and action were organized, and the way that my presence was understood on that evening, can be understood as a “breakthrough into performance”, a shift in the participation framework that assigns the roles and responsibilities to speakers and addressees (see Hymes, 1981 [1975]). Rather than being a possible, implicit, and second-order addressee, the networks of people connected to *Majeeda kaṭai* (or at least a much larger than usual portion of it), had emerged together as an explicit audience. *Cilantro Kingpin’s* activities were a frequent topic for discussion in and around the shop, and it was probably through talk in and around the shop that word of the rehearsal had been spread. However, the rehearsal shifted *Cilantro Kingpin’s* political ambitions, from the stuff of side conversation while shopping to the main focus of time spent in the shop.<sup>161</sup>

The people who sat in front of the shop were almost all women and younger children, with the exception of *Amlan*, the shop’s owner (who arrived in time to push through the crowd and take up a standing position behind the counter) and the occasional

---

<sup>161</sup> In Tamil Nadu, as in other parts of India, people hoping to curry favor with or notice from politicians may do so by taking out newspaper advertisements, posting signs, or commissioning other displays that praise a powerful politician (see Bate, 2002 for more information on this).

man who slipped through to make a purchase. Men, most of whom I knew by sight as residents of *Vishnu's Lake*, took up places standing on either side of the shop and even in front of the *Reddiyar's* petty shop located farther down the street. *Cilantro Kingpin* and other men associated with the adjacent marriage hall who had commissioned and the performance (and served as its producers, in a sense), abandoned the chairs in which they usually sat in the evening in order to allow other area residents and a few visitors to observe the program. In contrast to times when my recording of interactions required explanation and my presence as a woman on the street attracted unwanted attention and critical remarks, my interest in seeing the drum performance and my role as documenting it seemed expected and acceptable to most people in the space. *Rājēswari* and *Amlan* continued to conduct business in the shop during the performances, although the overall participation framework for interactions around the shop shifted from shopkeepers, customers, and roadside chat to one of audience and event.

In conversation, people in the crowd were explicit in their recognition of the performance as a “practice session” and in their status as watchers as “ratified overhearers” rather than as true addressees. Yet the staging of the performance and the talk that surrounded it led me to believe that in many ways this practice session was the more real, or at least the more fraught and potentially efficacious, of the two events. Although both of the programs’ audiences were described as crowds (*kuttam*), the first was a known and knowing crowd whose members had the unobstructed view and social context of gossip needed to interpret the drums politically. Through earlier sessions of unstructured talk, the participants had been made aware of the cost of the drummers (rumored to be nearly 25 laks [Rs 250,000]), the names of the sponsors, and the ways in

which the performance served to represent their ambitions for greater involvement and recognition in DMK politics. The crowd that would surround the Chief Minister when he arrived the following morning (the officially ratified audience) would consist mostly of locally unknown people who wouldn't likely appreciate the expenditure and authorization behind the drummers nor remark significantly on their presence. Particular party members, however, would presumably come to know the details of who had paid for what.

Although this staging of the drum performance, and a performance of a local girls' dance troupe that followed it, were described as "rehearsals," their enactment for people who had gathered to watch them from the shop may have been more efficacious than the officially acknowledged "real" event.<sup>162</sup> Many members of the *ad hoc* audience explained their interest in watching the first performance by the fact that work, propriety, or avoidance of crowds would prevent them from attending the upcoming gathering to welcome the Chief Minister in town. They also pointed out that even if they were to attend the next day's event, they'd be unlikely to be able to see or hear much of what was happening because of the crowds.

---

<sup>162</sup> It's hard to be sure of the motivations and meanings that guided *Cilantro Kingpin's* commissioning of the drummers, coordination of the dance troupe, or staging of the rehearsal. I never quite believed the things he told me and was constantly warned by people in my social network to stay away from him. I doubt that timing of the performance was accidental, though, as it precisely coincided with a time of night when people were arriving home, had drunk coffee, and were in search of some amusement before consuming their evening meal. Its location seemed strategic as well, as it could easily have been staged on a smaller side street or in front of the *Amman* temple so as to avoid blocking traffic, but this would have made it more difficult for area residents to assemble and view it. Though it wasn't formally advertised, advance notice of the performance had been spread through talk in shops and among area residents for the several days prior.

Many in the audience were clearly enjoying an excuse to take a break from their usual evening routines, to distract fussy children during the time before the evening meal, and to meet with neighbors and to watch a live performance. Even while watching with rapt attention, those who had gathered to observe the event were eager to fill me in on the details that facilitated their understanding of the it: that the man who coached the group of dancing schoolgirls had been pushing them hard with daily rehearsals during the last week, and that these outpourings of efforts and resources signalled interests in increased political involvement, which might bring more meetings to the newly constructed marriage hall.

Unlike the Chief Minister and his followers, who were unlikely to learn anything new from this particular drum performance, rehearsal watchers in *Vishnu's Lake* were presumably among those who remained to be convinced both of the DMK's validity as a candidate and of *Cilantro Kingpin's* status as a party member.<sup>163</sup> Although the position of the drummers on the road made the front of the shop a slightly more convenient viewing location than the adjacent marriage hall would have been, neighborhood residents' decision to gather at the shop may have signalled their refusal to accept or admit full enjoyment of the performance that *Cilantro Kingpin* had commissioned. To take the chairs and space that his associates offered, while watching the program that they

---

<sup>163</sup> While DMK party members were unlikely to complain of expenditures and productions that served to amplify their own significance, many participants in the life of *Majeeda kaDai*, including *Amalan*, declared the program a financial "waste." Most of the friends and neighbors with whom I could talk openly about such matters viewed *Cilantro Kingpin* as a rowdy. They suggested that I speak with him as little as possible and pressed me to turn down invitations to visit or interview him at his home. They were quick to recognize him as the head of one of the three most wealthy and powerful families in the locality, although his house was relatively modest. Area residents knew that he was the principal donor and organizer for the construction of the *Amman* temple that had recently been built on a nearby corner, that he sponsored the yearly temple festival and the neighborhood programs that accompanied it, that he was the owner of the new marriage hall and adjoining shops, that he was training his son to be an engineer, and that all of these moves reflected a play for greater power and middle-class status, both in the neighborhood and on greater geographic and political scales.

had arranged, might have been taken as expressing an affiliation (either with *Cilantro Kingpin*'s politics or with other aspects of his persona) that was greater than most of them desired. Sitting in front of the less marked space of the shop to enjoy a performance coded as a “rehearsal” was, in contrast, a much more neutral activity.<sup>164</sup>

Whether or not it was efficacious, the speed and ease with which the drum “rehearsal” was staged in front of *Majeeda kaṭai* highlights the extent to which it drew on a network and participation framework that was already present, if latent. Most of the people who came to the shop to watch the rehearsal, particularly the women with whom I sat, were those who came to the shop in the evenings on a regular basis. Although it was rare for them to sit and watch something or to treat their time together as part of an event, they regularly participated in concerns and conversations that engaged them as parts of an ongoing audience for neighborhood events.

More significantly, members of the crowd who sat near the shop came dressed as they normally would when stopping by the shop in the evening. They wore nighties or old clothing or had partially plaited hair, all manners of dress that were acceptable when carrying out everyday tasks in the neighborhood, but would be unthinkable—and remarked upon as such—if sported in more public parts of the city. Female members of the audience in particular pointed out that they could never respectably go to watch a performance as part of a crowd at a large political rally, which would likely be full of jostling and require contact with strange men, but they could easily observe and discuss events from the shop, where they might have gone to buy laundry soap or carry out some

---

<sup>164</sup> Since many people who lived in *Vishnu's Lake*, like the rest of Thanjavur, were strong DMK supporters, I doubt that many people in the crowd saw supporting the DMK in particular as a source of trouble. Instead, I suspect that some were reluctant to support any political party at a rally on the street and that many more were hesitant to associate themselves with *Cilantro Kingpin*.

similar errand on any evening. Their continued framing of the space of the shop as insignificant and backstage enabled them to observe and discuss a political performance from the safety of their everyday space and relationships. Watching the program within the space of a *mafi kaṭai*, which was metapragmatically framed as everyday and unimportant, allowed people in *Vishnu's Lake* to participate in a political performance without overtly acknowledging the fact that they were doing so.

## Chapter 4:

### **“You Have to Get up Early in the Morning”: Rhythms of Expectation in *Maḥi Kaṭai* conversations**

While conducting a census of the 16 *maḥi kaṭai* located in my study area, I asked shopkeepers: “What do you need to do in order to succeed in your business?”<sup>165</sup> I asked the same question of other participants in the system that supplied provisions to the south-western edge of Thanjavur, people such as wholesalers and distribution agents, who gave answers that stressed control of capital, longstanding relationships, *speaking well*, or simply good luck. *Maḥi kaṭai* owners, however, almost universally replied that “You need to start early in the morning.” I was initially puzzled by the frequency of this answer because it seemed to do relatively little to separate shopkeeping from other kinds of work; most of my adult friends and neighbors awoke between five and six in the morning, only one hour after most *maḥi kaṭai* owners, in order to enjoy the cool morning air and/or complete any physically demanding household chores before the heat of the day.<sup>166</sup>

---

<sup>165</sup> *inta viyaparam jecciratukku eṇṇa paṇṇaṇum?* Literally: To be victorious in this business, what do you need to do?

<sup>166</sup> Common early morning activities included sweeping, hauling water, drawing *kolam*, shopping, preparing food, and studying for exams. In the three households where I stayed during the course of my

Why, in contrast to other people who worked to supply provisions, did *mafi kaṭai* owners stress a prompt, regular, and early start as critical to the success of their shops? Their answers could be interpreted as yet one more example of the “time discipline” that anthropologists and historians have described as a feature of work in industrial societies (see Lofgren, 1987; Thompson, 1996) or as an emblematic example of making an effort. Yet I think that *mafi kaṭai* shopkeepers’ responses are best understood as pointing to how the coordination between multiple domains of expectation and activity, each of which may be characterized by an independent and potentially variable rhythm, is a critically important feature of their shopkeeping work.

In this chapter I argue that *mafi kaṭai* shopkeepers must work to coordinate a variety of systems for the organization of action and expectation, each of which has separate rhythms associated with particular persons, institutions, political stances, or moral dispositions. Rather than collapse these disparate influences into a single pulse of uniform commodity flow, or ground all events within the locality, interactions in *mafi kaṭai* tend to maintain and regiment associations between the rhythms of trade activity and the persons, groups, and institutions associated with other scales of social life. I begin by examining the ways in which shopkeepers’ talk and actions seek to produce and exert control over time. As an example, I suggest that assessments of the pace of past and future transactions inform the ways in which shopkeepers and their interlocutors assign value to vegetables. I then trace ways in which *mafi kaṭai* talk helps to produce the pulses of activity that defines participation in the shop’s locality while simultaneously

---

fieldwork, all adults were usually up before six am. The norm of rising at this time was strong enough that if my landlords did not hear me bathing or sweeping before seven am, they would call up to ask if I was sick or to tease me for being lazy.

regimenting rhythms that are depicted as emerging elsewhere. Other domains implicated in the rhythms of *mañi kañtai* exchange include: the routine requirements of household life; the actions and expectations of wholesalers, agents, and product suppliers; Hindu ritual calendars; infrastructure schedules; and the timing of *bandhs*, strikes, and other mass political events.<sup>167</sup> Attempts to coordinate actions in neighborhood shops are therefore a means by which broad categories of social difference—class, caste, religion, and political affiliation—and associated struggles for dominance are made visible and salient in everyday life.

### *Trade as Temporal Collapse*

Interpretations of relevant pasts and possible futures may be at issue in all human actions; however, they are particularly significant in situations of ongoing exchange. Since Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) observation that deferral, delay, and related temporal orientations shape the meanings and strategies of exchange, it has become common for anthropologists and others who work on trade to examine relationships between exchange and temporality (p. 5-7).<sup>168</sup> However, I am less interested in chronicling the rhythms at which trade is practiced than I am in examining the ways in which the temporal

---

<sup>167</sup> *Bandh*, a word used throughout South Asia, refers to a general strike called by the government, a political party, or some similar interest group. Although they are sometimes called by parties in power, *bandhs* are usually enforced by supporters of a position rather than by the police and other officials (though police may sometimes choose to support a *bandh*). Although the words were sometimes used interchangeably, most people I spoke with in Thanjavur referred to party-issued closings as *bandhs* and closings and work stoppages ordered and enforced by unions as "strikes" (using the English word with a Tamil verbalizing particle) or *atāippu* (a Tamil calque of strike).

<sup>168</sup> Mauss (1925, 2000) also observes that assessments of honor with respect to credit and gift giving are tied to the place of actions in time. "...in every possible form of society it is in the nature of a gift to impose an obligatory time limit" (p. 35-36.)

alignments of practices are distinguished, defined, and assessed. As Webb Keane observes:

If transactions are events, they are geared to exerting control over definitions and outcomes in the future, beyond the event. They thus contain within themselves meta-languages of action, that is, reflexive characterizations (explicit but more often implicit) of the kind of event now taking place, and the kinds of participants entering in to it. (2008, p. 33)

While the meta-languages (and meta-semiotics) of shopping involve evaluations of participants, locations, objects, and events, characterizations of transactions are also shot through with questions of temporality.

My use of “rhythms” draws on Henri Lefebvre’s (1988, [1992], 2004) use of the term to describe cyclical patterns in the organization of desires and actions that constitute everyday life. He posits that tendencies towards the ordering and repetition of action, which he declares are simultaneously individual and social, are critical to weaving individual actors into broader social systems. He introduces this study, entitled “rhythmanalysis,” as one of the ways of understanding human relationships to scale, noting that “our rhythms insert us into a vast and infinitely complex world, which imposes on us experience and elements of this experience” ([1992] 2004, p. 82).

Rhythm, and the musical metaphor that it implies, are useful means by which to approach the coordination of actions and the ways in which a variety of systems and pulses may impinge on actors and bring them into or out of step with one another.

Lefebvre suggests that rhythm is a way to approach organizing orientations as diverse as heartbeats, cycles of hunger and sleep, calendars, seasons, and institutional activity. His playful and expansive use of the term covers actions, anticipations, and the metapragmatic models through which they may be monitored and accessed. In order to

emphasize the ways in which *mafi kaṭai* shopkeepers work to coordinate multiple systems for the organization of action, each of which embodies separate cycles of demand and delay, I refer to the temporal models assigned to and abstracted from these systems as “rhythms of expectation.” My use of this phrase is intended to focus on the ways in which actors—both individual persons and the systems in which they participate—characterize, anticipate, and assess pulses of activity.

I want to avoid suggesting that it is possible to make a clear distinction between metapragmatic models—or ideologies, conversations, and calculations that reveal anticipation—and other modes of action. In fact, my argument depends on the assumption that prediction, assessment, and talk about time are meaningful forms of social action. Yet, like many other taken-for-granted aspects of social life, rhythms, and the relationships between the systems that produce them, are often most apparent when they fail. This chapter is less concerned with cataloguing practiced rhythms of everyday life than it is with tracing the ways in which these actions were predicted, coordinated, and assessed. For this reason, I focus on particular instances in which things and people fell out of step or attempted to explain apparent delay.

To draw on a different vocabulary, rhythms of expectation are most apparent when attempts at coordination seem to fail and produce “faultables” (see Goffman, 1981) that can be interpreted and assessed. When things went markedly awry in *mafi kaṭai* interactions, it was often because of some disagreement about time or participants’ failures to correctly anticipate the actions of their interlocutors. Direct accusations of dishonesty, incompetence, and failure were relatively rare in the conversations that I recorded. When things seemed to be amiss, or interlocutors feared that they might be, the

meta-languages of rhythm and expectation—discussion of what happened when and of the ways in which future probabilities should inform present actions—were used to characterize and remedy transactional missteps.

The importance of time in orienting trade, and ways of knowing about the people, things, and places that participate in it, is neatly explained by Hirokazu Miyazaki's (2003, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009) work on Fijian politics and global financial markets. Miyazaki observes that in many situations what shapes a particular instance of "now" is not always accessible in the present (2004, p. 20). For this reason, he asserts that, "access to the now [that is in the present]...demands another "now" [that is distant]" (Miyazaki 2004, p. 21).<sup>169</sup> Miyazaki describes this practice of collapsing past, present, and future possibilities, in order to create models that guide and enable action, as a critical part of finance work. Successful traders must project the histories of past transactions and earnings into models of future possibilities in order to assess and enact present transactions. Drawing on Nancy Munn's (1990) discussion of *kula* exchange, Miyazaki further explains that, "the present as a site of reality construction contains intersecting temporalities that actors seeks to control" (2004, p. 20). This description of different temporal moments as collapsed in the "now" of any given transaction works well to

---

<sup>169</sup> Miyazaki takes much of his discussion from Ernst Bloch, but the observation that trade demands temporal collapse through the reification and future projection of rhythms of expectation is far from unique. Economic anthropologists, including Catlin Zaloom (2009) and Karen Ho (2009), have chronicled the ways in which financiers and economists describe these projections as part of their work. I draw on Miyazaki's work because his discussion of the ways in which projections of knowledge about the pasts into future moments, all of which are collapsed into a particular "now" of action, highlights the ways in which talk about temporal models and assessments of delay can work as a form of social creativity. Miyazaki describes these projected models and acts of imagination as a method of hope that can enable progressive political transformation as well as successful trades. I avoid drawing more heavily on his language because, although they were socially and financially efficacious, shopkeepers' projections about possible futures were more doubtful than hopeful. They tended to phrase decisions about purchases, credit worthiness, and transactions in terms of delaying or warding off possible failure—as limiting suspicion and exposure to risk, rather than as a means of achieving desired success.

explain the ways in which value, risk, and reliability are accessed in small-scale trade. While carrying out their daily tasks, the shopkeepers that I interviewed continually collapsed past histories and future possibilities into single moments in order to assess the profitability of potential purchases and sales. Decisions about what and how much to buy, who should get the last packet of milk, and what rate should be charged, can be accessed as creating profitable futures only through the future projection of past rhythms of action.

In a move that shares much with Miyazaki's discussion of projected possibilities, Theodore C. Bestor (2001, 2003) borrows David Harvey's model of "compression" in globalization to describe the ways in which Tokyo's *Tsukiji* fish market sits at the intersection of disparate times and spaces and anchors them in interactions with one another. Bestor suggests that understandings of time and the pressures they exert on price, demand, value, and taste, are a means by which the conditions and actions of Canadian fishermen are linked to markets in Tokyo.<sup>170</sup> The rhythms collapsed in talk about trade can be linked with domains that are spatial and social as well as temporal. By examining the ways in which rhythms of expectation are created, transmitted, and regimented in conversations that surround *mafi ka tai*, I hope to sketch the ways in which

---

<sup>170</sup> Bestor (2003) suggests that "the complex temporal structure of trade requires coordination of producers and markets, supply and demand among many irreconcilable clocks...timescapes perhaps" (p. 317). Using the rubric of timescapes, Bestor describes the tuna trade as shaped by: "natural time," which describes the seasons and climatic fluctuations shaping the supply and behavior of fish; "fishing time," which describes the activities and orientations of fishing people; "regulatory time," which attempts to organize fishing through government institutions; and "market time," a temporal logic coordinating the buying and selling of fish as commodities that creates linkages between these disparate domains. As encountered through reflexive consideration in market stalls, these timescapes, as Bestor notes, come to be associated with particular spaces and geographies, resemble the cycles that shape and inform *mafi ka tai* trade, and come very close to what I mean by "rhythms of expectation."

spatial and social distinctions are produced through conversations and predictions about the rhythms of action.

*The Pulse of Products: Vegetables, Value, Refrigeration, and Power*

Time is assessed and produced, in part, through the interpretation of palpable material qualities and practices. As Webb Keane (2003) observes, the semiotic ideologies that mediate the place of objects in social life respond to the existence of material forms. While there may be material properties that escape salience in semiosis, they remain “bundled” with the objects in question, ready to slip out at a later point and enter into the realm of significance. As anyone who has kept vegetables outside in a warm and often humid environment soon realizes, these latent possibilities play a particularly strong role in the evaluation of foodstuffs. People involved in *mafi katai* transactions were vigilantly aware of the relationships between time and the value of perishable commodities. Material traces of objects’ ages and movements through time shaped evaluations of prices, people, and relationships that surround them.

As Susan Freidburg (2007) suggests in her work on eggs and refrigeration, temporality and ideas about the significance of time are often produced in relation to the properties of objects and the ways in which they are valued. Although, as she explains in her 2009 history of “freshness,” we are likely to view qualities such as color, taste, texture, and other signs of objects’ quality as purely material properties, they can be modified by social practices, such as refrigeration, transportation, and different cooking methods.<sup>171</sup> Vegetable wholesalers, shopkeepers, and their customers all read vegetables

---

<sup>171</sup> Although many perceptions about freshness and goodness seemed shared by most people living in my study area, these assessments were also often specific to household, class, and, to some extent, caste. The

and other perishables for signs of both temporal histories and of the social and technological networks that produced them. Material traces of freshness and the ability to successfully partake of particularly perishable commodities signify social and technological success.

Because it has the ability to slow processes of rot and desiccation, refrigeration represents a means by which people involved in vegetable transactions can exercise control over time. Most regular customers in my study area explained that they needed to shop at *maḥi kaṭai* because they lacked access to reliable refrigeration. Although they explained that dry goods could be purchased on a monthly basis, and certain perishables like potatoes and tomatoes could be kept for weeks at a time, most people living in my study area claimed that they needed to make daily shopping trips in order to secure fresh vegetables, milk, and other perishables.<sup>172</sup> Similarly, shopkeepers with access to a reliable refrigerator, or even a large shady storage area, were able to exert better control over the state of their wares than were cart vendors or people who conducted their trade on blankets at the market periphery. The extent to which products were vulnerable to time shaped assessments of the risks and values assigned to them.<sup>173</sup>

---

cuisine associated with economically marginal and *Dalit* households stressed drying and heavily cooking vegetables in ways that made rot, desiccation, and other forms of decay relatively easy to disguise. *Chettinadu* and *Mami* cuisine, associated with higher status, emblematically vegetarian castes, and greater wealth, require fresher and higher quality vegetables. Relationships between diet practices/preferences, regional affiliation, caste, and wealth were complex. However, caste and communal affiliation certainly played a role in defining what counted as “good food,” and as a result, the ways in which freshness was accessed and assigned social and fiduciary value.

<sup>172</sup> Tomatoes were usually purchased green and would be used until they started to rot. When I bought ripe tomatoes, *Anbu* and other shopkeepers often commented that they would be quick to spoil and asked if I wanted to swap some of them out for yellow ones.

<sup>173</sup> With the exception of commodities such as fruits, which were relative luxuries and sold through networks other than the ones on which I focus in this chapter, quickly spoiled items (especially those that were produced locally), such as flowers, *kife*, and banana stalks, tended to be sold by economically and social marginal traders, such as women who worked on the edges of the vegetable market. *Maḥi kaṭai*

Access to a refrigerator was not enough to successfully prolong the value of perishables. Power cuts were a regular feature of life in all three of the neighborhoods that I studied and were much more prevalent, longer in duration, and less predictable in the *panchayat* union areas. In fact, the lines drawn by different grids when the power was cut were the most visually evident and socially salient division between the fully incorporated city areas and the non-city areas. Although some power cuts were caused by failures or sudden shortages on Thanjavur's grids, many more were regularly scheduled or to some extent controlled by the power station.<sup>174</sup> These cuts were supposed to be equitably divided between areas, but most residents agreed that the frequency and duration of the power cuts correlated with the political power and social standing of the affected area.<sup>175</sup> Electrical power, and the access to refrigeration that it allowed, was an index and enactment of political power within the city.

Histories of handling, transportation, refrigeration, and associated “power relations” were not always legible by a surface inspection of the product in question. While some material effects of time could be easily discerned (by viewing, smelling, and touching vegetables, for example), others, such as the freshness of packaged milk, the

---

shopkeepers, like wealthier male wholesale vendors, generally avoided these items or kept them in limited and carefully calculated supply.

<sup>174</sup> Although some cuts may have been due to maintenance and other problems, most cuts were explained as a way of rationing power to a city that now consumed more than was available.

<sup>175</sup> Even the officially published schedules for power cuts, which were rarely enacted reliably, supported this theory. When, in the summer of 2008, each section of the city was supposed to have power cut for two hours each day, the most desirable times for a cut, such as the middle of the day when people were likely to be napping or at the office, were assigned to the wealthy area along the medical college road, whereas the least desirable times, which hit right when people were likely to be cooking, were assigned to the crowded southern section of the city. The *panchayat* union was assigned longer and more frequent power cuts on the official schedules, and its power was cut more often than was officially acknowledged. Shopkeepers and customers who used refrigeration quickly learned to adapt to these cuts, the timings of which were published in the paper, by avoiding buying perishables before scheduled or likely shortages.

quality of eggs, or the juiciness of lemons, were usually inferred through assumptions about the objects' histories. Conversations with wholesalers, suppliers, and shopkeepers, and the relationships that they produced, were the primary ways in which the histories of objects became knowable. One of the main reasons that people gave for shopping at a nearby shop, at which they were familiar with the shopkeeper, was concern with "quality".<sup>176</sup> Merchants with whom customers had regular relationships were expected to understand the degree of freshness that their customers required and to work to provide it.<sup>177</sup> When, for example, several people came to *Pushpa kaṭai* and complained that the milk packets they purchased had been spoiled, *Pushpa* and *Karthikeyan* noted their complaints and apologized.<sup>178</sup>

Shopkeepers, in turn, insisted on the value of regular customers and of wholesale merchants with whom they had long-term relationships because they viewed the predictability produced by these relationships as a hedge against risk. As shopkeepers

---

<sup>176</sup> "Quality": many people used the English word quality to describe this trait; *pure* and *nalla* (good) might be used as well.

<sup>177</sup> This does not mean that the quality of fruits and vegetable sold in *maḥi kaṭai* was expected to be the best available. Nearly everyone agreed that the vegetables in *maḥi kaṭai* were likely to be more wilted than those sold in the main market, especially if shopping was done after eight am when the weather had become warm. There were also recognizable differences in definitions of acceptability between the different shops in my study area.

Large stores with refrigeration that catered to wealthy people were described by *maḥi kaṭai* shoppers as tending to have wilted vegetables (and my observations confirm this view). Most *maḥi kaṭai* shoppers, shopkeepers, and wholesalers suggested that this was because these stores, like their customers, lacked the social connections and relationships needed to produce and guarantee fresh produce. This was the primary reason given by the traders whom I interviewed for not being concerned about the influx of large grocery stores (such as those run by Reliance). People who shopped at these stores were often non-Tamil speakers or short-term residents. They preferred the predictably low-level of spoilage that these stores provided. It was expected that, when doing one-time transactions with strangers, merchants with whom one was not familiar would attempt to offload the worst possible merchandise: spoiled, dried-out, wormy, and adulterated food, while still charging at standard prices.

<sup>178</sup> More commonly, if the quality of such products was low, shopkeepers would warn customers in advance as they were shopping or point out that it was the fault of the season or conditions at the distribution center.

usually paid cash for their inventory of vegetables, milk, and other perishable items, they needed to estimate quantities that were great enough to meet customer demand while minimizing the amounts that might remain and get spoiled. Most *maḥi kaṭai* owners were proud to explain that they gave preferential treatment to regular customers whose behavior allowed the shopkeepers to feel assured of future repayments and predictable sales. When his shop ran low on milk packets, for example, *Karthikeyan* refused to sell them to customers who only bought them infrequently, in order to ensure that his regular customers would be able to purchase them if they so desired. *Maḥi kaṭai* owners were often depicted by men in other sectors of the grocery business as assessing their profits by simply looking at the amount of cash in the till, but in reality their actions were constantly informed by careful evaluations of past transactions, assessments of future risks, and interpretations of delays.

### *Rhythms of Expectation in Wholesale Trade*

In their role as traders, the vegetable wholesalers, dry-goods distributors, and *maḥi kaṭai* owners all performed jobs that required careful coordination of actions. Yet the rhythms of expectation that defined their trades, the technologies through which these rhythms were recorded and enacted, and the products, institutions, and persons with whom they interacted, produced distinctive and divergent pulses of activity. Within a single week, a typical *maḥi kaṭai* owner was likely to do business with a set of vegetable wholesalers (each of whom specialized in particular items), at least ten agents and distributors, local product suppliers, and a wide range of customers. Chronicling the rhythms of expectation that defined each of these suppliers as types, institutions, and individual persons could provide material for several books. Knowledge of the rhythms

of activity that could be expected by and from each supplier constituted much of the expertise that allowed some shopkeepers to be successful. However, I hope that describing the rhythms that governed two critical and dramatically different supply streams—those of vegetable wholesalers and of distribution agents—will clarify the pressures and complexities inherent in shopkeeping work.

### *Vegetable wholesalers*

Vegetable wholesalers purchased produce from groups of farmers, arranged to have it shipped to Thanjavur's main market, and bundled and sold it to retailers, restaurant owners, and certain household customers. Of those involved in grocery sales, wholesalers were the men (and they were all men) who got up earliest in the morning. After having arranged for transit and set prices via mobile phone, they awoke and went to the main vegetable market at two to three in the morning in order to meet and manage the unloading of produce as it arrived by truck from distribution centers and farms.<sup>179</sup> Most vegetable wholesalers mentioned the odd hours at which they worked—usually from two in the morning until noon on days other than Sundays or holidays—as a defining characteristic of their jobs and lives.

For example, *Cilantro Kingpin* who, with his brother, controlled most of the cilantro trade in Thanjavur, explained that he was educating his son in engineering not

---

<sup>179</sup> When describing this schedule, most wholesale vegetable traders explained that their jobs had been made considerably easier in the last five years, thanks to the increasingly widespread use of mobile phones. Calls to drivers and loaders allowed wholesalers to predict when convoys of produce were going to arrive and to sleep or relax at home until travel to the market was necessary. Before mobiles were widely available, it had been necessary for wholesalers to wait for trucks in the market for most of every night. Wholesalers also suggested that the popularity of mobile phones made it easier to get in touch with the farmers with whom they had longstanding relationships, in order to predict the quantity and cost of crops as well as when they might arrive.

because engineers made better money but because this job would allow the boy to sleep until six am.<sup>180</sup> He stressed that this was a privilege that his father, grandfather, and other family members who had worked in the vegetable business could not enjoy except during illness or retirement. Yet, when asked what he needed to do in order to succeed in his work, *Cilantro Kingpin* explained that he was successful because people knew that he would take care of them. He had paid the medical bills when one of his drivers was injured in an accident, for example. He also stressed that other people in the market treated him with fear and respect.<sup>181</sup>

Similarly, *Ajit*, a tomato wholesaler, explained that he had no worries about the future of his business because he had apprenticed in the market since he was ten years old, had strong relationships with the other vendors, and had the support of three brothers to help him in his business. Although both *Cilantro Kingpin* and *Ajit* seemed to resent the odd hours they worked, they also seemed to appreciate the sense of fellowship and solidarity that these hours helped to foster among competitors. *Ajit* grinned broadly as he explained that he usually ate meals, joked, and took naps with other wholesalers (who were also his competitors) in unrepaired parts of the Maratha palace that they effectively controlled before returning home to sleep.<sup>182</sup>

---

<sup>180</sup> This is an English gloss of the epithet by which he was known in *Vishnu's Lake*. In contrast to *mafi kaṭai* owners, less than one third of who had entered the business through family connections, all of the workers that I interviewed from the wholesale market had entered the business through family connections.

<sup>181</sup> *Cilantro Kingpin* announced that people were afraid of him with a fair amount of pride; however, *Gayathri*, who helped me to transcribe my conversation with him, pointed to this as an additional reason for why I should not go to interview him.

<sup>182</sup> I mention time spent in the palace because it suggests one reason why the vegetable wholesalers may form such a strong political block (*Ajit* and others report that they are careful to charge the same prices as one other and that anyone who disobeyed the group of their union would probably be thrown out of the market), and because it represents the considerable power that they wielded in the city. Although they tended to dress in dirtier clothes, and were even less likely to keep written records, wholesalers made more

Although both groups had unions, wholesalers were much more likely than *mafi kaṭai* shopkeepers to go on strike. Their single location, visibility, and hold on the supply of vegetables going in to the city meant that their actions were much more likely to attract attention from mass media channels, politicians, and the police. Wholesalers and other suppliers stopped work on major Hindu religious holidays, during *bandhs*, and on days after elections when violence and disturbances were expected.<sup>183</sup>

### *Distribution Agents*

“Agents,” who were described by the English word, received dry and packaged goods, such as soap, cookies and spices, from companies and distributors located elsewhere, delivered them to networks of shops in the Thanjavur area, and collected payments from the shopkeepers for a modest mark-up.<sup>184</sup> Their schedules tended to overlap with the days and hours kept in urban Indian offices; they usually did business from nine am until five pm for five days each week, working Saturdays on alternate weeks or for a half-day. In contrast to those who operated at fixed locations, agents usually moved between suppliers, warehouses, and clients and so were unable to carry out more than one business transaction simultaneously. Of the groups that I interviewed for this project, agents were the most likely to insist that I make an appointment to interview them and to rush back to work immediately after the interview was over.

---

money than most retail shop owners and exercised greater political power. Many, such as *Cilantro Kingpin*, owned other property and businesses.

<sup>183</sup> Although all of the wholesale operations that I investigated were run by Hindus, some market stalls had Muslim workers. The wholesalers suggested that this was an asset because these workers could allow them to continue to do some retail business on Hindu holidays.

<sup>184</sup> For large companies, agency work might be divided into marketing, office management, sales, delivery and collection. Smaller agencies that dealt in more local products might have one man (like wholesalers, agents were exclusively male) performing all of these roles.

When they arrived at shops to collect orders or payments, agents often waited on their motorcycles, sometimes with the engines running, so that they were ready to speed off to the next shop as soon as the transaction was complete. Similarly, their deliverymen were usually eager to unload goods as quickly as possible and usually spent little time doing anything other than the task at hand.

The success and scope of a particular agency depended, in part, on its ability to distribute goods to shops quickly. If goods did not arrive from the companies shipping them, if stocks ran low, or if many shopkeepers were late in making payments, agents would struggle to meet their obligations, damage relationships, and fail to make profits. Attitudes towards time differed between agents, some of who worked relatively independently while others worked directly for the companies whose goods they supplied. *Manohar*, a Malayalam man who had spent most of his life in the Thanjavur area and ran a relatively independent sales and distribution system for Ujala soap, bleach, and related products, smirked when I asked him what he needed to order to succeed in his line of work. Although I pressed him for descriptions of particular skills, knowledge, or effort that might be needed, he insisted that he was a success because his family was able to lend him the capital that he had needed to start and grow his business.

In contrast, *Sivaji*, who coordinated distribution for Cadbury's Chocolates, and *Manikam*, who marketed non-brand name mosquito coils, both insisted that the most important aspect of their jobs was the ability to make and keep plans of where they would go and when and to correctly report these plans when they attended regional and national meetings of the companies for which they worked. Agents tended to keep folders, planners, business cards, and paper receipts. Those like *Sivaji* and *Manikam*, who

worked directly for companies, were likely to treat the temporal organization of activity and the ways in which it could be distilled, displayed, and presented in documents, as the products of their work.<sup>185</sup> Because they tended to deal in packaged, mass-produced, and industrial products, such as tea powder, cookies, pens, and soap, which were slow to spoil, agents experienced a less direct possibility of loss with time than those who worked in vegetable supply and trade. Yet their schedules were shaped by the demands of manufacturers and transporters and rarely varied according to seasons, weather, or political events.

Wholesalers and agents interacted with dramatically different scales and types of institutions. Whereas agents might work for multinational companies, produce sales reports in Hindi or English, and be expected to keep the records needed to pay the newly instituted VAT tax, many wholesalers described their work as organized by family and friendship connections that had persisted for generations.<sup>186</sup> Yet, in contrast to *mañi kañai* shopkeepers who dealt with a wide variety of suppliers and scales of trade, most wholesalers and suppliers dealt with relatively small, well-known, and uniform groups of suppliers and customers.

*Mañi kañai* owners were distinct in the extent to which their work required managing the intersection of multiple, potentially dissonant, rhythms of action and expectation. Because their work linked these disparate groups and systems, failure to correctly anticipate or respond to the timing of the demands of wholesale markets, agents,

---

<sup>185</sup> For more on the role played by documents in differentiation circuits of commerce, and producing value, see Chapter Six.

<sup>186</sup> *Cilnatro Kingpin* suggested that sales units for vegetables reflected highly local divisions and practices. For example, the standard size for a bundle of cilantro or greens sold in Thanjavur differed from the standard bundle size sold in the nearby city of Tiruchirappalli. Although most of the more solid vegetables were sold by kilo, some were sold by other location-specific measurements.

or customers (and to the seasonal variations, strikes, advertisements, and politicians that might influence them) would lead to failed interactions with other sets of interlocutors. Thus, in contrast to some of the jobs performed by their customers, and jobs that they had performed at other points in their lives, shopkeepers described their work as requiring careful attention to coordination: a concern emblemized by getting up early in the morning.<sup>187</sup>

### *Rhythms of Expectation in Caste and Community Distinctions*

Meeting customers' needs while avoiding spoilage requires shopkeepers to understand and attend to the dietary, hygienic, and ritual-based rhythms of their customers, many of which are partially governed by religious and caste affiliations. Most people in Thanjavur, but Hindus in particular, are defined in part by what they eat and the times at which they eat it. Asking, "What have you eaten?", "What will you cook?", and "What foods do you like?" are common ways of indirectly soliciting information about an interlocutor's caste and religious affiliation.<sup>188</sup> While some groups are associated with

---

<sup>187</sup> One of the things that continued to impress me about *maḥi kaṭai* and the vegetable wholesale market was how few vegetables seemed to go to waste. Both vegetable wholesalers and *maḥi kaṭai* owners used a variety of strategies, such as discounting vegetables that were beginning to go bad or giving them away in small amounts to loyal customers, to avoid having unusable produce left at the end of the day. They also tended to watch the times and quantities in which different vegetables were being purchased and to push customers to consume them in ways that would avoid remainders of inconvenient quantities. On the rare occasion when something became so wilted or smashed that it was no longer fit for human consumption, other uses could usually be found for it. *Maḥi kaṭai* were plagued by visits from hungry goats, cows, and chickens, which, if not watched carefully, would creep in from the side of the shop while transactions were happening and attempt to eat fresh vegetables right from the displays. Occasional treats to hungry goats or cows sometimes served as entertainment for customers and an indirect gift to an animal's owner (for further discussion, see Duranti, 1993).

<sup>188</sup> Class affiliations and cosmopolitan stances may also be projected through these answers. Many people were proud to advertise dietary preferences that reflected individual choice and differed from other members of their household, family, or ascribed group. Although most people shared a common schema that connected dietary preferences (particularly times at which meat would and would not be eaten) to

consistent food taboos (Muslims are expected to be consistently non-vegetarian; Brahmins are expected to be vegetarian and non-garlic eating), for many, defining dietary mores apply only at particular points in time: during specific months, days, or days of the week.

The rhythm of days on which people were likely to eat vegetarian food as opposed to non-vegetarian food was a consistent mode for organizing supplies and expected purchases in *mafi kaṭai*. Although by definition *mafi kaṭai* did not sell meat or animals, shopkeepers were careful to stock fresh eggs (which were classified as non-vegetarian) on days when meat was usually eaten and extra vegetables on days when vegetarian foods were obligatory for many of their customers. Many of the people who worked in grocery supply and trade were Muslim, Christian, and/or simply not particularly observant in their adherence to ritual schedules and dietary taboos. Yet the schedule of provision supply in my study area, and in Thanjavur as a whole, was closely aligned with non-Brahmin Hindu dietary and ritual schedules, and people throughout the grocery trade lived and worked by them.<sup>189</sup> Most shopkeepers also knew the caste and

---

religious and caste affiliations, few were surprised to learn about individual variants and idiosyncrasies in diet.

<sup>189</sup> As a result, many people who were not Hindu, and/or described themselves as not particularly interested in religion, still ate vegetarian and non-vegetarian foods on days dictated by Hindu ritual observances. Since most people knew that fresh meat would be available on Wednesday and Sundays—the days on which meat-eating was considered acceptable by the largest number of people—many people chose to cook meat on these days. Similarly, people who might not otherwise have eaten pumpkin on the new moon day, may have chosen to purchase and cook it simply because shops made it available. In this way, shops and shopkeepers may have enforced the dominant and normative status of a Hindu ritual calendar that they did not keep in their own households.

Other elements of the Hindu ritual cycles, such as auspicious dates for weddings, indirectly made their presence felt when they were used as explanations for changes in the flow of business or in the prices charged for goods. These holidays, and the Hindu expertise that they helped to define, also entered into shopkeeping interactions in discussions of time that controlled the flow of money. In conversations about credit and debt, people often made mention of purchases and payments by describing them as having been made before or after particular holidays.

religious affiliations of particular customers and took care to supply the foods, *puja* items, and other supplies that they were likely desire on particular dates.<sup>190</sup> It was possible to read both seasons and the religious significance of particular days by the stock of provisions that were displayed for sale.

Although they were Christian and Muslim respectively, *Amlan* and *Anbu* knew the dominant Hindu dietary schedules well and assisted many of their customers in carrying them out. Yet their evident expertise was often ignored by customers, who sometimes took care to remind the shopkeepers of upcoming significant dates and the sorts of foods, *puja* items, or entertainments for children that they hoped to be able to purchase. As a Roman Catholic who served an apartment block full of observant Hindus, *Anbu* constantly received such reminders, especially from several of his elderly female customers.<sup>191</sup> Rather than pointing out the supplies that he had already purchased in preparation for upcoming days, he usually thanked them for their advice, socially accepting his status as a non-Hindu.<sup>192</sup>

Shopping encounters provided neighbors with a chance to indirectly learn about each other's caste and religious affiliations by monitoring their purchases. They also

---

<sup>190</sup> Most families that I knew did their shopping for major festivals and functions (such as *Deepavali*, *Pongal*, or weddings) in town, but customers often came to small neighborhood shops to make last-minute purchases and to get the supplies needed for more minor holidays and rituals. Although *Anbu* certainly didn't expect to supply the food for neighborhood weddings, he was careful to stock extra sodas and cigarettes during the wedding season, so as to meet the demands of customers who slipped down to his shop from the marriage hall up the street.

<sup>191</sup> I was unable to do a full survey of people who lived in the apartment building, and those residents with whom I spoke at length denied certain knowledge of all other residents. However, selected interviews and observation of customers at *Anbu's* shop suggest that most residents were Hindu and many, but not all, were Brahmin.

<sup>192</sup> Similar encounters sometimes took place at *Pushpa kaṭai*, as when neighbors requested that *Karthikeyan* be sure to provide fruits and *mehendi* for the 14<sup>th</sup> of *āṅṅ* (a date on the Tamil calendar on which various Hindu groups conduct rituals).

provided a means by which people could confirm and synchronize their observances or signal blatant non-observances of religiously significant dates.<sup>193</sup> Although shops and their suppliers generally offered goods in ways that enforced the normative status of a moderately observant non-Brahmin Hindu diet, some neighbors chose to advertise their adherence to other dietary standards or to call attention to the dietary practices of others by commenting on what was bought and cooked and when.

Banter about who had cooked what, teasing observations about the ways in which purchases of particular ingredients conformed to or defied expectations about caste and religiously appropriate diets, and questions about upcoming meal plans were common forms of talk in all of the shops where I recorded conversations.<sup>194</sup> Yet I suspect that such back and forth may have been of particular importance at *Pushpa kaṭai*, as many of the area's newest residents used talk at the shop as a way to learn about and display awareness of each other.

### *Rhythms of Expectation in Political Action*

Alignments of action and non-action with socially significant rhythms were also a means by which shops, suppliers, and customers could assert more overtly political ties.

In much the same way that the times and durations of power cuts made evident the

---

<sup>193</sup> For example, one morning a woman from down the street came to *Pushpa kaṭai* to ask if it was *Amavasai* (the new moon day, sacred to the goddess *Mariamman*, which many people celebrate by cleaning their houses and cooking special food). *Pushpa* quickly double-checked the shop's calendar, and explained that *Amavasai* wasn't for two more days. The women thanked her and explained that she had seen her neighbors cleaning while on her way to the shop and been confused.

<sup>194</sup> Such talk usually took the form of supported interchange in which knowledge about and attention to interlocutors was confirmed. Observations and questions about dietary preferences and taboos often took a form that might be characterized as cosmopolitanism. However, such talk occasionally highlighted religious and caste differences in ways that stressed the difference of particular area residents, particularly Muslims and *Dalits* from those who were speaking.

usually invisible geographic and political boundaries between parts of the city (and between city and *panchayat unions*), various forms of strikes and closures provided visible displays of connection, influence, and alliance between different kinds of shops and provision suppliers. A given *mafi kaṭai* or market stall might be shut for a number of reasons, including voluntary closure due to illness, religious or social obligations, political or performance closure in support of a strike or a *bandh*, or forced closure due to threats, violence, or the possibility of violence.<sup>195</sup>

In order to ensure that their households were provisioned and to learn about the political climate in the city, customers regularly asked about and attended to the reasons and timings for shop and market closings. *Maḥi kaṭai* in my study area did not participate in any of the strikes of *bandhs* that occurred between 2005-2008. However, when a *bandh* was announced, a few customers usually inquired to confirm that the shop would stay open. As well as confirming their own non-actions, shopkeepers often provided news and predictions about actions that might happen elsewhere in the city, gleaned from daily trips to wholesale markets at the center of town and from explicit conversations with their suppliers. These reports were often confirmed by bystanders who had other contacts or business in town, but such conversations provided a means by which mass media accounts of possible events, such as the DMK's announcement of a statewide *bandh* in the summer of 2008, could be accessed in relation to probable local activities.

---

<sup>195</sup> Although I offer this typology, distinctions between these closure types could sometimes be difficult to discern. The event was jokingly referred to as a *bandh*; however, most shopkeepers and market stall owners chose to close or keep much shorter than usual hours on days after elections because of a general assumption that violence, or at least general drunken rowdiness, was likely on such days. Some shopkeepers said that they closed at such times out of fear of violence. Others, including people at different stalls within the same market, suggested that there had not been serious violence for several years, yet they still assumed that the *perception* of possible violence was great enough to keep it from being worth staying open.

On the occasion of the 2008 *bandh*, only a few shops located on the main roads in the center of Thanjavur closed; most other others simply partially shut their doors and windows in acknowledgement of the *bandh*. *Maḥi kaṭai* located out of range of unknown roving crowds conducted their business as usual.<sup>196</sup> No one seemed to be particularly surprised by this fairly weak adherence to the *bandh*, but participants in conversations surrounding shops seemed to be alert to the possibility of a more serious closure.<sup>197</sup>

A strike by the vegetable wholesaler's union, which occurred on March 23<sup>rd</sup> of 2007, was much more extensively discussed and had a slightly greater impact. The strike, called for by vegetable wholesalers and their allies, was meant to be a one-day protest of the opening of large refrigerated grocery stores by the Reliance Corporation. These stores were already open in Chennai and other cities and were meant to sell produce purchased directly from farmers, as well as a variety of dry goods and other items, to both retail traders and individual consumers. Both *maḥi kaṭai* owners and wholesalers at the main vegetable market said that they doubted that construction of a

---

<sup>196</sup> This sort of a partial shuttering was often explained as a way to avoid trouble if anyone went around scrutinizing those who did not support the *bandh*. It seemed to be practiced with particular care by shops with large glass windows that might have easily been smashed by rocks. There were no particularly serious *bandhs* in Thanjavur between 2005-2008.

<sup>197</sup> The most strictly and violently enforced shop closures that I witnessed in Thanjavur occurred when particularly powerful politicians were due to visit the city and police enforced the usually ignored market zoning regulations in honor of their visits. Vegetable markets and others, such as *Tilakar tiṭal* market, were usually surrounded by cart stalls and blankets from which more marginal vendors, many of them women, plied their wares. These vendors were usually tolerated fixtures of vegetable trade in the city, even though they clogged the flow of traffic on what would otherwise have been major arterial streets. However, when an important politician was due to arrive, they would often be told by the police to close. If they did not shift with significant speed, police sometimes threatened violence or beat one of these vendors with lathes. No one ever seemed to discuss this violence, or even pay much attention to it, since it was part of an expected rhythm of trade and movement within the city. Although they did not move to directly counter or protest these actions by police, vegetable vendors with stalls located in the market usually came out to help cart vendors move their supplies to safer locations if they were threatened or beaten.

Reliance grocery store, which was already in progress near the old bus stand, would change their business in any significant way, but the local vegetable traders union agreed to give support to the strike.

At the same time, more serious protests carried out in Chennai were discussed in reports in Tamil and English language newspapers and on *Sun News* television. Many *mafi kaṭai* customers checked with shopkeepers about whether or not the strike would happen, when it would happen, and whether or not it would significantly affect the local flow of vegetables. Several days before the event, *Karthikeyan*, *Anbu*, and other *mafi kaṭai* owners explained that since this was only a token strike, wholesalers planned to close only on the morning of the event. Rather than canceling shipments, they simply planned to delay them until the afternoon. Although they would not be able to buy their usual stock of fresh vegetables in the morning, *mafi kaṭai* shopkeepers saw no reason to support the strike and thus stayed open. The owners explained that they were willing to announce the strike and explain the reason behind it, but because they were not members of the vegetable wholesalers' union they weren't personally threatened by or involved in the controversy surrounding the opening of the Reliance store. All of the stalls at the vegetable "night market" near the old bus stand were closed for the first part of that day, and shopkeepers posted a sign at the entrance explaining their actions.

Although direct participants in interactions were often familiar, locals interpreted rhythms of closure and the evidence offered by prices and flows of goods allowed *mafi kaṭai* to transmit the pulses of activity and political stances associated with other sites, domains, and scales. Many wholesalers, shopkeepers, and their customers learned of

planned closures and possible interpretations from mass media accounts of the various positions taken by political parties, unions, and other interest groups. Additionally, they continually checked these actions and interpretations through conversations with each other. On-site discussion of news and word-of-mouth reports of possible closures made *mafi kaṭai* sites through which the political implications of action and inaction could be interpreted. In a situation like the vegetable market strike, where a much larger and more dramatic show of support was expected, the absence of the expected shift in rhythms of trade could be, and were, interpreted as significant.<sup>198</sup>

---

<sup>198</sup> Ironically, *mafi kaṭai* shopkeepers' non-compliance with this strike and the relative lack of severity with which wholesalers adhered to it may have done far more than striking to suggest that the introduction of Reliance stores was not perceived as a threat to their business, despite media reports to the contrary.



Figure 4. The table of vegetables for sale at *Pushpa kañai*, around 10am in July of 2008.

The boxes contain tomatoes; the sacks, potatoes and onions; the upper shelf, *kīre*, snake gourd, beans, cabbage, green mangoes, *mururīkakai* and *cauco*; the lower shelf holds plantains, a slice of pumpkin, ladies fingers, bitter gourd, French beans, beets, eggplant, and carrots. This low supply is typical of late morning. The slice of pumpkin on the lower shelf has been supplied for customers who will cook it in honor of *Amavasai* (the new moon), which some celebrate as sacred to the goddess *Mariamman*.



Figure 5. Sign placed in front of vegetable market on the day of the 2008 strike.

The sign reads: “**Full Closure.** The livelihoods of 6 crore (60 million) vegetable traders are being threatened<sup>199</sup> by India’s leading corporate leader Ambani through Reliance’s entrance into the vegetable trade. In condemnation of the central and state government’s support of Ambani there will be a one-day token closure of shops and vendors thought Tamil Nadu. General public and customers, we, the traders and workers of the *Tilakar tiful* vegetable market union, solicit your support. AITUC. (All India Traders Union Conference).”

<sup>199</sup> The literal translation of this is “Six core people doing vegetable trading are being struck in the stomach.”

Although news of the strike was spread in advance by television, radio, and newspaper reports, the shopkeepers union, or one of its members, still felt the need for an on-site sign explaining the problem. This sign (Figure 6), which gives the reason for the vegetable market closure and a brief summary of the situation that this vegetable markets union is protesting, is also an apology to any customers who came to the market and found it closed. The dual-pronged address, which hails readers both as “general public” and “customers” (*potu mākkāḥum vāḥikkaiyāḥārkāḥum*), suggests the writers’ awareness of the dual roles and associated rhythms of expectation with which people may confront the space.

### *Shop Closure and Its Interpretation*

As I suggested in Chapter Two, *speaking well* in shops was defined in part by participation in supportive interchanges, in which shopkeepers and customers displayed awareness of and attentiveness towards each other. In Chapter Three, I noted that people who frequented a particular shop often engaged in conversations that acknowledged and ratified their status as members of its network. Given the multiple meanings that shop closures and short supplies could have and the ways in which they threatened ongoing exchanges and dependencies between shopkeepers and customers, delays that departed from expected rhythms of exchange could cause significant strain or require explicit repair.

On a particularly memorable night in mid-July of 2008, *Pushpa kaḥai* was short of its usual stock of rice husk, bran, and other forms of cattle feed. Customers’ failures to settle accounts after the end of the month had exacerbated ongoing tensions between

*Pushpa* and *Karthikeyan*. For the last several days they had engaged in increasingly bitter whispered fights about the proper ways of collecting debts. During the previous night, a fight had grown particularly ugly. Frustrated by *Pushpa*'s continually nagging to push for payment more aggressively, *Karthikeyan* had walked out of the house and went to stay with his younger brother in town, as a sort of domestic protest strike<sup>200</sup>.

*Pushpa* attempted to save face with most of the neighbors and customers by telling them that *Karthikeyan* had needed to go to his native village, implying that there was some emergency. She managed to keep the shop open all day, but because she had to be there consistently she had not had an opportunity to cook food for her family, draw a *kolam* in front of the house, or even to bathe and dress properly.<sup>201</sup> More importantly, because *Karthikeyan* had not gone to the market that day, there were no vegetables, which upset customers' breakfast plans and meant very little profit for the shop. *Pushpa* had managed to supply the shop with milk packets and some of the other daily essentials by sending her oldest daughter to get them on a bicycle, yet she was unable to procure bags of cattle feed, which were much heavier. She explained that one day's loss of

---

<sup>200</sup> *Pushpa* used the English word "strike" to describe his action to me.

<sup>201</sup> *Kolam*, interwoven designs (usually made of a white powder sold for the purpose) on the freshly swept threshold of a house, are one of the primary ways in which Tamil (usually but not always Hindu) households advertise their status to passersby. *Kolam*, which are always drawn by women, mark a house as cared for and chores as completed. Neighborhood residents often comment on each other's skill and style of drawing *kolam*. Observant neighbors can detect changes in who has done the work and sometimes make a game of guessing the author at a house where the work of drawing may switch between several people. They may also read the time pressure or attitude of the drawer on a particular day. The absence of *kolam* at a house where they are normally drawn usually signals that someone has died. When neighbors left their houses for days at a time, they usually arranged for someone else to sweep and do the drawing on their behalf. Although she often treated the *kolam* drawn at the front of the shop as optional and sometimes gave the task to her youngest daughter as a practice exercise, *Pushpa's* failure to draw a *kolam* at the threshold to her house was a marked departure from routine, which was likely to have been noted by customers and passers-by.

profits was not particularly significant but feared that by forcing regular customers to go elsewhere, the shop might suffer a permanent loss in business.

Indeed, between five-thirty and six pm, one hour after I started recording, regular customers came in, expecting to make the purchases that they needed to feed their cows, only to find that the shop was out of cattle feed. These customers expressed their frustration to *Pushpa*, teasing her and suggesting that their cows would go hungry (although there was another shop that sold feed grains about 1,000 meters away). *Pushpa* was noticeably agitated by her inability to meet the customers' needs and made several calls to her husband from the calling box at the front of the shop (he had taken the family's only mobile phone with him when he left). She urged *Karthikeyan* to return home and to bring feed grains with him.<sup>202</sup> These phone calls, and the pressure applied by customers that motivated them, were enough to bring *Karthikeyan* home by seven-thirty pm, belligerently hauling several bags of cattle feed on the back of his motorcycle.

The pressure of customers' teasing, and the threat to the shop and the household's wellbeing that they implied, helped to force reconciliation between *Karthikeyan* and *Pushpa*. She acknowledged her dependent/subordinate position in the shop and ceased demanding that *Karthikeyan* be stricter in attending to collections. Although *Pushpa* was well aware of the timing of her customers' needs, *Karthikeyan* had successfully

---

<sup>202</sup> *Pushpa* seemed reluctant to quarrel in front of the customers and explained the situation to me in private. Her lack of access to a mobile phone, however, and the nature of the space in which she had to make her call, made the news of what was happening difficult to suppress. After she finished her phone call, she received further teasing from an older male customer, who noted that *Karthikeyan* was unlikely to bring grains with him, as he would be returning by bus if he really had gone to his native village, which was located in Madurai district. While this display of knowledge and attentiveness fit with interchanges that I have characterized and supported, *Pushpa* seemed to be hurt and frustrated by the man's refusal to respect her artifice.

illustrated that she was unable to meet them or to maintain the rhythms of her own household without his aid.<sup>203</sup>

### *Buying Time: Kaṭaṇ and Other Delayed Payment Practices*<sup>204</sup>

As the nature of the conflict between *Pushpa* and *Karthikeyan* should suggest, rhythms of expectation in *maḥi kaṭai* were constantly deployed, assessed, and examined in relation to the movement of money. Like vegetable wholesalers and many other kinds of vendors in Thanjavur, *maḥi kaṭai* shopkeepers regularly allowed delayed or partial payments.<sup>205</sup> Most people who I interviewed agreed that this was a necessary part of commercial transactions between people who did business regularly, in part because the small coins needed to give exact payment at the time of purchase were rarely available, and shopkeepers, like other merchants, often lacked the ability to make change. Yet *maḥi kaṭai* shopkeepers also allowed regular customers who had reliably paid back small debts, were known to have a steady income stream, or were supported by a guarantor, to

---

<sup>203</sup> This episode highlighted the ways in which gendered divisions of labor and the differences in access to technology that they enforced kept *Pushpa* dependent and vulnerable in both the shop and household. Although she ran the shop for large amounts of time each day, *Pushpa* did not have the knowledge or connections needed to procure goods from wholesalers in town. More significantly, her lack of knowledge of how to drive the motorcycle that was used to transport items to and from wholesale shops rendered her isolated and frustratingly helpless in *Karthikeyan*'s absence. This situation may not be unchangeable, however. When I left Thanjavur in 2008, shortly after this episode occurred, *Pushpa* was making a very public show of learning to ride a bicycle and of ensuring that her oldest daughter could ride the family's motorcycle.

<sup>204</sup> *Kaṭaṇ* is the Tamil term for a gap created in the space between the two parts of a reciprocal transaction. It is the intersubjective version of the English credit/debt. When a particular side of a transaction is discussed it is usually modified by verbs such as *vāṇiku* (to buy), or *koḥu* (to give). I have used credit and debt alternately in my discussion of exchange in shops, but what I mean by them in most cases is the gap of *kaṭaṇ*.

<sup>205</sup> Shops also occasionally made loans of objects, such as flashlights and bicycle pumps that might be briefly borrowed or objects such as soda bottles that customers were expected to return. These types of loans were far less significant and controversial than loans of money.

make larger purchases on credit and incur debts that might remain for weeks or even months at a time. Rhythms of expectation played a critical part in allowing shopkeepers to access the possible profit or loss incurred by credit purchases and, in cases where payments were delayed, to interpret the ways in which delays might be meaningful.<sup>206</sup>

When comparing *maḷi kaṭai* with other kinds of provision shops, both shopkeepers and their customers pointed out that since the option of buying on credit was one of the main reasons for shopping at a *maḷi kaṭai*, they could be understood as being in the “finance” business.<sup>207</sup> My interlocutors used the English word “finance” to describe a variety of non-bank, money-lending practices. Rather than referring to financial instruments generally, it carried a somewhat negative or “shady” connotation, slightly milder than loan-sharking.<sup>208</sup> Emblematically, “finance” described the lending of money by people with large amounts of capital, often making such loans at predatory rates, secured by implicit threats of shame and violence. *Gayathri* pointed out that as such explicit “finance” had come under greater government scrutiny, it had become increasingly popular for people to do similar business by selling goods, such as saris given as gifts at *Deepavali*, to be purchased on credit, demanding repayment in repeat

---

<sup>206</sup> As suggested by an interaction that I discuss at length in Chapter Five, delay could be the result of the heedlessness of wealth or the stress of temporary poverty. When confronted with delays, shopkeepers had to determine what was happening and what might be done to remedy the situation.

<sup>207</sup> *Manikkam*, a semi-retired government worker struggling to keep a small shop in *Pushpa nagar*, was the only small shopkeeper in my study area who said that he refused to extend credit to his customers. Although he justified this decision by saying that there were already too many shops in the area, which might allow customers to buy on credit and then stop doing business with him, he also constantly complained that he never made a profit and that his shop would soon be closing.

<sup>208</sup> “Finance” was negatively evaluated not because it produced money from money—many people were happy and even proud to explain that their jobs and social positions had been effectively purchased by family capital—but because predatory rates and aggressive pressure for repayment frequently damaged or disrupted relationships. A friend who loaned money when it was asked for might be complimented for his generosity; if the same friend came to the borrower’s house demanding repayment, he might be denigrated as doing “finance.”

installments at high rates of interest. She suggested that, although they did not charge interest on credit, *mafi kaṭai* owners' mark-ups on wholesale prices served a similar purpose. Although they did not use the word "finance" to characterize their work, *Anbu*, *Karthikeyan*, and most other *mafi kaṭai* owners agreed that selling on credit constituted a significant portion of their business and that much of their work involved assessing the probability of repayment and compelling customers to repay.

### *Risk, Repayment, and Trust*

Assessments of credit-worthiness and of the significance of non-payment of debts were some of the critical moments in which past histories and probable futures were assessed in shopping interactions. Although discussions of the terms of credit occasionally became explicit, especially when payments were delayed far longer than expected, they were usually confirmed indirectly in the course of conversation. Many of the transactions that occurred in and around *mafi kaṭai* relied on some form of delayed payment. Shopkeepers regularly bought on credit from wholesalers if their own customers had not paid them back, and many product suppliers kept the collection of payments separate from delivery. During the summer of 2008, a bank strike delayed receipt of salaries and pensions for several weeks, removing much of the cash that had been expected from Thanjavur's economy. Transactions were nonetheless able to continue according to their usual rhythms because everyone assumed that the cash, which would come to shopkeepers and later to their suppliers, could be expected eventually.

Differences in status, relationships, and kinds of transaction are often associated with distinct expectations about payment. The stretch of conversation described below

begins as *Thirumalavan*, a middle-aged man who lives a short walk from *Pushpa kaṭai*, is in the midst of discussing the amount and source of his debts with *Karthikeyan*. While they are talking, *Amutha*, an elderly woman who lives in the same area and sometimes makes money by selling perishable vegetables in other parts of the city, comes to the shop carrying two bundles of cilantro.

Although she is also a neighbor and customer of the shop, *Amutha* sometimes attempts to get rid of vegetables that she has been unable to sell in the center of town by selling them to the shop (often as an in-kind payment for other goods) or to other neighbors who live in the area. *Karthikeyan* usually avoids buying her wares, however, because like other women who occupy marginal places in the vegetable trade, *Amutha* tends to deal in items that are quick to spoil, such as banana stalks, *betel* leaves, *kīre* (leafy greens), and cilantro, the stock of which have to be carefully calculated just to meet demand.<sup>209</sup>

As on other occasions, she speaks loudly about her sales, at great speed and with piercing animation. As *Amutha* approaches, *Thirumalavan* is trying to reconstruct what his family has purchased and cooked recently, in order to make sense of the amount of his debt to *Pushpa kaṭai*. *Amutha* assumes that he is discussing her wares, however, and quickly joins in pressing *Karthikeyan* to buy her cilantro. *Thirumalavan* initially assumes

---

<sup>209</sup> When possible, *Karthikeyan* and *Pushpa* avoided interacting with *Amutha* in this type of situation. Once, when they were closing the shop to leave for a family wedding, they literally ran away from her—leaving much more quickly than they otherwise would have. *Karthikeyan* sometimes employed the dodge, which I describe in detail in a later chapter, of quickly going into the house and letting *Pushpa* come out to speak on his behalf. She then insisted that she wasn't authorized to make purchases for the shop. In two other cases that I recorded, *Amutha* ignores *Karthikeyan's* initial refusals to buy her wares (banana stalks and *betel* leaves in these cases) and argues that he has access to a refrigerator and so could get more value from them than she can. He countered by asserting that, rather than keeping them fresh, the refrigerator would make *betel* leaves black and slimy.

that *Amutha* is trying to sell him cilantro, but she quickly makes it clear that she wants to collect a debt that members of his household incurred when buying cilantro and *kīre* from her the previous evening.<sup>210</sup>

In the conversation that follows, *Thirumalavan* attempts to confirm the amount of his debt to *Karthikeyan*, while hinting that he is not yet able to pay. *Amutha* presses *Thirumalavan* to pay his debt to her, or to increase it by buying more vegetables (thus relieving her of a loss that she will incur if they wilt before being sold). Simultaneously, she attempts to cancel out this potential loss, and some of her debt to *Karthikeyan*, by selling the cilantro to the shop.<sup>211</sup> *Karthikeyan* refuses, insisting that she must pay him in cash. Such thick entanglements of credit/debt transactions, in which explicit discussion

---

<sup>210</sup> As I suggested in Chapter Three, pressing him to pay the debt at the shop, as opposed to going to his house, may be seen as gentler. It also saves *Amutha* the effort of walking down an additional street.

<sup>211</sup> Attempts at in-kind payment or sales of goods to the shop by customers were often refused and a frequent source of disagreement. *Anbu* had to frequently reject or modify proposals made by some customers who sought to use guava fruit or flowers from bushes outside of their house to settle their bills. Part of the trouble in these interactions seemed to stem from customers' and shopkeepers' different senses of the value that should be assigned to in-kind goods. A related problem was that, because they tended to be conducted irregularly and by non-professionals, in-kind payments were likely to require overt negotiations about price, value, and the timing of transactions that could become a source of conflict between shopkeepers and their regular customers. For example, *Karthikeyan* once refused to let *Venmani* sell coconut from the trees surrounding her house and field as a way in which to settle her bill, even though she had already brought them to the shop and the shop was relatively low on coconuts, by explaining that the last time they had tried this exchange, *Venmani's* husband had come to the shop and demanded payment for the coconuts at the retail price even before the shop had managed to sell them.

In several discussions with a customer about the value of guavas, *Anbu* wanted to accept them as in-kind payment at the wholesale rate, whereas his customer suggested that he should accept them at the retail price (what he would sell them for) and thus negate any additional profit from their sale. Yet a second problem was that produce offered for in-kind trade was not only far less liquid than currency but also temporally limited in its value. "December" flowers, which *Anbu* accepted from one of his customers when they were in season, would wilt and become valueless within just a few hours, *betel* leaves could get slimy within a day, and even cilantro can lose its value much more quickly than currency. Shopkeepers thus needed to expect that the goods they accepted would sell before they lost their value and needed to account for the possible risk of non-sale in accessing the value of goods. Although practiced wholesalers were used to accessing, accounting for, and accommodating these risks in transactions with shopkeepers, they seem to have been unappreciated (or perhaps strategically unacknowledged) by customers seeking to make occasional in-kind payment.

of the status of one debt might implicitly promise, prioritize, or postpone another, were often at play in interactions surrounding *maḷi kaṭai*.<sup>212</sup>

## 5. “Spinach may go bad, but cilantro won’t”

Recorded at Pushpa kaṭai at about 4 pm on April 17, 2007

41	<i>Thirumalavan</i> :// nēttu kīre vāṅki irukkarāru iṅṅakki kīre vāṅki enṇa paṅṅratu	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : Yesterday (they) were buying spinach, why will they buy spinach today?
42	<i>Amutha</i> : kīre illē, malli, kīre ellam oṭīrucī pāruṅka //	<i>Amutha</i> : (joining in as she reaches the shop) It’s not spinach it’s cilantro, spinach and stuff like that goes bad you see.
43	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : ah malli tale koṭukka vēṅṅā(m)	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : Ah don’t give me cilantro leaves (I don’t need them)
44	<i>Amutha</i> : vēṅṅān-ṅu-rucci, nēttu koṭutta kācē koṭukkalleṅ	<i>Amutha</i> : You’ve said you don’t need it. You didn’t give the cash that you said you’d give yesterday!
45	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : yētu?	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : Huh? What for?
46	<i>Amutha</i> : koṭukkaṅumē kācu	<i>Amutha</i> : It needs to be given, the cash
47	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : atanalē illēṅkirīṅkalā?	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : Because of that can’t one say no?  (He still thinks that she is pushing him to purchase now the cilantro now, but she has pushed to collecting on an earlier debt that was incurred by other members of his household)
48	<i>Amutha</i> : malli vēṅum aṅṅē reṅṅu kaṭṅu irukku vaiccukkirīṅkalā enṇa kaṭāṅ.	<i>Amutha</i> : (to <i>Karthikeyan</i> ) Don’t you need cilantro elder-brother (emphatic)? There are two bunches, won’t you keep them? (to <i>Thirumalavan</i> ) The credit is nothing.

<sup>212</sup> As I explained in Chapter Three, shops provided ideal sites for collection of debts between neighbors.

49	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : vēṅṭā (m), nēttu koṭṭutta kācē koṭṭukkalle illa. apporo inṅikku ēṅ kāṭāṅ?	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : I don't need (them). (I) didn't even give you the cash for yesterday's purchase, so why should I buy on credit today? <sup>213</sup>  (He has figured out that she's asking him to pay a debt)
50	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : (laughs)	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : (laughs) <sup>214</sup>
51	<i>Amutha</i> : apparo vāṅka vāṅka (incomprehensible)	<i>Amutha</i> : Because of that, take it! Take it! <sup>215</sup>  (She keeps going, but it's hard to understand)
52	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : atuvum vēkama collrīṅka. pāruṅkā koṭṭutta kācē koṭṭukkalēy-ām vēṅṭiyavārum koṭṭukkamuṭiyamē koṭṭukkāmē pōyṭṭāṅkala	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : Even this (matter) you are saying quickly. Look, the cash which I need to give has not been given it seems (reportive), while there are all these needs, <i>it seems</i> it can't be given, <i>it seems</i> that (my household members) didn't pay you. <sup>216</sup>
53	<i>Amutha</i> : reṅṭu malli kaṭṭu-tāṅē	<i>Amutha</i> : It's just two bunches of cilantro (emphatic)
54	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : vēṅṭām, malli-talāi vēṅṭām. inta kācē, oṅka kācē koṭṭutte...//	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : (We) don't need (it) the cilantro is useless (to us) this cash, you need to pay us in cash... <sup>217</sup>

<sup>213</sup> An alternative translation is “The cash (emphatic) for yesterday wasn't given (emphatic) was it? So why buy on credit today?”

<sup>214</sup> *Karthikeyan* may simply be laughing to be affable, but *Thirumalavan*'s statement is also a bit funny because he has been buying on credit daily: incurring new debts before the old ones are paid (doing just what he told *Amutha* he shouldn't do) from *Pushpa kaṭṭai*.

<sup>215</sup> She is implying that he should be a better customer since she's given him credit.

<sup>216</sup> More literally: “It seems that they went without paying you”. His multiple uses of particles marking indefinite/uncertain reporting events may be meant to cast doubt on what *Amutha* is saying, and thereby reject that he owes her the loyalty suggested in the previous line. However, as I discuss in chapter five, he might also be expressing doubt or concern about the actions of family members who could have used money that he gave them for some purpose other than paying down debts as he intended.

<sup>217</sup> Literally: “(we) don't need (it), the cilantro is unwanted. This cash (emphatic), your cash to give...//” *Karthikeyan*'s speech is a bit stumbling and uncertain in this passage. My interpretation of the meaning draws on other encounters in which *Amutha* unsuccessfully tried to pay her debt in produce, such as banana stalks or *betel* leaves that would soon spoil.

55	<i>Amutha:</i> Oh kāṭakkar-āṇṇā vaccikkirīṅkalā vānta oṭaṇe piccipicci koṭuṅka	<i>Amutha:</i> Oh shopkeeper-elder-brother will you take it? (When) customers come you can give it to them bit by bit.
56	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> irukku,	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> It's here (we have plenty)...
57	<i>Amutha:</i> irukkā	<i>Amutha:</i> You have it, do you?
58	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> nētti kaṭṭē irukku periya kaṭṭu	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> ...the bunch that was bought yesterday is still here; it's a big bunch.
59	<i>Amutha:</i> inta malli ille inta malli keṭṭaikātu	<i>Amutha:</i> It's not <i>this</i> cilantro, <i>this</i> cilantro is not available.  (She is suggesting that the cilantro she carries is special)
There is a brief interruption as a woman comes to buy curry leaves		
60	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> karuvēpillai oru rūpaikki koṭuṅka, nēttu-tāṇē maḷi kaṭṭu vāṅkiirukkāṅka	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> (to <i>Karthikeyan</i> ) Give me curry leaves for one rupee, just yesterday they bought cilantro (these items are usually purchased and kept together)
61	<i>Amutha:</i> reṅṅu kaṭṭu	<i>Amutha:</i> (It's just) Two bunches  (She is very insistent and trying to make them tempting)
62	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> netti-tāṇ malli-tala vāṅkiṭṭēṅ	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> Yesterday (emphatic) cilantro was bought (emphatic)
63	<i>Amutha:</i> pāppa-āppa vāruṇum collici	<i>Amutha:</i> (to <i>Karthikeyan</i> ) But the little woman <sup>218</sup> said "you must come"
64	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> ennakki//	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> (skeptically) On what day?
65	<i>Amutha://</i> nēttikki night-ṅa	<i>Amutha:</i> Yesterday night
66	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> viṭṭule oṅṅakku pattu rūpa koṭuttuṭṭu aṅcu rūpa vāṅkiṭṭu vantāṅka, apporom,	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> (in a voice full of doubt) At home I gave ten rupees to be given for you and was to get five rupees change,// after that, (repeating himself) ten rupees were

<sup>218</sup> The actual phrase used here translates as "baby-girl-father", but it's an affectionate diminutive reference to any woman and probably refers to *Thirumalavan's* wife or to *Pushpa*.

	pattu rūpa koṭuttittu añcu rūpa vāñkiṭṭu vāntaṅka ah apparo ille	given five rupees were gotten, ahhh, after that, no (he's unsure)
	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : (incomprehensible)	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : (incomprehensible) <sup>219</sup>
67	<i>Amutha</i> : mmm ille	<i>Amutha</i> : (responding to <i>Karthikeyan</i> ) mm nothing
68	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : enna ille?	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : What nothing (that's not acceptable)?
69	<i>Amutha</i> : koṭukk-illa <u>nālakki-tāṅ</u> <u>kīre vāñkiṭṭu kācu tārē-nu pāppa</u> collici pattu rūpa <u>kīrekku</u> maṭṭom-tāṅ vāñkīruca	<i>Amutha</i> : “I’m giving tomorrow only (I’ll give the cash for buying spinach, baby-girl) (she) said. [She is describing what <i>Thirumalavan</i> ’s wife said to her]  I received ten rupees for spinach only. (cash was given for the spinach but the cilantro is on credit.)
70	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : nēttiyum malli-tale kīre vāñkiṅaci?	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : Yesterday too cilantro and spinach were bought?
71	<i>Amutha</i> : nēttikki añcu kaṭṭu	<i>Amutha</i> : Yesterday five bundles (were bought)
<i>Thirumalavan</i> gives RS 5 to <i>Amutha</i> and she gives him Rs 2 in change. They continue to speak, but this part of the conversation is muffled by the sound of a passing motorcycle and the sound of a horn. <i>Amutha</i> leaves, probably to attempt to sell the cilantro at nearby houses and <i>Thirumalavan</i> resumes discussion of his bill.		
72	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : ṭī kuṭikirata maḷḷikki koṭutāci um ah evalavu vāntiruci	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : I gave the change that I was going to use for tea to buy cilantro, um ah how much has it (my account) come to?

<sup>219</sup> Based on the earlier comment in which *Karthikeyan* insists that they must be paid in cash, and the fact that *Amutha* backs off and leaves quickly, I suspect that his utterance has something to do with a debt that she needs to pay.

The desperate speed and volume of *Amutha*'s fast-paced sales pitch—on which *Thirumalavan* comments explicitly—matches the rapid rhythm at which she must accomplish transactions. She has to move quickly, because her wares wilt to nothing at the end of the day. She lacks the capital needed to extend more than a few rupees worth of credit and still purchase new stock the next day, as well as food and other necessities. The stakes for delay, either in sales or in payment, are perilously high for her. While I take *Thirumalavan*'s comment “*atuvum vēkama collrīṅka*” (“you’re talking about even that quickly”), to refer to the speed at which she is speaking, it may also implicitly comment on the speed at which she needs to press him to complete their credit/debt transaction. *Karthikeyan*'s speech, like *Thirumalavan*'s, is much slower, less desperate, and firm but leisurely. Although his access to refrigeration does not come up in this conversation, in his final refusal to buy (line 58) he suggests the very different pace at which his business operates. Rather than selling cilantro by the bundle, *Karthikeyan* keeps a large bundle in the shop and sells small amounts of it to customers for a profit.<sup>220</sup> He is in a position to conduct his business at a more measured pace: he need only give the cilantro away slowly; there is still plenty of it there.

*Thirumalavan*'s family buys on credit at *Pushpa kaṭai* over fairly long stretches of time. His debts at the shop last for weeks rather than days. The comment he makes at the end of the transcript, explaining that he was only carrying money for tea, and now has given away even that, suggests that, although he has been discussing his debt, he had no

---

<sup>220</sup> Small pinches of cilantro and curry leaves, which were viewed as essential to cooking, were also given to regular customers who bought large quantities of vegetables as a sign of goodwill. The expectation that they should be given is strong enough, and their value is low enough, that it took a great deal of talk to convince shopkeepers that I loathe cilantro and they had no need to give any to me.

intention of paying it this evening. Yet his conversation with *Amutha* makes it clear that he expects his, or rather his household's, transactions with her to be governed by a much faster rhythm. Although she volunteers to extend him credit for a second day, by suggesting that he buy even more cilantro on credit tonight, he turns down the offer. Because *Thirumalavan*'s conversation with and payment of *Amutha* occur as part of a conversation about his debts to *Karthikeyan*, his quick payment of one debt and comments about prudent use of credit may implicitly comment on the other.<sup>221</sup>

### *Negotiating and Evaluating Rhythms of Expectation*

As I explained in the previous section, by making goods available on credit, *mafi kaṭai* allowed customers to literally buy time. Unlike other more explicit forms of finance, the transaction that I observed were carried out as part of a much broader exchange of social and temporal knowledge. Conversations in small shops frequently commented on multiple rhythms of expectation, tracing connections, contingencies, and systems of responsibility that commented on credit transactions. For example, in the conversation that I describe below, *Bhavani*, a woman of roughly *Pushpa*'s age who lives next door to the shop, manages to convince *Karthikeyan* to give her a small loan by suggesting that the funds will help her to repay a slightly larger amount that she owes him.

---

<sup>221</sup> I have no way of knowing whether or not *Thirumalavan* might have intended for this to happen or to what extent *Karthikeyan* may have attended to his interaction with *Amutha*. However, as shown in other sections of the transcript given in chapter five, after she leaves the relatively tense and confused conversation in which *Thirumalavan* and *Karthikeyan* are engaged seems to relax considerably. Although it is also likely that the two men may have united in the shared difficulty of refusing *Amutha* it seems likely that the prompt payment of one debt has hinted at the probable repayment of the other.

The conversation begins as she pulls her bicycle, which has a noticeably flat tire, out into the road and walks it towards *Pushpa kaṭai*. She explains that she has had trouble getting the tire fixed because all of the local shops have been shut and suggests that the owners of these cycle repair shops are lazy. *Karthikeyan* counters that they may have had to close because the power has been cut and won't return until after five pm (this makes it harder to fix tire punctures, which can be identified much more quickly using an electrically powered air hose). He suggests that she try a nearby repair shop run by Muslims, because they might either have power or a hand pump. *Pushpa* seconds his suggestion. At the same time, *Bhavani* asks for a matchbox and *kumkumum* packet on credit, suggesting both that she is going to the temple and that she has no cash.

*Bhavani* then explains that she knows there is a large balance on her family's account and confirms the amount. She says that she is trying to get her cycle repaired so that she can go to find a male family member (probably her husband) who accidentally shut and locked the door to her house while she was outside switching on the motor to draw water from their well. She suggests that she has the money needed to pay her debt but needs to repair her cycle in order to gain access to it. She then says that in order to get her bike repaired, she'll need five rupees. She laughs as she makes this request, which conveys embarrassment and also enjoyment of the irony that she must take more money on credit in order to pay back her debt. *Karthikeyan* and *Pushpa* don't give her the matchbox or *kumkumum* packet (suggesting that they recognize the cash as the real content of her request), but they do give her Rs 5 and point her in the direction of the Muslim shop as she leaves.

## 6. “My cycle tire is punctured”

*This exchange occurs between Bhavani and Karthikeyan at Pushpa kaṭai around 4 pm on July 12, 2008*

1	<i>Bhavani:</i> cycle-puncture oṭṭuratukku oru eṭattukkum pokamuti-yilla	<i>Bhavani:</i> (My) cycle tire is punctured and I can't find anywhere to go and repair it
2	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> ēṇ?	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> Why?
3	<i>Bhavani:</i> inkeṇekkulla kaṭai ellam ille, ella government leave viṭṭaci	<i>Bhavani:</i> There isn't a cycle repair shop open in this area, all of them are keeping “government leave”  [In this context “government leave” refers to closing randomly and often]
4	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> ella vacati vāntirukku pola	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> It's like they're all too wealthy to need to work (literally, it's as if they are all comfortable.)  [This is a joke/ironic since people who do this work, which is akin to cobbling, tend to have very little money]
5	<i>Bhavani:</i> mm ah vacati vāntirukku(m) pola neraiya	<i>Bhavani:</i> Yeah, it's like they have every possible convenience
6	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> inke oḷuṅke terakkamāṭṭēṇ-ṇitu enta cycle-karārṇum oḷuṅkaterakka māṭṭēṇ-kiraṅka	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> Here they're like “we won't be open” all the men who work on cycles just won't stay open
7	<i>Bhavani:</i> puncture oṭṭiratukku āḷ irukku cāmma irukku oruttarum oṭṭitara mattēṇiraru	<i>Bhavani:</i> (They have) a person to fix the puncture there, the tools to fix it are there, but they won't open
8	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> inta ivarum inittupōy aḷaiyiraru ennamo current pōṭurāṅkalām ille	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> Look there (indicating a man standing by the road) this man's also just wandering here and there, (they're) supposed to be doing something to fix the current, but it seems it's not getting done.
9	<i>Bhavani:</i> āma avaru busy	<i>Bhavani:</i> Yes, he's busy  [She indicates the man, who seems to be

		just hanging out, and says this sarcastically]
10	Velu Murugan: (something inaudible)	...
11	Bhavani: ampatu paica cūṭam oru tīpeṭṭi oru kumkumam koṭu	<i>Bhavani:</i> Give me a 50 paisa packet of camphor and a <i>kumkumam</i> packet
12	Karthikeyan: iṅke oruttaru ārumaṇi vāraikkum current pūṭṭiyirukkara	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> There won't be any current here until six pm
13	Bhavani: āma	<i>Bhavani:</i> Yes
14	Karthikeyan: iṅke bāi neṅacca terapparu neṅaccama tarakka mattāru	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> Check at the Muslim (owned) shop. If he thinks he will open, if he doesn't think he won't <sup>222</sup>
15	Bhavani: avara-tā(ṅ) nāmpikkiṭa pōrē(ṅ) (laughs) m bāi kiṭṭa tā(ṅ) pōrē(ṅ) tallikiṭṭu	<i>Bhavani:</i> With belief in him only I'm going (laughs) yeah I'm going to the Muslim (owned shop) only pushing (my cycle)
16	Pushpa: ippo-tāṅ pōriṅkalā	<i>Pushpa:</i> You're just leaving now?
17	Bhavani: āma	<i>Bhavani:</i> Yes
18	Pushpa: vera?	<i>Pushpa:</i> Anything else?
19	Bhavani: tiruṅūl oṅṅu tīpaṭṭi oṅṅu// kaku vāntu tārēṅ, antā āru rūpa koṭutēṅ-ille avaṅka eḷuti vaiccirupāṅka	<i>Bhavani:</i> One sacred thread and one matchbox // I'll come (back) and give (you the) cash. I gave that 6 rupees that I owed you, didn't I? <sup>223</sup> She ( <i>Pushpa</i> ) would have written it down
20	Karthikeyan:// tīpeṭṭi perucavā? ciṅṅavā? oru rūpaiyā?	<i>Karthikeyan://</i> (do you want) a big matchbox? A small one? (for) one rupee?
21	Bhavani: oṅkkiṭṭa vāṅkuṅṅēṅ, cari evalavu?	<i>Bhavani:</i> I bought it (the six rupees) with you, OK, how much?
22	Karthikeyan: (adds quietly) 5, 5.50, 6.50, 7.50	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> (adds quietly) 5, 5.50, 6.50, 7.50

<sup>222</sup> The implication is that the shop owner will open if he's attending to the welfare of his business.

<sup>223</sup> *Bhavani* is confirming that an earlier debt was paid – possibly as a way of suggesting that she will pay down the current debt as well.

23	Bhavani: ēlampata?// nā(ṅ) vāntu tārē(ṅ)	<i>Bhavani:</i> 7.50 (rupees) is it?// I'll come and give (the cash)
24	Karthikeyan: //āma	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> // Yes
25	Bhavani: (softly) vānti(ti) tārēṅ. kacu aṅke irukku, cāvi eṭuttu vāntuṭṭaṅka (laughs) oru aṅcu rūpa kacu tārāṅka puncture oṭratu kacu tāṅka (laughs) paṅṅeṭṭuampatu anta viṭṭe pōy motoru eṭutu vaicciṭṭu vāra pōṅṅēṅ atukku ulle ivaṅka pūṭiṭṭu velile vāntutaṅka cavi eṅka vaiccaṅa-ṅu teriyillaiye.	<i>Bhavani:</i> (softly) I'll come and give it. The cash is there (in her house), but he's taken the key (laughs) give me 5 rupees change please, give me the change to repair the puncture (laughs) 12.50 (is) at that house <sup>224</sup> , I went to put on the motor (for the water pump) while I was going to turn it on, he left the house and locked it, while leaving he put they key somewhere. I have no idea where he's kept it
26	Pushpa: itu yāra, avaṅkalukku-vā?	<i>Pushpa:</i> (to Karthikeyan) Who's that for, for her?
27	Bhavani: eṅṅakku aṅcu rūpa veṅum	<i>Bhavani:</i> I need five rupees
28	Karthikeyan: (inaudible comment)	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> (inaudible comment)
29	Bhavani: ēṅ (inaudible comment, laughter) paṅṅeṭṭuampatu vāntu tāruvēṅ	<i>Bhavani:</i> why? (inaudible comment and laughter) I'll come and give 12.50 (rupees)

Although the end result of the interaction described above is that Bhavani succeeds in borrowing an additional Rs 5, while promising to pay the Rs 12.50 that her family has on account, the conversation includes discussion and confirmation of multiple rhythms of expectation:

1) Current and expected actions of cycle repair shops<sup>225</sup>:

<sup>224</sup> It later becomes clear that she's saying that the amount she owes them is in the house, but she can't get it because she doesn't have the key.

<sup>225</sup> Although the shop that is open is identified by its operator's religion its different hours have nothing to do with religious difference.

*Bhavani* announces that the usual cycle repair shop is closed. *Karthikeyan* and *Pushpa* suggest that the shop run by Muslims may be open and that the other shop may be closed due to the power cut.

2) Current and expected state of the power schedule:

*Karthikeyan* confirms that the power is off now and won't return until five pm.

3) Current and expected state of finances within *Bhavani's* household:

She will have access to Rs 12.50 as soon as she can get back into the house. The state of *Bhavani's* bicycle (and the fact that she hasn't been able to get it fixed due to the repair shops being closed) is blamed for her lack of cash and, implicitly, for her delay in paying down her account. *Bhavani* links her financial status to miscommunication between household members as they carried out routine activities.<sup>226</sup>

4) Current and expected state of *Bhavani's* account with the shop:

*Bhavani* previously owed a debt of Rs 6, which was paid (to *Pushpa*) and should be noted as such on the account. *Bhavani* currently owes the shop Rs 12.50 and promises to pay it when she gains access to the money.

*Bhavani* explains that her delay in paying the shop is caused by her delay in getting money from the house (rhythm 3), which is caused by her delay in fixing her bike (rhythm 1), which *Karthikeyan* links to the power cut (rhythm 2). *Bhavani* probably succeeds in getting the loan from the shop because she is a regular customer who reliably pays down her bill. As a friend and next-door neighbor, I suspect that she might have been able to get Rs 5 simply by asking for it. Yet, in making her case, *Bhavani* draws on multiple rhythms of expectation and emphasizes them as experiences to which *Karthikeyan* and *Pushpa* can relate. By complaining about difficulties in getting her cycle repaired, she draws on *Karthikeyan* and *Pushpa's* shared experiences as neighborhood residents. This sense of shared experience is further emphasized by the fact that everyone in the conversation knows who is referred to as “*bai*,” a term that is used locally to refer to a Muslim man or Muslim-associated business. Although the

---

<sup>226</sup> For more on this see Chapter Five.

connections between *Bhavani*'s expectations about the movement of money within her household and the movement of money between her household and the shop is made explicit in the conversation—she promises to pay the shop as soon as she can get money—she also collapses these moments in time and the roles that they entail. She requires support from the shop and shopkeepers in order to use her bicycle to find her husband and enter her house.<sup>227</sup>

The rhythms of activity alluded to in this conversation are not simply described but evaluated as signs of participants' characters and priorities. Despite their constant discussion of financial worries and prolonged discussion of relatively small sums, both *Karthikeyan* and *Bhavani* lead what many of their neighbors would consider to be lives of relatively middle-class comfort (*vācutiyākāvāṅkā*).<sup>228</sup> In lines 8 and 14, *Karthikeyan* draws implicit comparisons between his own diligent and regular work habits and those of other men in the area. He suggests that the man who should be working to install new wires for the power grid is simply standing around and that even the Muslim bicycle repair shop worker might be keeping shorter business hours than he should. *Bhavani*

---

<sup>227</sup> I discuss the implications of such slippery combinations of participant roles, in which the shop may be incorporated into a customer's household and household members may confirm or deny shared responsibility, in chapter five.

<sup>228</sup> Both *Bhavani* and *Pushpa* occasionally expressed fears that they were failing to achieve middle class status because they were failing to educate their children in English medium schools. Although *Bhavani*'s family, whose house had a private well and water pump was in many ways materially better off than *Pushpa* her husband, who provided her with income, usually worked in Chennai and sent money on a relatively irregular basis. Therefore, despite her ostensibly wealthier status *Bhavani* was often short of cash and needed to buy on credit or borrow from *Pushpa* and her family. Since she was alone in the house with her two young sons, one of whom was mentally disabled; she also frequently called on *Karthikeyan* and other neighbors for aid in performing household tasks. Yet despite the differences in their castes (*Bhavani*'s family is Brahmin and *Pushpa*'s is Nadar), financial situations, and household arrangements these two families had a great deal in common when compared to evidently poor or working class day laborers or to the men who run small cycle repair shops (work that was similar to and sometimes combined with cobbling.) Negative evaluations of these workers temporal dis-orders seems to highlight and perhaps congratulate *Bhavani* and *Karthikeyan* on their shared adherence to the distinctive rhythms and demands of life in wealthier households.

echoes and affirms *Karthikeyan*'s assessments of these other workers, who are being accused of not doing their jobs as quickly as the rhythms of neighborhood life seem to demand.<sup>229</sup> They avoid condemning *Bhavani*'s husband, who could also be faulted for heedless action, but their talk suggests the ways in which failure to meet expectations and demands of the systems in which one is enmeshed may result in social and moral sanctions, something that's especially true for those whose actions are not buffered by maintenance of relationships through conversation.

### *The Stakes of Temporal Coordination: Shopkeeping at Multiple Scales*

Coordination of actions, interactions, and objects with respect to various systems of time is not simply a means to profit but also a mode of moral assessment.<sup>230</sup> Failures of synchronization that make temporal troubles apparent often extend to spaces, places, and times other than those in which the conversation occurs.<sup>231</sup> Participants recognize *maḥi kaṭai* interactions as occupying intersections between multiple, potentially incommensurate, rhythms of expectation. Even so, failure to successfully manage the interchange of actions and expectations between these systems comes at a price.

---

<sup>230</sup> These modes of temporal morality are famously associated with Protestantism and European capitalism. While many of them certainly apply in Thanjavur, which has long been part of the same multi-regional trade system, the religious affiliation or origin of time discipline is not a question on which I am prepared to take a stand. Although Hinduism is famously associated with modes of cyclical temporality, Hindu ritual practice- especially for those who take astrology seriously- has a complicated, precise, and often demanding relationship with various modes of clock and calendar time.

<sup>231</sup> This is, of course, true of all interactions, but I think that it is particularly interesting and important in *maḥi kaṭai* conversations and transactions because they are usually particularly concerned with the movement of objects and obligations across space and time.

Shopkeepers and others who make mistakes in calculating their supplies, especially of perishable goods, will literally lose money. As demonstrated in the conversation between *Karthikeyan* and *Bhavani*, workers who fail to do their jobs in a timely way may be condemned. Similarly, customers who fail to pay shopkeepers on time and do not succeed in shifting responsibility for their delay onto some other system or set of relations may be assessed as unworthy of larger amounts of credit in the future.

Assessments associated with temporal coordination extend beyond shops to shape the ways in which actors are viewed in other domains of life.<sup>232</sup> Success or failure in coordinating flows of commodities—through sales, distribution, or closures—may be read as a sign of the efficacy and popularity of a distributor, commercial brand, workers union or political party. Assessments linked to anticipation and coordination between the rhythms that pulse through *maḥi kaṭai* may be used to place, evaluate, or condemn actors within domestic situations.

The ways in which conflicting scales of social life and associated rhythms of expectation may be collapsed in interactions around grocery shops are the basis of a “*Little Liccu*” cartoon which was run in the comic supplement to *tiṇa maṇi* (*The Daily Bell*), one of the popular Tamil newspapers, in mid-July of 2008, just after a *bandh* had been called by the DMK.

## 7. Little Liccu (by Pillai)

*Translation:*

Panel 1:

Liccu’s mother: (With a baffled look on her face) What? Are all of these shops shut?

Man: (There is) a *bandh* today. Because of that there won’t be a shop open, mother.

---

<sup>232</sup> As *Bhavani* and *Karthikeyan*’s remarks about workers suggest rhythms of activity and time discipline may have class or status associations.

Panel 2:

Liccu's mother: (looking dejected) Shoot! I forgot that a *bandh* was happening. There aren't vegetables and things at home. What can be done?

Panel 3:

Liccu's mother: There's absolutely nothing to munch on. Liccu will throw a tantrum (emphatic) "There are no *snacks*" (He'll) cry!

Panel 4:

Liccu's mother: (in thought bubble) Immediately when I go home he'll look longingly at the empty shopping bag. Seeing that it is empty he'll disappointedly say, "Is there nothing?" Does he understand what a *bandh* is?

Panel 5:

Liccu's mother: (now at home, to Liccu) *Sorry-da* (affectionate particle), Liccu. Today there's a *bandh*, for that reason there's not a shop open...

Liccu: That's no problem, mother. I knew this and have coped.

Panel 6:

Liccu's mother: What's this *-da* (affectionate particle), these snacks? How did they come?

Liccu: Yesterday on the TV it said that tomorrow there will be a *bandh*. Shops (will be) closed – (quotative) just like that. In the evening I got cash from father, went, bought all of this, and came (home). Hee hee (He laughs).

# லிட்டிஸ் லிச்சு

பிள்ளை





The cartoon begins with a stereotypical middle-aged Hindu woman (*Liccu's* mother): her weight, her sari, and the fact that she carries a woven plastic basket suggest her age, religion, and status. She arrives at the shops, only to find them shuttered, and is told by a bystander that a *bandh* has been called, something she realizes she had known, but forgotten.<sup>233</sup> Because she has failed to correctly receive, process, and use the information needed to coordinate her activities with events (the *bandh* could be citywide, statewide, or even potentially national), she will fail to fulfill the expectations of her son and her role as mother and food provider within the household. This cartoon, which came out shortly after a relatively unsuccessful *bandh*, hints at the stresses of intersecting scales of social life and the resulting mismatch between rhythms and expectations that can be a source of trouble outside of the commercial zone.

The humor of the cartoon derives from the ways in which *Liccu* is able to best his mother in the art of managing and manipulating the intersection of multiple rhythms of expectation and from the way in which the situation allows him to appear heroic for performing an action—buying without his mother's permission (it is not entirely clear how he got the money from his father)—for which a child would usually be punished. I include this example here because it nicely illustrates the ways in which faults in a customer's ability to gauge the relationship between mass political events and local shops may result in faulty fulfillment of duties at home, thereby threatening her social and moral position within the household. The cartoon addressed an audience of readers who may have encountered similar surprises or difficulties if they had failed to keep track of

---

<sup>233</sup> Their names, *mēkalā maḥkai* and *sāmi stores*, suggest that they are ordinary small grocery shops.

events and make accommodations for the possibility that shops might be closed at unusual times.

Although *Liccu* claims to have gotten all of the information he needed simply by watching television, the actual responses to *bandhs* and strikes that I observed in Thanjavur were much more complex. Even if they received information on statewide and citywide events through televised news or newspaper accounts, shoppers usually checked the effects of such events on their local environment through conversations with shopkeepers or word-of-mouth reports within the neighborhood. During the *bandh* that preceded the publication of the cartoon, for example, only large shops in the center of the city were closed or partially shuttered. All of the *maḷi kaṭai* in my study area received fresh vegetables and stayed open.

By enacting, transmitting, amplifying, or refusing rhythms of action and expectation, practices of shopkeeping assign dominance and significance to particular customers, supply chains, political parties, and scales of transaction. Conversations about probable futures, recognition of select pasts, and attempts to determine appropriate actions in the present may all allow speakers to stake their legitimacy as experts on a particular kind of time. By offering spaces in which customers can synchronize with a variety of institutions, display their adherence to particular rhythms as meaningful, or buy time through a variety of objects and devices, *maḷi kaṭai* serve their customers in ways that competing kinds of provision shops, such as the main market and large “departmental stores,” cannot.

Although, as I explain in detail in the following chapter, *maḷi kaṭai* are spaces in which temporal delays can be explained, managed, and negotiated by a variety of actors,

these interactions do not ameliorate all of the difficulties and inequities created by incommensurate rhythms of activity and expectation. As well as offering a source at which all customers can acquire objects needed to enact everyday life, *maḥi kaṭai* provide those with limited access to transportation, refrigeration, or ready cash with indirect access to these services. In return for a mark-up, *maḥi kaṭai* allow many of their customers to consume and, importantly for those entertaining guests, to display consumption of, a wider and fresher variety of foodstuffs than they might otherwise acquire.<sup>234</sup>

Because access to different positions in this system of timekeeping labor are differently weighted, shops' roles as mediators between different cycles of action and expectation are an important means by which they participate in the production and instantiation of other regimes of social difference and value, particularly caste and religious differences and related senses of dominance and marginalization. Although there may be creativity, flexibility, and ingenuity in the talk about rhythms in and around *maḥi kaṭai*, much of the talk and action that they produce may serve to support some domains and networks, while simultaneously denigrating others.<sup>235</sup>

---

<sup>234</sup> Although people from all socio-economic classes -ranging from wealthy elites with cars, refrigerators, and generators, to itinerate laborers without fixed houses- shopped at *maḥi kaṭai*, these shops were particularly important to people who could afford to buy vegetables and similar goods but lacked the means needed to obtain and maintain them as they moved through other channels (while income was not the only determining factor – who was in the household, what they did and where they did it mattered to, this was generally true of households making between Rs 2000-10,000 per month.) *Maḥi kaṭai* offered people who lacked the infrastructure and means needed to acquire them through other channels, a way in which to obtain the sorts of food and small consumer goods depicted as part of normal life in SUN TV soap operas.

<sup>235</sup> In the neighborhoods where I carried out this study interactions and transactions in shops served to amplify the dominant and normative status of non-Brahmin Hindu dietary schedules, school calendars, and office work.

## Chapter 5:

### Shoplifting Responsibility for *Kaṭai*: Blurred Participation Frameworks in Discussions of Credit/Debt

Interactions in *maḷi kaṭai* frequently examine the ways in which different actors might be involved in a purchase. In interactions that I observed, shopkeepers, their suppliers, and their customers regularly chatted about where objects were from, which companies had made them, who had authorized a purchase or sale, and who might eventually consume what was purchased. Discussions of who would be responsible for a purchase or debt were frequently sites of play in *maḷi kaṭai* interactions. In the conversation below, *Roja*, a regular customer, comes to *Pushpa kaṭai* to buy cattle feed. *Pushpa* alerts *Karthikeyan*, the primary person waiting on *Roja*, that a previous purchase has been made, for which *Roja* must pay.<sup>236</sup> *Roja* confirms that the person for whom she is being held responsible is her husband, *Perumal*. In a tone that I initially interpreted as teasing, *Roja* refuses to pay on his behalf.

---

<sup>236</sup> Note that by making this comment to *Karthikeyan* within *Roja*'s earshot, as opposed to addressing it to *Roja* directly, *Pushpa* is making an indirect request. It's possible that she may do this because of her physical orientation in the shop during the interaction, yet, as I explain in later sections of this chapter, presenting the request in this way may make it more difficult to deflect or refuse.

## 8. “Get it from him”

Recorded at Pushpa kaṭai at around 5 pm on July 1, 2008.

*Karthikeyan*: Male shopkeeper and owner

*Pushpa*: *Karthikeyan*’s wife, she also works as a clerk in the shop

*Roja*: A regular customer, younger than the shopkeepers.

1	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : uṅkalukku eṅṅa vēṅum?	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : What do you want?
2	<i>Roja</i> : eṅṅukku taviṭum puṅṅakkum, taviṭu oṅṅu puṅṅakku oṅṅē-kal	<i>Roja</i> : For me rice bran and oil cake, one (measure) of rice bran one and a quarter (measure) of oil cake
	...(several turns removed)	
6	<i>Pushpa</i> : ēṅga, oru rūpay cettu-kkiṅka ippa-tān bubble gum vāṅkiṭṭu pōraru	<i>Pushpa</i> : (to <i>Karthikeyan</i> ) Dear, add one rupee, just now he came and bought bubble gum
7	<i>Roja</i> : yāru?	<i>Roja</i> : (to <i>Pushpa</i> ) Who?
8	<i>Pushpa</i> : perumāl-tāṅ uṅka perumāl-tāṅ	<i>Pushpa</i> : Perumal only, your Perumal only
9	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : taviṭu...	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : Rice bran... (getting it from inside the house entrance)
10	<i>Roja</i> : avarukku koṭutēn-na(l) avarkitṭa vāṅkiṅṅa	<i>Roja</i> : If you gave to him get it (payment) from him
11	<i>Pushpa</i> : ēṅ uṅka viṭṭukar amṁā vārum vāṅkikōṅga-naru	<i>Pushpa</i> : Why? Your husband, (literally your landlord) purchased saying “ <u>my wife will come, get it (the cash) from her</u> ”

I initially interpreted *Roja*’s comment in line 10 as teasing because, by refusing responsibility for the debt declared by *Pushpa*, she defies the shopkeepers’ expectations about the behavior of a regular customer and refuses to acknowledge the normative organization of household and familial responsibilities, in which husbands and wives are supposed to work as parts of a single transaction. As I explain in later sections of this chapter, *Roja*’s capacity to get away with this refusal—to pass it off as joking—is enabled by an assumed hierarchy of financial responsibilities within households. In the

context of this hierarchy, parents are responsible for purchases made by children, and adult males are responsible for purchases by women. *Roja*'s joke works as such because everyone present assumes that she and *Perumal* transact as a unified household and because, even if she refuses to pay, it is assumed that, as her husband, *Perumal* will ultimately be held responsible for their purchases.<sup>237</sup>

This assumed division of responsibility for transactions is highlighted by the fact that, in order to justify her earlier claim, *Pushpa* resorts to reporting *Perumal*'s speech. Rather than simply telling *Roja* to give payment in her own voice, *Pushpa* draws on a quotation of what *Perumal* said. This segment of the conversation seems, like many others of its kind, to be little more than a momentary joke between a customer and the shopkeepers at her usual store. Yet, as I explain in later sections of this chapter, talk that represented and reconfigured assignments of responsibility for speech and action in *maḷi kaṭai* could do much more than simply assert or play with stereotypical divisions of responsibility within households. This chapter examines the ways in which domestic roles and responsibilities were depicted, deployed, and potentially manipulated through transactions and interactions between shopkeepers and their customers. Indeed, later segments of the conversation that I analyze above reveal that *Roja* is doing something more than simply joking or passing time.

As I suggested in Chapter Three, *maḷi kaṭai* often served as a backstage for domestic and family relations. Although patrons were visible to neighbors and strangers,

---

<sup>237</sup> I suspect that *Perumal* and other men would have been less likely to make similar jokes in *Roja*'s situation. As the conversation between *Thirumalavan* and *Amutha*, which I analyze in Chapter Four, demonstrates, adult men, and especially those who acted as heads of households, were expected to take responsibility for the debts of subordinate family members, even when purchases were unauthorized.

expectations about speech and dress in small shops had more in common with what was done in domestic spaces (where people cooked and did laundry) than with activities that took place in the central part of a house.<sup>238</sup> Similarly, distributions of money and provisioning responsibility, which would not normally be revealed to visitors in households, were often performed in interactions surrounding *mafi kaṭai*. Regular customers frequently reported on intra-familial struggles when conducting transactions in shops. When doing so, they might seek to provide humor or dramatic entertainment, to garner sympathy from shopkeepers and bystanders, or to acquire more material assistance in resolving a problem. Difficulties with divisions of labor and responsibility within families might also be made visible or deployed as a means of claiming, producing, or denying responsibility with respect to the shop and shopkeepers in a particular interaction.

I focus on situations in which participation frameworks, the distributions of roles and responsibilities between parties entailed in an interaction (see Goffman, 1974; Irvine, 1996), are explicitly at issue. An analysis of the participant roles implicated, entailed, and explicitly identified in discussions of unpaid debts, provides insights into the relationship between specific moments of spoken interaction and the economic transactions that they evaluate, project, and produce. Although there is no reason to expect full overlap between the ways in which actors are identified and held responsible

---

<sup>238</sup> This statement applies to the center of the house in the presence of guests and non-household family members. The extent to which actions, speech, and dress were regimented within dwelling spaces depended on the physical space and composition of the household. In houses with multiple rooms, the front room (where guests were entertained and food was eaten) might always be a place where a relatively careful presentation of self was expected during waking hours. In houses such as *Gayathri's* mother's, which consisted only of one room, the boundaries assigned to spaces might shift more frequently during the day. Many larger houses—almost all that were located in *King's Community*—had walled latrines and bathing spaces; others, such as the houses located behind *Pushpa kaṭai*, shared these spaces with neighbors.

in conversations and the ways in which they are produced and entailed by other forms of exchange (as I explain in later sections), attention to the ways in which actors are identified and held responsible in instances of talk is critical to understanding and organizing other aspects of transactions. I suggest that shifting and indeterminate assignments of responsibility for transactions are an accepted and even a preferred feature of *mafi kaṭai* interactions.

Drawing on an analysis of participant roles in two conversations, I argue that the ease with which shifting participation frameworks are mobilized in these conversations suggests that transactions in *mafi kaṭai* are normally understood as taking place between actors other than the people who are directly present. Instead, these conversations draw and depend on the assumption that the default *mafi kaṭai* customer, or at least the sort of customer who can buy on credit, is a household rather than an individual speaker, and that responsibility for the household is divided unequally between its members.

Although, as I explain in chapter six, there are other domains in which the roles and responsibilities of household members might be defined and regimented, conversations in *mafi kaṭai* offer a striking example of the ways in which domestic participation and relationships are configured, contested, and informed by interactions that occur outside of the household.

### *Participation Frameworks in Mali Kaṭai Transactions*

People who spoke in *mafi kaṭai* interactions often performed transactions on behalf of entities other or greater than themselves. Most *mafi kaṭai* shoppers were assumed to live, earn money, shop, and consume the goods that they purchased as part of

larger households.<sup>239</sup> People who lived entirely alone were rare enough that they were often commented on and pointed out to me by shopkeepers and other customers.<sup>240</sup> Some customers, such as men buying cigarettes to smoke at the side of the shop, made purchases as, by, and for themselves. However, many other purchases were made for, on behalf of, or with the authorization of someone else.

More importantly, shopkeepers and bystanders often explicitly recognized and commented on the roles, ties, and relationships that were involved in purchases.<sup>241</sup> Young girls who came to the shop to buy cigars were sometimes jokingly scolded for smoking. This jocular play worked precisely because there was a general assumption (by shopkeepers and bystanders) that the purchases they made were not for the girls' own consumption. Similar assumptions applied to many other purchases. In the conversation

---

<sup>239</sup> As I explain in Chapter Six, what counted as a “household” varied across contexts, transactions, and interactions. From the perspective of *maḥi kaṭai*, a household (peoples’ answer to *uṟkā vīṭṭe yār-yāru irukkīraṟkā(!)?*: *Who lives with you/who is in your house?*) consisted of people who shared food from the same stove. Single buildings often contained multiple unrelated families, and households sometimes contained people who were not immediate family members. Households and family connections took on different forms and distributions of responsibility as represented in government documents, marriage negotiations, and shopping of various kinds. Households as represented in *maḥi kaṭai* transactions, which offered a snapshot of everyday lived relationships, were far more likely to be run by women, or include adult women’s natal families, than households as represented in government documents.

<sup>240</sup> Even people who seemed to live, shop, and cook independently were often described as being part of larger households. *Bhavani*, like many other women in Thanjavur who lived on remittances from somewhere else, was the only adult in her house at most times, but she was spoken about as if she lived with her husband. Similarly, *Anbu* pointed out that many of the men who lived in the apartment complex near his shop stayed, shopped, and ate there alone in order to work in the city but had families in surrounding villages with whom they shared earnings and who they might visit on holidays or weekends.

<sup>241</sup> Even purchases of cigarettes could be understood as tied to more complex frameworks of obligation and responsibility. Although health concerns were also raised, one of the most common objections to cigarette smoking, and one of the main reasons why people described it—along with *betel* nut and *pak* chewing—as a negative trait in a potential bridegroom, was that it consumed financial resources that ought to be spent on purchases that would benefit other members of the household. The stigma assigned to smoking and consuming other addictive products also made the purchase of these items a site for complex play with trust, participant roles, and responsibility. *Gayathri* happily recalled being sent to the shop to buy cigarettes on behalf of a favorite uncle who wished to keep his habit secret from other family members. She enjoyed these trips, during which she was subjected to teasing by people at the shop who sought to discover the identity of the person for whom she was making the purchase, because they marked her as her uncle’s favorite and allowed her to return the gesture with a display of loyalty to him.

between *Pushpa* and *Venmani* that I describe in Chapter Two, for example, *Pushpa* knows that *Venmani* is not buying *betel* leaves for herself. Assumptions about customers' domestic roles and about the organization of responsibility for purchasing and debt within a household frequently played a part in organizing *mafi kaṭai* interactions. Depictions of roles, responsibilities, and authorizations of purchases occasionally had the ability to shift the course of interactions in shops.<sup>242</sup> As I explained in Chapters Two and Three, shopping encounters were ways in which customers constructed domestic relationships and conveyed information about those relationships to other members of the locality.<sup>243</sup> Allowances as to what customers should and could buy on credit might be modified by the behavior of guarantors, or justified as a way to meet recognized household needs. For example, shopkeepers routinely allowed purchases on credit by people who needed to buy sodas or snacks quickly in order to entertain unexpected guests.

The order and way in which a customer's presence at the shop was acknowledged might shift depending on cues that suggested the authorization behind and responsibility for a purchase.<sup>244</sup> When carrying an empty cooking oil bottle early in the morning as food was being prepared, thereby signaling that the intended purchase was on behalf of

---

<sup>242</sup> Much of the seemingly less serious play involved teasing very small children or encouraging them to enact transactions.

<sup>243</sup> Daniel Miller (1998, 2001) makes a similar observation about shoppers in Northern London who construct their families through purchases of products. Family members in the transactions that I studied were similar to those described by Miller, in that they exerted their presence as desires that needed to be met, changes that should be wrought, or sacrifices that could be made. However, my discussion differs from Miller's in that the shoppers he describes are assumed to have full control over the money that they are spending and to equally authorize all purchases. Rather than simply receiving purchases, family members who are physically absent in *mafi kaṭai* interactions can be understood as making them.

<sup>244</sup> I owe thanks to Bruce Mannheim for suggesting this significance of turn taking.

an adult family member, a small child might be given priority amongst waiting customers and, from the standpoints of both the transaction and the interaction, be treated as interchangeable with the adult whose request he carried. If the same child returned in the afternoon, when a purchase of a snack for his own consumption might be expected, he could be made to wait until the more urgent needs of adult customers were met.

This organization of interactions meant that purchases at shops, which were often carried out by multiple people on behalf of single household, could be sites for the contesting, manipulating, and re-working domestic roles and responsibilities. At the end of Chapter Four, I used a “*Little Liccu*” cartoon to illustrate the ways in which anxieties about the performance of domestic roles may be tied to successful negotiation of the multiple “rhythms” that pervade shopping interactions. The humor of the cartoon derives from anxiety about the performance and manipulation of domestic roles, with *Liccu*’s delighted laughter in the final panel celebrating the fact that he has turned the expected division of labor within his household on its head. Not only did he manage to attend to, interpret, and act on mass media reports and political events—taking on responsibilities that should have been met by his mother—but in doing so he managed to usurp her, and perhaps his father’s, expected role in the households’ shopping transactions.

In the final panel of the cartoon, *Liccu*’s explanation of how he bought the snacks is somewhat ambiguous; it is not clear whether he took the cash from his father by asking for it or by simply taking it from where it was kept. What is certain is that *Liccu*’s mother, who assumed that she would fill the role of shopper for the household, was not

informed.<sup>245</sup> *Liccu* successfully enacts a fantasy that was attempted by several children in my study area and assumed to be desired by many more: he manages to purchase what he desires without (full) parental authorization. *Liccu's* actions, which might normally be classified as theft, disobedience, and gluttony—note that he bought packaged snacks as opposed to vegetables or other cooking supplies—are rendered irreproachable due to their timing (during the *bandh*).

As the conversation with which I opened this chapter illustrates, frameworks of authorization, responsibility, and alliances between participants were often explicitly at issue in credit/debt transactions. As I explained in Chapter Four, it was relatively common for shopkeepers to request short delays in returning change or to allow regular customers to buy on credit for amounts of just a few rupees. Such purchases were particularly likely to be granted in situations when customers were in the midst of an activity, as in *Bhavani's* attempt to repair her bicycle tire, or otherwise unlikely to have cash on hand. Most shopkeepers in my study area, merchants at the wholesale market, and other traders who were not affiliated with large institutions such as government offices and departmental stores, insisted that such small credit/debt transactions were a necessary part of doing business.

All but two of the sixteen *maḥi kaṭai* located in my study area allowed some of their more reliable customers to pay for larger purchases on lines of credit that could be

---

<sup>245</sup> Although it is the case in the cartoon, and in many of the examples that I draw on in this study, provision shopping was not commonly assumed to be women's work by people living in Thanjavur. In fact, since women in normative middle-class families were supposed to go out alone as little as possible, the appointed grocery shopper (especially for errands that involved going to socially distant locations) was often a man. Women were stereotypically the ones who did domestic cooking, but in many households the person who cooked and decided what to cook was not the one who shopped. Children, especially boys, elderly male relatives, and other people who were on-hand, could be recruited to buy groceries at a *maḥi kaṭai*.

extended over several weeks.<sup>246</sup> Unlike smaller loans, which shopkeepers seemed happy to give on the spur of the moment, larger lines of credit—usually defined as amounts greater than 50 rupees and a timeframe of several days—were offered only to well known customers after a probationary period. *Anbu*, for example, explained that he usually gave out several small loans of amounts less than Rs 50; only if customers were prompt and reliable in paying them, ideally without reminders, would he consider allowing them to make larger purchases on credit. Larger lines of credit were of particular use to customers who lived off pensions and salaries that were paid on a bi-weekly or monthly basis and who sometimes lacked cash between paychecks.

Lines of credit, most of which were extended to multiple members of a household, also served to mark and shape the ways in which households could function as customers in transactions. *Kaṭṭaṅ kannakku*, the written accounts of credit and debt kept in *maḥi kaṭṭai* and similar shops, usually consisted of lists of numbers kept under a name or epithet. Although that name usually applied to a single person, such as the child who ran errands to the shop most often or the titular head of the family, the ability to make purchases on that account was usually extended to anyone who belonged to or seemed to purchase under the auspices of a particular household unit. Several (male) shopkeepers who I interviewed said that they tried to avoid writing women’s names in order to be respectful, implying that it would be inappropriate for them use the names of their female clients. It was also assumed that adult women would not, or at least

---

<sup>246</sup> Both of the shops that refused to give larger amounts of goods on credit described themselves as failing. One closed in 2007 and the other one, which was run by a retired man who said that he kept the shop in order to spend time away from his house, was rarely busy. I cannot be sure to what extent their refusal to give credit was a cause or effect of their precarious situation.

normatively should not, have been the primary person identified as in charge of household finances.<sup>247</sup>

Although overt discussion of credit as a means of control was relatively rare, some families seemed to use credit purchases in order to monitor or earmark money spent at a particular shop.<sup>248</sup> Because cash was assumed to be equally spendable for all commodities and in all locations, purchases made with ready-money were relatively difficult for family members to monitor. When cash was given to people who were sent shopping, there was always some risk that unauthorized purchases might be made, that change might be kept, or that more might be spent than other household members considered permissible. Credit, in contrast, could only be spent at shops that had particular kinds of ties to spending households, where shopkeepers were able and likely to exert greater control over what was being purchased.<sup>249</sup> Although divisions of responsibility shifted over time and differed between households, shopping in many

---

<sup>247</sup> Several households in my study area were funded and financially directed by adult women. A woman was often the oldest household member and, often, older women drew government pensions, either for their own work or the work of spouses; others worked for wages or received remittances from family members living elsewhere (who were therefore unable to exert much control over money once it entered the household). In many other households, women provided substantial income streams through agricultural work, part-time work, or piecework carried out at home. In crisis situations, women might temporarily supplement a household's income by pawning jewelry. Since shopkeepers made it their business to understand the finances of customers who bought on credit, many of these issues were discussed in shops. However, for reasons that I explain below, members of many households seemed to prefer to pretend that they were not run or funded primarily by women.

<sup>248</sup> Two women who shopped at *Pushpa kaṭai* told me explicitly that they had to buy on credit because their husbands would not give them money to shop independently. Similar uses of credit as a form of control were more commonly practiced between parents and children. I often attribute these decisions and associated control to "households" in the paragraph above because control of finances within families did not always match the models that were presented to shopkeepers or to the anthropologist in interactions.

<sup>249</sup> Shopkeepers also had greater incentive to exercise control over credit purchases, since, if inappropriate uses of credit were allowed (either through the purchase of frivolous unauthorized objects or in amounts that were in excess of a family's ability to pay), other members of a household might refuse to pay a bill. This seems to be the case in the conversation between *Pushpa* and *Sneha* that I described in Chapter Two. If *Sneha* had been paying in cash, it is unlikely that *Pushpa* would have counseled her not to buy the mangoes, even if her household income had been the same.

families was carried out by women, children, and younger male household members on lines of credit that were backed and paid for (or, at least represented as backed and paid for) by older male household members. Payment of transactions as one consolidated debt allowed the payee to get a sense of the total amount that had been spent.

In much the same way that the person who enacts the purchase for a debt incurred does not necessarily need to be the same as the person who is ultimately held responsible for payment, the speaker who utters a promise to pay may speak on behalf of actors other than those who are immediately present. Rather than simply identifying the parties that can act as “speaker” and “hearer” in an interaction, utterances and their interpretations can be analyzed as entailing a wide variety of possible actors or participant roles (Irvine & Hill, 1993; Irvine, 1996). For example, Erving Goffman (1974) observed that within the role of speaker it may be possible to distinguish the following parties: a principal, who is responsible for the content of an utterance; a figure, who is held responsible for it; an author, responsible for some elements of its form; and an animator, responsible for its material transmission. Similarly, the hearer, receiver, or audience that directly perceives an auditory signal need not be the same as the addressee who is hoped to respond to it.

As Judith T. Irvine (1996) observes, possible fragments of the speaker-hearer roles need not be finite or universal. More importantly, from the perspective of my argument, she explains that the ways in which roles are assigned to particular actors, and thus potentially the natures of the actors themselves, may remain indeterminate.<sup>250</sup>

Researchers have explored complex alignments of participant roles in a variety of settings, such as political speeches (Duranti 1993), religious rituals (Keane 2004), and explicitly marked performances (Hymes 1981 [1975]; DuBois 1993; Agha 2005; Seizer 2005). Jane Hill and others (for example: (Agha 2005), have examined the ways in which shifts in participation frameworks may bracket and thereby produce different voices that are associated with morally evaluative stances and socially responsible actors. Many of these accounts stress the usefulness, acceptability, and even the normative status of indeterminate and ambiguous participation frameworks—and the associated blurring in the identification of actors and responsibilities.

Yet commercial transactions involving money are often assumed to be situations that favor neat assignments of participant roles and clear assignment of responsibility to a specific and accountable speaker. In his 2007 essay on the stance triangle, for example, John DuBois declares that, “*Responsibility... comes with ownership. In the dialogic shop of stances there’s a rule: If you take it, you own it*” (p. 173). DuBois uses shopping only as a metaphor for a situation in which ownership and responsibility are clearly delineated, because purchasing is, to some extent, all about realignments of responsibility and ownership. It may, however, reinforce the problematic and questionable assumption that the shifts in ownership and responsibility that take place in commercial encounters are necessarily clearly delineated.

As I demonstrate below, such indeterminacies are usual and preferred features of shopkeeping interactions and part of what allows “households” to be constructed as such through their interactions with shops. While the point of most *maji kaṭai* transactions is a clear transfer of ownership of goods or cash between shopkeepers and their interlocutors,

clarification of responsibility in this segment of the transaction is often enabled by a blurring of responsibility in other domains. The work of short-term interactions in shops is often the result of blurred or shadowy subjects and participant roles.

I agree with DuBois' (2007) insistence that stance taking should be examined as an inter-subjective act:

...by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means, of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects (self and other), and aligning with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimensions of the sociocultural field. (p. 163)

I think it critical to examine the possible form of the subject/actor in stance-taking and explicitly consider the implications of this model when applied in situations such as reported speech (other than conversation between a physically present singular "I" and "you" who are taken to be fully responsible for their conversation). If, extending DuBois' metaphor, stances and other forms of alignment and responsibility are sold in a shop, it is rarely a fixed-price shop in which all customers pay cash up front, giving their names at the register.

In *mafi kaṭai* interactions, stance may be purchased on credit in the name of some other actor who is absent and, in some cases, can never be made to fully appear. In my analysis of the interactions below, I draw on a language of stance, evaluation, and alignment. I find this language useful because it produces an analysis that neatly deals with both the specific forms of utterances and the social actions that they produce and entail. Yet, especially in cases where responsibility for payment and similar actions is at stake, addressees are likely to interrogate and evaluate such speech with respect to the participants who it has the possibility to involve, create, or implicate in a transaction.

Subjects of utterances may also be left ambiguous so that, without additional work at specification or strong presupposition, it is impossible to assign responsibility. In this way, stance and responsibility can be “shoplifted” in many *maḥi kaṭai* interactions.<sup>251</sup>

### *Assigning Responsibility in Discussions of Kaṭaṇ Kannakku*

I'll turn first to a conversation in which one of the participants might be described as sounding angry, as doing precisely what most customers and shopkeepers insisted should never be done. Goffman (1979) defines a shift in footing as “a change in the alignment we take up to ourselves and the others present as expressed in the way we manage the production or reception of an utterance” (p. 182). In his initial discussion of footing and participant roles, Goffman (1976) describes conversations as shaped by both *system requirements*, which mandate and open working channels, and *ritual requirements*, which manage the social risks and opportunities produced by the performative potential of face-to-face talk (p. 268). It is possible to examine shifts in the voices used by speakers as functioning to meet both of these requirements. In discussions about credit and debt in *maḥi kaṭai*, shifts in footing are constituted by changing frameworks of reported speech and action and by the creation of multiple “voices” in which participants can speak, seeking to blur and distance responsibility for problematic behavior in ways that alleviate conflict. By manipulating systems of voices, conversations in *maḥi kaṭai* often shift responsibility for the non-payment of debts, the

---

<sup>251</sup> There are, of course, limits to the ways in which this is allowed. As I explain in a later part of this chapter, murky depictions of participant frameworks may be allowed in conversations because they can help to protect participants in the transactions on which they comment.

non-return of objects, or the need to nag people to get these actions done, away from the customer who is currently present.

The practice of writing a single account for all members of a household, and of refusing to note who carried out which action, provided a source of tension as well as resolution in many of the conversations that I recorded in *Pushpa kaṭai*. Although moments of overt tension between shopkeepers and regular customers are relatively rare, they do follow some fairly consistent patterns. The conversation that I transcribe and discuss in detail below is very similar to eight other conversations, each with a different female customer, which I recorded during observations of interactions in *Pushpa kaṭai*. It attempts to deal with a discrepancy between the amount of debt claimed by the shopkeeper and the balance expected by the customer.<sup>252</sup> The numerical value of the discrepancy—17 rupees—is relatively small compared to the overall balance that must be paid<sup>253</sup>, but it is a less than trivial amount for all participants in the conversation. The shopkeepers and customer all bring an unspoken accusation into the encounter. Each is aware of the possibility that the other party in the encounter might lie or cheat and that a

---

<sup>252</sup> The conversation is also typical in its timing. Although regular customers came to the shop approximately once per day, those who bought large amount on credit were usually expected to settle their accounts only once or twice each month, when pension and salary payments arrived. The first few days of the month, after payments had presumably been received, were replete with conversations in which shopkeepers reminded customers to pay and accounts were haggled over. The first week of the month was also the time when shopkeepers, who had purchased goods from suppliers on credit, were also eager to retrieve funds needed to pay back wholesalers, distributors, and others from whom they had made purchases. Arguments similar to the one below generally happened several times each day at the start of each month but almost never happened at other times.

<sup>253</sup> At the time of my fieldwork, Rs 14 was roughly equivalent to 25 cents in US dollars, not a particularly trivial amount for most customers, who might easily use it to buy enough vegetables, cooking oil, and milk to feed five people. Similarly long and tense conversations occurred over amounts as small as Rs 4. Rs 1.5 is enough for an egg and Rs 20 is enough to purchase an unlimited meal in a decent restaurant. I doubt that a woman of Revathi's status would fight this hard for 50 paise, but she would certainly remember the amount and hope to receive it if owed it back in change.

profit might be made by doing so. As I explained in Chapter Two, both the shopkeepers and customers that I interviewed reported that while cheating of various kinds was possible and common, participants in such a conversation needed to be careful not to make this accusation directly, nor to express overt anger, if they hoped to maintain the kind of relationship needed to exchange goods on account.

*Revathi*, a middle-aged woman who lives down the road within an easy walk of the shop, might be described as sounding furious when this interaction begins. She storms up to the shop and begins to speak rapidly. She immediately picks up a conversation that she had started the same morning, when she'd come to the shop to confirm that her understanding of what she owed matched the amount that was kept by the shopkeepers in the *kaṭaṇ* *kannakku* notebook (really a scrap of paper on a clipboard in which debts are recorded and paid amounts crossed out). She has returned to the shop to express the conviction that the amount requested by *Karthikeyan* is in error and to attempt to get the debt of Rs 17 cleared. As I explain in detail later, it is not entirely clear whose conviction this is, whose it is meant to be, and whether or not *Revathi* herself is convinced of this position.

Although money and trust are certainly at issue in this conversation, it is also a struggle about character; some participant at earlier points in this transaction has been sloppy or in error. Assignments of blame, fault, and responsibility are simultaneously comments on the nature of the actors implicated in this interaction. Transactions between *Revathi's* family and the shop ideally take the form of *Revathi* and her daughter making purchases, recorded by the shopkeepers, which they then report back to their husband/father, who pays for the purchases or provides money with which they can be

paid by another person. The failure of the balance reported in the earlier conversation to match expectations shows that there has been a breakdown in the system somewhere.

In the course of the conversation, the shopkeepers argue that, although *Revathi's* husband came and paid most of the balance of their debts, there was a small amount that remained afterwards, perhaps because he made some small purchases at the same time. As I explain in detail in the next section, this behavior of not caring about a debt of Rs 14 could be seen as a typical pretension of middle-class male status. By pointing out that *Revathi's* husband made a purchase without acknowledging that he owed a debt, the shopkeepers may be suggesting that *Revathi's* husband has pretensions of being above his status, and they are certainly suggesting that his behavior is not in keeping with hers.

The sense of breakdown in the normal system of transaction and the underlying threat to relationships is marked as exceptional by the speed, volume, and vocative use in *Revathi's* speech. Throughout the conversation, all participants mark the urgency and tenacity of their positions by making frequent use of the vocative case (vowel lengthening at the end of the word or adding *-e*) and the emphatic/exclusive particle *tān*. Much of the content of the conversation consists of an attempt to establish the location of the failure and who or what might be responsible for it. Although *Revathi* clearly communicates the high level of emotion associated with her position, she avoids shouting, making direct accusations of dishonesty, or speaking with overt contempt.<sup>254</sup>

This struggle takes place, in part, through the use and refashioning of a system of voices. In her initial utterances, *Revathi* quotes her husband; he is the principal who is

---

<sup>254</sup> *Gayathri*, who assisted me in transcribing this interaction, says that I should note that *Revathi* is speaking very rapidly and without pausing.

asking angrily though her. Vocative markers and other accusatory, frustrated, and almost angry stretches in *Revathi*'s speech are framed as being spoken through the voice of her husband via the use of quotative markers. As she is further pressed by *Karthikeyan* and *Pushpa*, she shifts to quoting him directly as the figure behind the conversation, then to quoting him as a separate party (one with whom she might not agree), then to quoting him indirectly and with an assumptive particle (which suggest she may be unsure of what he says), and finally to insisting that he doesn't communicate with her at all. Through this shift away from unity with the voice of her husband, *Revathi* moves towards a position that is more compatible with that of the shopkeepers and their account book. At the beginning of the conversation, she is noticeably agitated. She begins to calm down and pause more around line 30, and in the later parts of the conversation signals willingness to compromise.

## 9. "My husband won't tell things to me"<sup>255</sup>

*Recorded at Pushpa kaṭai at around 5 pm on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2007*

Speakers:

*Karthikeyan*: A male shop owner/worker

*Pushpa*: His wife, who keeps the shop at noon

---

<sup>255</sup> For most of the conversation *Revathi*, *Pushpa*, and *Karthikeyan* refer to one another as *nīṛkā*, the respectful second person or second person plural.

*Revathi* refers to both her husband and her daughter as *avaṛka*. This is the third person plural but also a respectful form of address. I have translated it according to context. *Revathi* also refers to her daughter as *pāpā*, an affectionate address and reference term for a woman or girl.

*Karthikeyan* shifts between referring to *Revathi*'s husband as *aṇṇa(ṇ)* (elder brother) a respectful term of address for a man the same age or older than oneself, and *sār* (sir), a similarly respectful but more distant term. He occasionally refers to him as *avār*, which, locally, is seen as a bit less respectful than *avāṛka* but still more respectful than *avāṇ* (which is used for friends, younger men, and people one doesn't respect). He switches to calling him *avāṇ* when *Revathi* is out of hearing range.

The first time that a new set of address terms (second or third person) are introduced I mark them in **bold**.

*Revathi*: Woman who lives down the street on the opposite side of the road. She's roughly the same age as the shopkeepers and has a daughter the same age as their middle child.

*Rishu*: Her daughter (about 11 years old) is also present, but she says nothing.

*T. Amma*: Woman who lives in a row of houses behind the shop. She is also a regular customer.

*ChinnaThambi*: Her son, who has just started kindergarten. He is very congested and his participation consists mostly of coughing.

1	<p><i>Karthikeyan</i>::</p> <p>Um</p>	<p><i>Karthikeyan</i>: (concluding interaction with the previous customer and shifting to attend to <i>Revathi</i>, who has approached quickly)</p> <p>Um</p>
2	<p><i>Revathi</i>:</p> <p><u>kēkirānka-e</u></p> <p>avaṅka <u>kaṭaṇē vāṅkillā</u> iṅkirānka</p> <p><u>nā vāṅkinatu tān ellāme</u> avaṅka appā</p> <p>colrānka</p> <p><u>inta māco(m) katakki pōyi kaṭan-e</u></p> <p><u>vāṅkalla potuva cāma vāṅkuna, kācu</u></p> <p><u>kotutu-tān vāṅkine(n) (.) katanukku</u></p> <p><u>vāṅkale</u></p> <p><u>rentu trip-u kataikku pōnē(n)</u></p> <p><u>kācukku tān vāṅkinē(n) iṅkirāna</u></p> <p>iṅke pāruṅkaḷe</p> <p>patiṅelum pattum nā vāṅkinatu</p> <p>irupatti nāllu(m) pati muṅṅu(m) pāpā</p> <p>vāṅkuṅatu oṭaṅē koṭutiṭṭe(n) nāṅu</p> <p>ippa irukka veṅṭiya itu patiṅēlum</p> <p>aiṅutiampataṅcu-tā(n)</p>	<p><i>Revathi</i>:</p> <p><u>he-(honorific) (My husband) is asking!</u></p> <p>He (honorific) said <u>“(I) didn’t buy on credit!”</u> (quotative)</p> <p><u>all of it-(emphatic) is stuff I bought,</u> her father said.</p> <p><u>didn’t buy on credit at the shop this month,</u></p> <p><u>when buying stuff I paid for it in cash,</u></p> <p><u>didn’t buy on credit!</u></p> <p><u>“I went on two trips to the store. I paid in cash”</u> (quotative) he (honorific) said</p> <p>Look here you-(honorific +politeness particle)!</p> <p>17 and 10 are the amounts I bought for, 24 and 13 are the amounts my daughter bought for. I gave (payment) immediately. All I need to pay you now are those balances of 17 and 555.</p>
3	<p><i>Karthikeyan</i>: nā <u>taṅ</u> koṭuttēṅ aṅṅākiṭē</p> <p>(.) [laughing] cāma vāṅkiṅaru aṅṅaki</p> <p>oru nālu //</p>	<p><i>Karthikeyan</i>: I’m the one keeping the shop [laughing] for elder bother, (he) came and bought (on credit) on some day or other</p>
4	<p><i>Revathi</i>:</p> <p><u>kācu kottuttit tēn</u> iṅkirāna// <u>kaṭaṅē</u></p>	<p><i>Revathi</i>:</p> <p><u>“I gave cash”</u>(quotative) he (honorific)</p>

	<u>vāṅka/le</u>	said// <u>didn't buy on credit (emphatic)</u>
5	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> koṭuttāru full-a koṭukkalle// vāṅkumpōtu kocuru vaccatu- <u>tāṅ</u>	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> (he) (moderate respect) gave (the money), but not the full amount//as (he) was buying some unpaid for amount <i>remained</i>
6	<i>Revathi:</i> // vāṅkinate kitaiyātu <u>kaṅ-ē kācu koṭuttittēṅ</u> appaṭi iṅkiraṅka  iṅke pāruṅkalē(n)  pati muṅṅu(m) irupatti nālu(m) pattu(m) irupatti nālum pattimuṅṅu(m) pāpā vāṅkinatu pattum pattiṅēllum nā vāṅkiṅe(n) inta biscut-ūm rusk-ūm pati muṅṅu(m) koṭuttāci patinēllu pattum koṭuttāci patinēlum aiṅūtiampatu- <u>tāṅ</u> irukkutu  nāṅ eḷutiṅa kaṅakkule (.)  <u>avaṅka kēṭṭkirāṅka vāṅka vēy-illai inta mācom</u> appaṭi iṅkiraṅka  aṭikkamē iruntu irukkīṅka	<i>Revathi:</i> (I/we) <u>don't buy like that for the credit-(emphatic) I gave cash</u> like that he-(honorific) said  Look here you (honorific+ politeness)  13, 24,10,24, and 13 were bought by baby girl, 10 and 17 were bought by me [ <i>Revathi</i> ]. For these cookies and the rusk packet Rs 13 was given, 14 and 10 were also given, 17 and 555 are there (to be paid)  (it's in) the account I wrote. <sup>256</sup>  He-(honorific) is asking " <u>(I) didn't buy in this month</u> " like that he-(honorific) says  You (honorific) have been without striking out.
7	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> <b>cār</b> tāṅ vāṅkuṅaru //aṭikkāme iruntirukkīṅka	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> <b>Sir</b> [shift to more distant address] is the one buying and you're the one saying we don't strike it out
8	<i>Revathi:</i>  paṅam koṭṭuka- <u>ṅu-tāṅ</u> kaṭaikku varuvēṅ, kaṭaṅ vaṅki evalavu nal acē, nā pōy kaṭakki paṅam koṭuttu..	<i>Revathi:</i>  <u>"in order to give cash"</u> I've come to the shop, since buying on credit it's been <i>many days</i> I'm now coming to the shop to give payment..(statement incomplete)
9	<i>Karthikeyan:</i>	<i>Karthikeyan:</i>

<sup>256</sup> This statement is somewhat ambiguous. It probably refers to a separate record of purchases on credit that *Revathi* kept at home (many customers kept their own notes on credit purchases) but might also refer to the debt as she has calculated it.

	<p>ēṅkiṭṭa <i>tāṅ</i> vāṅkiṅāru <b>aṅṅa(ṅ)</b>  cāma vāṅkiṭṭu kācu koraiyumpōtu aṅṅa  oṅṅum colla maṭṭāru avar pākkule  pōyiruvāru nā eḷuti vacciratu</p>	<p><b>Elder brother</b> bought from me <i>exclusively</i>  He (moderate respect) didn't have quite  enough cash to cover his bill, but he  (moderate respect) just left without saying  anything, so I wrote down the remainder as  a purchase on credit.</p>
10	<p><i>Revathi:</i>  avaṅka <u>nā katnē vāṅkele kācu koṭuta-</u>  <u>tāṅ vāṅkinēn-iṅkaraṅka</u> inta māco(m)</p>	<p><i>Revathi:</i>  <u>"I didn't buy on credit I bought only with</u>  <u>cash, this month"</u> he (honorific) said.</p>
11	<p><i>Karthikeyan:</i> (inta māco(m)/)  apparō(m) nā eṅṅa colratu apparō(m)  ~[laughing]</p>	<p><i>Karthikeyan:</i>  (unclear, this month), well, what should I  say, well [laughing]<sup>257</sup></p>
12	<p><i>Revathi:</i>  light-ē pōṭuṅa nīṅka noṭ-a pāruṅka //</p>	<p><i>Revathi:</i>  Turn on your <i>light</i> and look (respectful) at  the notebook //</p>
13	<p><i>Karthikeyan:</i> (nā) note-le eḷuti <i>tāṅ</i>  irukkē apparō eṅṅa-t ē pārkkiratu</p>	<p><i>Karthikeyan:</i> I wrote what has <i>been written</i>  in this notebook, so what need is there for  me to look in it?<sup>258</sup></p>
14	<p><i>Revathi:</i>  (she's looking at her little account  book)  itu nā vāṅkiṅatu (.) ille (.) avaṅka</p>	<p><i>Revathi:</i>  (she's looking at her little account  book)  That's what I bought, no it's <i>what she</i>  <i>bought (emphatic)</i>, my daughter and I came</p>

<sup>257</sup> I wouldn't describe *Karthikeyan* as embarrassed, but this seems to be a classic case of laughter as social repair (see Goffman, 1967). It's possible that he's softly started to repeat *Revathi*'s final utterance in order to contradict it and then drawn back to a more conciliatory position.

<sup>258</sup> *Karthikeyan* stresses that he is principal of the notebook and so needn't worry about how it's animating the record. His insistence relates to my argument in Chapter Six.

	vānkiṇatu- <i>tāṇ</i> , nālu ṭrip-u nāṇu(m) pāpāvu(m) māti māti vānkiṇukkōm avaṅka varalle	on four trips alternately, he (my husband) didn't come at all
15	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : nā- <i>tāṇ</i> koṭuttirukkēṇ sār- kiṭṭe avar- <i>tāṇ</i> vānki-irukkāṅka	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : I'm the one who's constantly selling things to sir (your husband), <i>he's</i> come and bought (things)
16	<i>Revathi</i> : vānki-irukkāṅka pana(m) kotutu vānkiṇāṅka- <b>lām</b>	<i>Revathi</i> : He's (honorific) bought, <u>buying with cash</u> – <b>it seems</b>
17	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : vānkiṇukāṅka nāṇ taṅ-ē koṭutēṇ He's (honorific) buying <i>I (double- emphatic)</i> gave to him	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : He's (honorific) buying alright, I'm the one selling to him
18	<i>Revathi</i> : poṅkalukku oru vāṭi vantaṅka, atukapparo oru trip vantara <b>kācu</b> <u>kotutu vānkiṇēn</u> ṅkiraṅka	<i>Revathi</i> : He made one trip for Pongal, <u>after that he</u> <u>made one more trip, wasn't it?</u> , He said " <u>I</u> <u>bought with cash.</u> " <sup>259</sup>
19	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : koṭutaṅka, koṭutatupōka mīti kocuru iruntata ellam itule eḷuti vacirukkirutu	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : He's (honorific) have (cash), but there was a small remainder that was unpaid that's what this is, it was recorded.
20	<i>Revathi</i> : ummm (.) iṅke pāruṅka inta pattu rūpāy-kki ellām avaṅka vaṅka- <i>vē</i> - kiṭaiyātu //	<i>Revathi</i> : ummm (.)look here (you) he (hon) would never (strong negative) <i>buy</i> things for just ten rupees or so

<sup>259</sup> *Revathi* speaking about husband's action: her husband's speech is marked with a direct quotative, but she uses an assumptive particle when describing his actions, maintaining the uncertainty in her previous turn.

21	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> eṇṇamō vāṅkkinatu	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> Something or other was bought
22	<i>Revathi:</i> nāṇ-tāṇ reṇṇu nallakki muṇati uṅka viṭṭukaraṅka kiṭa vāṅkiṭṭu pōṇēn  ate vantū koṭuttiṭṭē(ṇ), irupatti nāllu rūpayum koṭuttiṭṭēṇ, nūrū māti koṭutuṭṭu pāki vāṅkiṭṭu pōṇe(ṇ), nīṅka-tāṇ aṭikavē māṭṭīṅkiṅka	<i>Revathi:</i> (turning to <i>Pushpa</i> although <i>Karthikeyan</i> is still there)  Two days ago <i>I</i> bought things <i>from</i> your husband  (for) that I came and gave (cash), I gave 24 rupees, I came to get change for 100 (rupees) getting the change I left, you (plural/respectful) aren't striking (out the balance owed.)
23	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> //shh(.) aṭikkile-akkā ēṇṇikkittatāṇ avar-tāṇ sar-tāṇ vāṅkinatu vāṅkiṭṭu jāmmā vāṅkumpōtu ampatu ruupāyṅku vāṅkṇāṭuṇu vaiṅka kocuṅu varum	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> //shh (.) it's not been struck out <b>elder sister</b> (it was bought?), things were bought <i>from me by him, sir-only</i> , when buying stuff, suppose he'll buy for 50 rupees there will be some balance...
	(a woman, probably <i>Revathi</i> , speaks here and is drowned out by a motorcycle)	
26	<i>Revathi:</i> nālu trip(.) eḷutirukkīṅka-le, <u>nālu trip</u> <u>varavē-illa poṅkalukku oruvāṭṭi</u> <u>apparo(m) kācu koṭutu tan</u> vāṅkinēn- ṅkiraru . <u>inta reṇṇu vāṭṭiyum kācu</u> <u>koṭutu vāṅkinē</u> ṅkiraru- <i>le</i>	<i>Revathi:</i> Four trips (.), you're writing, aren't you? " <u>I</u> <u>didn't come for four trips (I) came once for</u> <u>Pongal after than I bought with cash only</u> " he (honorific) said. <u>These two times "I</u> <u>bought with cash</u> " he said ( <i>emphatic</i> )
27	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> umhum nā eṇṇatta colluratu [laughing]	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> umhmmm what more is there for me to say? (he laughs)
28	<i>Revathi:</i> nāṇum pāpāvum-tāṇ vāṅkiṅu nīṅka light-a pōṭṭu-ṅka note-a eṭuttu pāruṅka	<i>Revathi:</i> <i>Baby-girl and I only</i> are buying, you (honorific) put on the light (honorific) look at what's written in the notebook

29	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> atu//ellām- <u>tān</u> e <u>luti-tān</u> -e irukku e <u>ṅṅ</u> atta pārkkiratu	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> all of that is written (I know what's there) what else is there to see
30	<i>Revathi:</i> // (to daughter) Rishu Rishu vā (.) <u>nīn</u> ka aṭikavē-ille ci <u>ṅṅ</u> a noṭe koṭu <u>n</u> ka nīnka kuṭṭi nōṭe-u vaccirukīnka-le?	<i>Revathi:</i> (to her daughter who has started to wander away) // Rishu, Rishu come (here)! You're not striking it out, give me the little notebook, you're keeping a tiny notebook, isn't it?
31	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> itu vantu sār oru vāṭṭi cāma vānki <u>nān</u> ka (.) jāmma vānkumpoṭu atule ulla kocu <u>ru</u> itu	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> This is how it happened, sir (your husband) bought things one time, while buying things there was an (unpaid) remainder, the balance for that was this.
	(short pause here)	
32	<i>Revathi:</i> itina vāṭṭi vārale <u>n</u> ka re <u>n</u> tu tri <u>p</u> -u- <u>tān</u> vāntānka- <b>la(m)</b> atuvum kaṭa <u>ṅē</u> vānka <u>le</u> , re <u>n</u> tu tri <u>p</u> vāntu kācu koṭuttu vānkittānka <u>lām</u> (.) Rishu Rishū inta pakka(m) vā  nīnka avikavē-ille ci <u>ṅṅ</u> a note koṭu <u>n</u> ka kuṭṭi note vaicirukīnka <u>l</u> -le	<i>Revathi:</i> (he) didn't come this many times, (he honorific) came for only two trips it seems, and for those (he) didn't buy with credit, coming on those two trips (he) bought with cash it seems (.) Rishu, Rishu, come to this side. <sup>260</sup>  You're (honorific) not striking it out, give me the small notebook please; you're keeping the small notebook, isn't it?
33	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> itu vantu cār oru vāṭṭi -le cāmā vānki <u>nān</u> ka cāmā vānkumpoṭu avaroṭa kocu <u>ru</u> itu	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> (here's) how this happened, sir bought things at one time, while buying things there was an (unpaid) remainder, his remainder was this

<sup>260</sup> After taking some long looks at cookies and chips, Rishu has begun playing with rotten veggies that are tossed to the side beyond the stall.

34	<p><i>Revathi:</i></p> <p><u>ittana vāṭṭi varalē-ṅkarāṅka reṅṅu trip-u-tāṅ vāṅkā-lām</u> appo vāntu kacu koṭuttu vāṅkiṭāṅka kaṅṅē vāṅka-le nāṅum pāpāvum vāṅkiṅu-tāṅ inta pattu rūpakk-ellam cāmā-<i>rie</i> vāṅka <i>vē</i> māṭṭāṅka</p>	<p><i>Revathi:</i></p> <p>(he) <u>didn't come for so many times</u> he (honorific) said, <b>it seems</b> <u>he bought twice only</u>, at that time he paid with cash, (he) didn't buy with <i>credit</i>, baby-girl and I are the <i>only</i> ones buying. He (honorific) <i>won't ever</i> buy any of those ten rupee <i>things</i>.</p>
35	<p><i>Pushpa:</i></p> <p>// eṅkiṭṭe oru vāṭṭi vāṅkināṅka nīṅka eḷutikṭṭē (becomes unclear)</p>	<p><i>Pushpa:</i></p> <p>(he) bought from me once, you write..(unclear, probably a comment on Revathi's account keeping.)</p>
36	<p><i>Karthikeyan:</i> <u>vāṅkavē-ille-ṅū</u> [laughing] eṅṅa colrātu?</p>	<p><i>Karthikeyan:</i> "<u>Won't ever buy</u>"(quotative) (your saying)[laughs] what shall (I) say?</p>
37	<p><i>Revathi:</i></p> <p>avaṅka reṅṅu trip-u-tāṅ kaṭai-kī vāntirukkāṅka</p>	<p><i>Revathi:</i></p> <p>He (honorific) is coming on only <i>two trips</i> to the store.</p>
38	<p><i>Karthikeyan:</i> nā(ṅ)-tā(ṅ) eḷuti irukkē(n) <u>cār vāntu vāṅkināṅka</u>-nu cāmāṅka vāṅkiṭṭu atu pattala colliṭṭu mītiye eḷutunatu-tāṅ</p>	<p><i>Karthikeyan:</i> <i>I'm the only one</i> writing, "<u>sir came and bought</u>" (quotative) when buying stuff (he) didn't have enough, (I've) said the <i>remainder</i> only was <i>written</i>.</p>
39	<p><i>Revathi:</i></p> <p>patu rūpaikkellam jāmmāṅka [stops before the end of some word] <u>nāṅ-tāṅ vāṅkiṭṭu pōṅe reṅṅu nāllukku moṅaṭi</u> (.) avaṅka kēkkaraṅka <u>nā(ṅ) reṅṅu trip-u poṅalukku</u> (.)ruvā(ṅ)tti <u>kāṭaikkū pōṅēn appuram pōṅēn kācu kotutta-tāṅ vāṅkinē(n) inta macom kāṭaikke katanē vāṅkale-iṅkiraṅa</u></p>	<p><i>Revathi:</i></p> <p>won't buy things for ten rupees (breaks off here) (.) <i>I only</i> went shopping two days ago</p> <p>He's (honorific) asking</p> <p>"<u>I went on two trips for Pongal (something), went to the shop, after that I went and bought with cash. I didn't buy on credit at the shop</u>" he (hon) said</p>

40	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> patiṇellu	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> Seventeen
41	<i>Pushpa:</i> vāṅkāma eppaṭi eḷtuvōm [starts to raise voice, and then laughs] eṅkiṭṭe oru vaṭi// vāṅuṅare (6:00)	<i>Pushpa:</i> Without you buying how will we write it? (getting annoyed) He (mod. Hon) <i>bought</i> from me one time.
42	<i>Revathi:</i> // eḷutirukkīṅa nā(ṅ) koṭuttē(ṅ) itu nā vāṅkiṅaṭu avaṅka vaṅkilla nā vāṅkiṅa-	<i>Revathi:</i> // You're writing (debts) I'm giving payment, this I bought he (hon) didn't buy it, what I bought...
43	<i>Pushpa:</i> // nīṅka vāṅkirute ella itu- <i>lle</i> eḷutru- <i>ille</i> // ore oru vaṭi patu rūpa- <i>tāṅ</i> eḷutaṅatu	<i>Pushpa:</i> All of the <i>stuff</i> you bought it's <i>not written</i> here// <i>just</i> one time <i>ten rupees</i> got written. <sup>261</sup>
44	<i>Revathi:</i> // (.) patu rupai-kk-ella(m) avaṅka vāṅkamaṭṭaṅka eppomē//	<i>Revathi:</i> //he (hon) won't buy things for ten rupees, <i>ever!</i> //
45	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> mattaṅa-ellām eḷutunātē kiṭaiyātu	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> other things won't get written
46	<i>Revathi:</i> reṅṅu nāḷḷikki muṅaṭi nā vāṅkiṅa patu rūppa. ita ella nā koṭṭitēṅ ippe 17, 555 yum- <i>tāṅ</i> irukku iṅṅa mūṅrumae	<i>Revathi:</i> Two days ago I purchased (things) for 10 rupees. For all of that I gave payment 17 and 555 rupees only need to be paid, this

<sup>261</sup> They are trying to calm her down by pointing out that this was a fairly small sum.

	kiṭaiyātu nīnka aṭika vē illa	other amount shouldn't be there, you (hon/plural) <i>didn't strike it out</i>
47	<i>Pushpa:</i> aṭikkāma-/e irukkamāṭṭōm. nīnka vānkirata itu-le eḷutu māṭṭōm avaru vānkiṇatu maṭṭum- <i>tāṇ</i> eḷutuvōm (becomes unclear)	<i>Pushpa:</i> We won't <i>fail to strike (a debt) out!</i> What you bought (just now) wasn't written (as a debt) we wrote <i>just</i> (double emphatic) what he bought (this becomes unclear)
48	<i>Revathi:</i> Um	<i>Revathi:</i> Um
49	<i>Pushpa:</i> nāṇ- <i>tāṇ</i> koṭuttirukkē(ṇ) eṇṇukku teriyum (.) sār jāmmāṅka vāṅkuvaru	<i>Pushpa:</i> <i>I sold it to him, I know(.) sir will buy things</i>
51	<i>Revathi:</i> jāmmā vānkiṇka <u>rentu trip-u-tāṇ pōyirrukke(n)-ṅkiṇa</u> (.) appavē nāṇ oṭaṇē eḷutuvēṇ <b>sār</b> oṇṇu colla māṭṭāṅka gummuṇu pōytuvāṅka	<i>Revathi:</i> He'll buy things, " <u>I went on two trips only</u> " he said (.) <i>right</i> after that I'll record (the debt) <i>immediately</i> , <b>sir</b> won't say anything at all he'll come and go with his mouth glued shut
52	<i>Pushpa:</i> mītu eḷutu -ṇṇu colla-māṭṭaru	<i>Pushpa:</i> "Write the remainder (as a debt)" he won't say
53	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> reṇṇu jāmmā vāṅkuvaru vāṅkitu pōyivāru jāmmāṅukku paki irukkum ite eḷuti vaikkiratu <sup>262</sup>	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> he'll buy a few things and leave right afterwards, for the things (sold) there will be some balance that will be recorded

<sup>262</sup> *ChinnaThambi* coughs here. Along with his mother, he has appeared at the shop from the side (he came through the shortcut across the rice field). As he approaches, the tone of the conversation begins to change. Although *Pushpa* holds firmly to her position, pauses grow longer, and participants' voices grow quieter. I suspect that they may have been reminded that they are being overheard and have decided to speak more calmly as a result.

	<i>[Several incomprehensible turns of talk occur here]</i>	
56	<i>Revathi: nī</i> ciṅṅa noṭe-a <b>pōṭu kaṭu.</b> kuṭṭi note....	<i>Revathi: You (informal) put it in the little note, in the little note...</i>
57	<i>Pushpa:</i> (in a flat and calm yet slightly aggressive voice.) note ellam irukku	<i>Pushpa:</i> in a flat and calm yet slightly aggressive voice.) Everything is in the notebook
58	<i>ChinnaThambi:</i> Chocolate ahh itu	<i>ChinnaThambi:</i> Chocolate (making selection) ah this one
59	<i>Revathi: inṅimay nā</i> muṭṭum jām̄mā vāṅkikkirēṅ aḷ alukku vāṅkarataṅa- <b>la</b> yaru koṭukkira pōraṅka-ṅu teriy-illa	<i>Revathi:</i> From now on I'll be the only one who comes to buy things. <b>It seems</b> that if lots of different people come “ <u>who paid for what and went where</u> ” (quotative) won't be known
60	<i>Revathi:</i> Um	<i>Revathi:</i> (after a pause) Um
61	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> vaṅki -irukkaru nāṅ-tāṅ jām̄mā koṭukkirukkē(ṅ) reṅṅu vaṭṭi jām̄mā vāṅkuvāru. vāṅkiṭṭu pattātaturukku <u>mīti ella</u> solluvāru eḷuta colla māṭṭatu gummu-ṅu oṅṅum collamāṭṭaru nāṅ mīti tāraṅumē eḷuti vaikkiratu	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> He's buying. I'm the one selling things. Two times he (semi-honorific) came and bought things. When buying he didn't have quite enough he mentioned <u>the balance</u> but he didn't say to write it he kept his mouth shut, he didn't say anything at all (he just left) I wrote the balance that <i>needs to be given</i> and kept it.
	There is an untranscribable and undecipherable kerfuffle during which everyone seems to re-state the positions	

	taken above.	
62	<i>Revathi</i> : (overlap with <i>ThambiAmma</i> ) ellam aṅṅupalē enṅa avaṅka vāṅkiratu <u>enakku teriyṁmatten-ṅkiraṅu</u> (7:10)	<i>Revathi</i> : ...haven't sent it all. Because he'll buy things and say " <u>I don't know anything about it.</u> " (quotative). <sup>263</sup>
63	<i>Pushpa</i> : nāṅka oṅṅaṅṅē eḷuti vaiciruvō(m) āṅṅerame	<i>Pushpa</i> : We write and keep records immediately, <i>at the time</i> (when things happen)
64	<i>ThambiAmma</i> : reṅṅu chocolate	<i>ThambiAmma</i> : two chocolates
65	<i>ChinnaThambi</i> : (inta) chocolate	<i>ChinnaThambi</i> : (that) chocolate
66	<i>ThambiAmma</i> : Mmmm tāruvaṅka Chocolate?/ koṅṅuṅka?	<i>ThambiAmma</i> : Mmmmm please give (it) (.) Please give (us) the chocolate. <sup>264</sup>
67	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : nāṅ-tāṅ reṅṅu mūṅuvāṅṅi vāṅkirukkāṅka eḷutivaicirukkēṅ <u>apparo</u> <u>vāṅkāḷa</u> inna	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : <i>I only</i> (.) he came and bought two or three times, I'll keep a record, " <u>after that I didn't</u> <u>buy</u> " if he says that (what can I do)?
69	<i>Pushpa</i> : ēṅkiṅṅe oru vaṅṅi oru vaṅṅi vāṅkṅāru-nu coṅṅaṅṅē(ṅ), eḷuta coṅṅē-illa patimuṅṅu enṅamo	<i>Pushpa</i> : (calling to <i>Revathi</i> as she leaves) he bought from me once, <u>he bought one time</u> I told (you), (he) didn't say to write (the debt) (for) 13 (rupees) or so
	( <i>Revathi</i> and her daughter leave as this is said, and <i>Tamma</i> buys candy for her son without further talk)	

<sup>263</sup> *Revathi* highlights her point (which still maintains a refusal to pay the amount demanded) by claiming yet again that she has no way of knowing what her husband has done. Although she's managing to make the refusal indirectly, this insistence breaks the contract with the shop by refusing the validity of her household as a unified subject.

*Revathi* begins this interaction by adamantly expressing disagreement with the shopkeepers in the voice of her husband. Although she quotes him confidentially and directly, she marks clear distinctions between his voice and her own, as if to imply that *she* is not annoyed with the shopkeepers but is simply duty-bound to carry the message of someone who is. *Karthikeyan* seems to comment directly on the mode of her presentation, and perhaps even to mark it as an explicit strategy, in line 36, when he quotes *Revathi* reporting on her husband's message and laughingly adds: "What can I say?" Because the accusations and complaints she implies are made in the voice of someone not present—a voice that *Revathi* continually makes more distant from her own—it is difficult for *Karthikeyan* to respond to them directly.

*Revathi* begins to back away from this position in later parts of the conversation by using less direct forms to report her husband's speech. She starts to speak more calmly and in a voice that is not marked as anything other than her own. Then, after a number of turns, *Karthikeyan* seems to get nowhere in the conversation, and *Pushpa* arrives to take his place. *Revathi* finally changes her position in line 51, quoting her husband directly again. Yet this time, rather than directing his speech at the shopkeepers, she suggests that she no longer believes him, stating that he "keeps his mouth shut and doesn't tell her anything." The shopkeepers agree with her. After a few more turns of talk confirming this tacit agreement, *Revathi* leaves.

In the ways in which shopkeepers and their customers normally evaluate speech, this conversation seemed to have been a success. No one, at least no one who is immediately present and could be held accountable, has gotten angry, and no one has been subject to direct or threatening accusations (either of inflating the amount of the

debt or failing to pay a debt that is known). Although they continue to treat *Revathi*, *Rishu*, and *Revathi's* husband as a household unit in which members share responsibility for the debt incurred at the shop, *Pushpa* and *Karthikeyan* are careful to suggest that the blame for confusion in the interaction lies not with *Revathi* but with her husband, the same party who is depicted as accusing them.

It is, of course, entirely possible that *Revathi's* husband's failures to communicate with other household members are the true source of trouble in this interaction. Yet I also think it likely that *Revathi's* use of his voice to present accusations, and the shopkeepers' emphasis on communication within *Revathi's* household as a source of trouble, is a means of carrying out contestation without resorting to direct accusation of people who are present. As I explained in the introductory chapter, shopkeepers, who often live in or near their stores, face a form of the problem often referred to as the "trader's dilemma," in which the need to make an immediate profit potentially conflicts with the performances of friendship and generosity (or at least of fairness) required to maintain relationships. Regular customers, who sometimes seek to delay payments while still appearing reliable, face a similar set of challenges. Conversations like this one work to frame the positions of buyer and seller (and the competing claims to responsibility and knowledge that they entail) as belonging to shifting and fragmentary subjects that can be rendered accountable without falling prey to direct accusation. Such framing is one of the ways in which the conflict posed by the trader's dilemma can be resolved.

*Revathi's* husband is framed as the voice and (semi)-separable transacting subject who takes most of the blame for aggression and for poor behavior in this interaction; however, other potentially separable subjects are suggested as well. Rather than directly

accusing the shopkeepers of cheating her, *Revathi* suggests that they may simply be misinterpreting their written account. Although the conversation happens early in the evening, when light is certainly not a problem, *Revathi* asks *Karthikeyan* to “turn on the light and look at the notebook,” as if to imply that external conditions, rather than his own actions are to blame.

### *Exploiting the Gap between Interactions and Transactions*

In interviews with me and conversations with customers, shopkeepers described *speaking well* as a necessary way in which to maintain relationships and facilitate future transactions. Successful interactions did not always produce immediate material exchanges, however. *Speaking well* in interactions was often both particularly difficult and critically important in the gaps between transactions. The interaction between *Pushpa*, *Karthikeyan*, and *Revathi* that I describe above occurs in one such gap. I resist the temptation to make claims about intention, to know with certainty what participants in this conversation thought had happened, how they understood past transactions, or even the ways in which they understood the participant framework at play in the current interaction.<sup>265</sup> However, there are several contextual clues to suggest that the conversation works in ways that participants do not overtly recognize during the interaction.

*Revathi* and the shopkeepers debate about the source of a debt as a precursor to payment. In conversation, they focus on the amount that must be paid, how the debt was

---

<sup>265</sup> As L. Ramamoorthy (who helped me to correct this transcript) suggested, since *Revathi's* husband lives only a few doors away, he could easily have gone to the shop himself if he had wanted to talk to the shopkeepers directly.

generated, and potential sources of trouble regarding how it might have been communicated between various parties involved in the interaction. Although at the end of the interaction *Revathi* is willing to accept the shopkeeper's versions of the events, and therefore the validity of the remaining 17 rupees, *Revathi* never gets around to paying the shopkeepers or even mentioning that she will pay them. Rather than working to clarify pressing issues about the nature of a debt, thus enabling an immediate payment, the shopkeepers and *Revathi* seem to take their interaction as a way to bridge a gap in a transaction that is taking longer than any of them think it should. The conversation occurs on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, a date by which the shopkeepers might reasonably expect to be paid by the customers who buy on credit on a monthly basis and are paid on the first of the month. By presenting a relatively minor quibble about the amount of the debt, suggesting that her husband will take responsibility for it, and demonstrating attentiveness to her account, *Revathi* has suggested that payment is on its way without actually providing cash. It is as if she has promised that "the check is in the mail."

This interpretation is supported by comments that *Pushpa* and *Karthikeyan* whispered to each other after *Revathi*, *ThambiAmma*, and her son were out of hearing range. Once the shop is empty but for the three of us, *Karthikeyan* confirms that the entire conversation was about only Rs 17, a relatively small portion of the total debt. *Pushpa* responds by suggesting that customers come and ask to write things on account—thereby promising to pay—and then, despite this implicit promise, need to be pressed for payment. *Karthikeyan* takes on a mocking voice as he imitates *Revathi* making the claim that her husband never comes and buys things at the shop. *Pushpa* then imitates his imitation of *Revathi* making this claim. By doing so, they express frustration with the

ways in which the same participation framework and division of responsibility that they accepted and even supported in conversation with *Revathi* has worked to further delay a payment that they need in order to pay their own suppliers. This whispered conversation also supports my assumption that the participant frameworks suggested in the shopkeepers' conversation with *Revathi* should be understood as a carefully crafted strategy for repair rather than as a reflection of sincere belief.

Although there are also slight shifts in the shopkeepers' speech during the conversation, their most dramatic break comes with the change in audience around after *Revathi* leaves the shop. I give this transcript under a separate heading, but continue with the same numbering, because it occurs within seconds after the interaction with *Revathi* transcribed above.

## 10. "And now what?!"

*Recorded at Pushpa kaṭai at around 5 pm on February 3, 2007.*

72	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> paṭiṇellu muṭṭom-tāṇ mītiyāruntu?	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> The balance (we were arguing about) is <i>only</i> 17, isn't that the remainder?
73	<i>Pushpa:</i> (softly) inta party-kku ellam koṭukka koṭu (more softly) <u>eltikka conṇarū kotututuvaaruṇu conṇiṅka</u>	<i>Pushpa:</i> to these parties (using English word), all of them, sales, selling [she sputters in suppressed fury]... <u>Write it (they'll) say, "come and give it"</u> (quotative) you'll (honorific) say.
74	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> ippo ennena? <u>Ava(n) kata pakkam-e pōle-ṇu</u>	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> And now what, " <u>He won't go to where the shop is</u> " (quotative)

75	<i>Pushpa</i> : <u>kata pakkam-e varille- nu \</u>	<i>Pushpa</i> : “ <u>Won’t come to <i>where the shop is</i>” (quotative)</u>
76	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : <b>avā(n)</b> vāruvār illa keta-ventiyetu-tāṇ-ē	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : <b>He’ll</b> come no, <i>there’s need to ask isn’t there?</i> <sup>266</sup>
77	<i>Pushpa</i> : vārilleyē itu-tāṇ-ē vāntu kalaiyle kaṇakku keṭṭatu eḷutikoṭutēṇ (.)	<i>Pushpa</i> : (sarcastically) <i>won’t come</i> is it? this morning <i>that only</i> (meaning Revathi) came and asked about the account, I wrote and gave (her) (the balance).

Throughout most of the conversation with *Revathi*, *Pushpa*, and *Karthikeyan* refer to her and her husband using the respectful third person plural *avanga*. After she has left, they shift to referring to him as the diminutive *ava(n)* and *avar* and use vocatives emphasizing frustration in whispered conference with each other. *Pushpa*’s use of “party” to refer to *Revathi* and her household could be taken as slightly derogatory or sarcastic.<sup>267</sup> It is also ambiguous enough that anyone who came to the shop suddenly and overheard the conversation would be unable to understand who was being spoken about. While I hesitate to posit a firm distinction between real and “put-on” emotions, this conversation seems to be an example of a time when both shopkeepers had to struggle in order to avoid getting angry.

*Pushpa*, in particular, sounds furious in this follow-up interaction. While most of her anger may be directed at *Revathi*, she also seemed to be annoyed with the situation

<sup>266</sup> This is an allusion to the possibility that *Karthikeyan* might need to explicitly ask for or remind members of *Revathi*’s household about the need for payment. As I noted in Chapter Two and explain in greater detail in Chapter Six, such explicit reminders suggest a lack of trust and might offend some customers.

<sup>267</sup> It is unlikely that *Pushpa* would refer to them in this way when speaking to another customer. Such vague descriptions were frequently deployed by shopkeepers on the rare occasions when they expressed negative evaluations of customers.

more generally. In the part of this conversation that was loud enough for me to record, *Pushpa*'s final comment implies that she does not take *Revathi*'s portrayal of her husband as the one who was reluctant to pay seriously. Similarly, neither *Pushpa* nor *Karthikeyan* may fully believe the solutions and explanations that they proposed when speaking with *Revathi*. Although they acted as if *Revathi*'s proposals were acceptable, they don't seem to have much hope that they have repaired anything beyond that particular moment of interaction. Similarly, *Revathi*'s willingness to restate her position just before leaving the shop suggests that she too may have decided to simply "make nice" with the shopkeepers and blame her husband, rather than making any serious change. Though her voice was too soft for my recorder to pick up, my written notes record *Pushpa* as having concluded this exchange with *Karthikeyan* by commenting on several other families who had not yet paid their bills and whining "we don't need customers like this." Yet, as *Pushpa*'s much more smiling speech to *Revathi* suggested, and *Karthikeyan* clearly agreed, customers like *Revathi* were required for *Pushpa katta*'s survival.<sup>268</sup>

### *"Soft" Animators of Aggressive Speech: Quoted Responsibility in Shopping Interactions*

*Pushpa* would have preferred immediate payment to *Revathi*'s blurry assumption of responsibility, yet the conversation was both an acceptable and interpretable form of interaction. In conversations about unpaid debts, shopkeepers and customers commonly drew on assumptions about gendered and kin-based divisions of financial responsibility,

---

<sup>268</sup> When I returned to Thanjavur in the summer of 2008, roughly a year and a half after this exchange occurred, *Revathi* and other members of her family were still regular customers at this shop. In fact, she had another conversation very similar to this one about the nature of a debt her family had not paid and how it could be identified.

which bracketed women's speech in implicit quotation marks, in order to avoid directing anger or accusations at their immediate interlocutors. Although these participation frameworks drew on assumptions about kinship and financial responsibility, rather than simple gender stereotypes, this bracketing of women as rarely speaking or buying for themselves made them particularly skilled negotiators.

Because they were rarely represented as the primary people who earned or took responsibility for the money spent in shopping interactions, adult women were particularly adept at prolonged conversations about responsibility for unpaid debts. As transactors who were often understood to buy on behalf of someone else—whose speech and actions were usually framed by the buffer of implicit quotation marks—they were ideally situated to carry out conflicts without being interpreted as directly responsible for them.<sup>269</sup> Faults, or the *possibility* of faults, in communication between household members could be exploited in the course of interactions to reconcile difficult moments in credit/debt and other transactions. The possibility, and assumed reparability, of such failures could be used to temporarily reconcile potentially gaps or disjunctures between the content of spoken interactions and the movement of objects in transactions – such as situations in which payments were simultaneously promised and denied.

Shopkeepers and customers recognized a variety of ways in which authority and responsibility might be distributed within networks and households. Yet traits such as

---

<sup>269</sup> This situation I describe is very different from the one that Elinor (Ochs) Keenan (1974) describes as shaping Malagasy men and women's participation in market discourse. She suggests that norms of refined speech, which value indirectness, are more strongly assigned to men and so encourage women's participation in marketing and negotiation. Norms of gentle and indirect speech, which are much less regimented in Tamil, apply more heavily to women than to men. In Thanjavur, women are far less likely to do the overtly recognized work of trade and negotiation, which paradoxically may enable them to do and say more in situations where overt negotiation is dis-preferred.

gender, age, and social status did play fairly strong roles in determining the authors and principals assigned to the voices with which regular customers carried out transactions. Older men were usually assumed to speak for the household; younger women were usually denied this authority. Even when *Gayathri* was running many of her mother and sister's affairs and controlling most of the income that flowed through that household, local business people often referred to her relationship with a well-known cousin-brother who was working in Dubai. Although he was married and did not send remittances directly to *Gayathri*'s section of the family, his name and the names of other earning male relatives seemed to act as guarantors of many of *Gayathri*'s business relationships. When *Anbu* mentioned her family in an attempt to gain my assistance in collecting on their debts, he described the semi-joint household, which consisted of five adult women, by mentioning *Vajayanthimala*'s one-year-old son.

Although I have more examples of shifts in reported speech in discussions of responsibility by customers, similar possibilities could apply to the speech of shopkeepers. In the areas surrounding *Pushpa Nagar*, women worked in, watched, and effectively ran, many small shops for long stretches of time each day. Yet, with the exception of women who worked in the shop started by a woman's self-help group, most of my friends and associates in Thanjavur shared an assumption that all shops were owned and controlled by men. This assumption, somewhat paradoxically, occasionally created situations in which women were better able to do the work of shopkeeping.<sup>270</sup>

---

<sup>270</sup> A more widespread version of this practice, by which a household or group might exploit the different roles and possibilities assigned to its members, was the strategic exploitation of women's queues. While such situations were relatively uncommon in Thanjavur, many institutions, such as railway booking offices in Hyderabad and Madras and movie theater ticket offices, offered and enforced separate queues for women so that they would not be forced to wait in line near unknown men and experience the harassment

When *Karthikeyan* wasn't in the shop, *Pushpa* sometimes avoided questions from me that she did not care to answer—but which I suspect she could have—by saying that she did not really run the shop and that I should ask her husband. Wholesale distributors claimed that shopkeepers could sometimes briefly and discreetly defer paying bills by making sure that the official (and always male) owner of the shop, who was usually assumed to be the responsible principal, was absent when they came to call. Depicting *Karthikeyan* as in charge of the family's purchasing decisions and saying that he had forbidden her to purchase more allowed *Pushpa* to refuse to make a second purchase from *Bhavani* when she was attempting to make money by selling Amway products.<sup>271</sup> Similar switches were frequently employed to divert *Amutha* when she came to the shop to attempt to sell extra vegetables from the wholesale market. On one occasion *Karthikeyan* ducked into the house when he saw *Amutha* coming. *Pushpa* then came out and refused to make the desired purchase of banana stems by suggesting that only *Karthikeyan* could make the decision.

Although it is entirely possible that interlocutors did not fully “buy” these denials of responsibility, they were, as in *Revathi*'s quotation of her husband's frustration, sufficient to conclude interactions in ways that prevented participants from overtly refusing and perhaps offending each other. These moves were usually taken up as

---

and sense of embarrassment that might result. Since there were usually far fewer women than men waiting for service, women's queues occasionally moved much faster than the men's, though this differed dramatically by institution and the ways in which lines were run. I witnessed several cases in which men came to the office with female associates who waited in the women's line and, when they reached the clerk, switched places with their male counterpart. Although blatant execution of this strategy was sometimes contested—I witnessed two fairly hostile encounters with railway station clerks and fellow customers in which the strategy was protested as unfair—it seemed to be a widely accepted possibility.

<sup>271</sup> I know that this was an explicit strategy because *Pushpa* discussed it with me.

sincere and serious in the course of interaction, but whispered metapragmatic commentary and laughing recounting of events suggest that many shopkeepers and customers treat this gendered division of responsibility as a potential strategy or form of artifice, rather than as a depiction of lived relations.

I suspect that participants in many interactions were willing to treat refusals of authority and shifts in responsibility as acceptable not because they took them as real or accurate, but because they were recognizable means through which households and other kinds of multi-party actors could continue to participate in transactions. As demonstrated by Irvine's (1996) discussion of indeterminate participant roles in wedding insult songs, the ability to avoid being assigned authorship is often an advantage. Similarly, in discussions of the use and non-use of ergative case markings in ritual speech, Duranti (1994) points out the perils of an authoritative stance. I do not mean to suggest that the ability to take non-authoritative stances offered particular advantages to women as persons. *Pushpa* and *Revathi*'s ability to simultaneously voice and deny responsibility for positions in interactions depended on overt recognition of their subordination to male family members. The relationships, money, and time that they may have made or preserved in these interactions were not, by definition, their own.<sup>272</sup>

### *Reproducing Responsibilities across Interactions*

The implications of this linguistic division of subject labor—the assignments of responsibility for speech within ambiguous participation structures—are different for

---

<sup>272</sup> Women's abilities to buffer transactions through double-voicing and implicit denials of authority were an interesting, important, and occasionally overtly acknowledged strategy. Yet they were not significant enough to earn women particularly prominent roles as traders. Four of the sixteen shops in my study area had no female workers, and the only shop that was started by women quickly failed.

male household heads than for women. Although men were allowed considerably less room in which to deny responsibility, they were also understood as participants in multi-party transactions and could delay payment of debts through double-voiced interactions. A similar progression towards alignment within a framework of voices can be found in the conversation between *Karthikeyan* and *Thirumanlavan* that I discussed in Chapter Four.

In this conversation, *Thirumalavan* confronts a situation that is very similar to *Revathi*'s. He finds that the balance on his account is higher than he'd expected and attempts to discover the source of the trouble. Yet, rather than being able to fully refuse responsibility by insisting that his daughter had not told him her about her purchases, he takes on more. The conversation begins with *Thirumanlavan* checking his debt balance. *Karthikeyan* tells him an amount that is higher than expected, so the two of them work together to reconstruct what *Thirumanlavan*'s family has purchased from the shop. *Thirumanlavan* hopes to find out exactly which items were purchased by which family members and when. He is concerned that his daughters (particularly the older daughter) may be treating themselves to pre-packaged snacks and similar petty luxuries on the family account. *Karthikeyan* does his best to re-construct events from the numbers he's written. Although it's possible that he doesn't remember what *Thirumanlavan*'s family members have bought or when, it's also possible that he's being intentionally vague both to avoid tattling on people who are also his customers and reporting his own permissiveness.

Like *Revathi*, *Thirumalavan* ultimately manages to take responsibility for the debt in a way that allows him to avoid providing payment at that time—to shoplift that

responsibility, if you will—by assigning the problematic behavior to his daughter, who he will take pains to correct at some unspecified point in the future. Shoplifting is, of course, a poor metaphor for what’s going on. Although these conversations about credit and debt happen in a way that keep the people who are animating the talk from being direct targets of criticism, they work precisely because they allow and encourage collusion by all participants.

### 11. “Don’t give credit to my eldest daughter”

Recorded at Pushpa kaṭai 5:27 pm on April 17, 2008

1	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : evalavu irukku?	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : how much is there (on my account)?
2	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : ampatti-āru rūpa	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : 56 rupees
3	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : ippo vaṅkiṇatā? eṇṇatu? muṇaṭi?	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : (is that) what was bought now? Which one? (Is it) from before?
4	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : munṇe vantu nuti-añci paḷasa, atukku piṛaku nāptaittañcara, nāpattiṇallā, tampi nēttu muṭṭe	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : the first one [balance] is 105, that’s the old one. The next one, after that, is 45.5 the next one is 44, younger brother, from yesterday...
5	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : nūtiañcikka apparo nāptaittañcara nāpattiṇallā ?	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : for 105 is it? After that 45.5 and 44 isn’t it?
6	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : mmm nāptaittañcara napatiṇāllu papa vāṅkuṇatu	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : hmm 45.5, 44, were bought by baby-girl (your daughter)
7	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : eṇṇakki	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : On what day?
8	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : (something) atu vāṅki nālañci nālacci.	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : (something) that (amount) was purchased about 4 or 5 days ago
9	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : illeyē? atukkapparo vāravaciṭṭu akkā varavaicikkiṭṭa (something) nūrttiañcu rupa-tāṇ anta reṇṭ-añci	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : Is that so? After that (some balance) was kept, elder-sister (your wife) came and kept (inaudible) 105 rupees (emphatic), those two fives...
10	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : 139.50 rūpā vāravu-ṇṇu iṭo	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : 139.50 rupees must be given (quotative)

	pōṭṭurukkē	(quotative) it's put (in the account)
11	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> cari aṅakkii nā paṇam koṭutiṭṭu pōyirukkēṅ eṅṅa vāṅkirukka. ille ille, nētte paṇo(m) koṭṭuṭṭu pōṅē(ṅ) ate eḷutiyirukkaṅkala?	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> Ok, on that day when I went and gave money, what was bought? No, no I went and gave money yesterday, just that (emphatic) is written, isn't it?
12	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> atāṅ collrēṅ mupatiompatu rūpa koṭuttirukkīṅka poyirukkīṅka vāravu irukku inta vāravuṅṅu pōṭṭu-irukkāṅka nēttu mupatiompatu rūpā koṭuttirukkīṅka-ṅṅu, appaṭi-ṅṅu colli eḷutirukku	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> I'm saying just that. You gave 39 rupees and went. (there's still some amount) that needs to come, for that which needs to come (quotative) it's been put (in the account), yesterday you gave 39 rupees (quotative) like that (quotative) it says in writing
13	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> cari cari atukku munnaṭati evalavu //	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> Ok ok, so before that how much?
14	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> //atu tāṅ cari collrēṅ mupatiompatu rupai-ṅṅu, atutāṅ akkāvukku teriyumē 105 rūpa avaṅka koṭuttatu	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> //that only I'm telling [you] correctly 39 rupees-(quotative), that (emphatic) elder sister (my wife) seems to know about, 105 rupees was given to her
15	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> ille ille nūtiaṅci-kku pirpāṭu-tāṅ kaṅakkunnum nūtiaṅci-iṅṅu collicci	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> No, no, for 105 rupees after that (emphatic) the account/sum still says 105
16	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> atukkappuro, pāppa	<i>Karthikeyan</i> after that, baby-girl (your daughter)
17	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> atukku munnaṭati evalavu? nā aṅṅekke nāllaṅcu rūpa nippaṭiṭṭu pōṅē(ṅ) uṅkakiṭṭa	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> before that how much (was there)? On that day (indefinite) I gave 4.5 rupees to you and went
18	<i>Karthikeyan</i> cari, atellām nī kalikkale	<i>Karthikeyan</i> OK, all of that you (informal) paid off
19	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> akkā-kiṭa nūtiaṅci rūpa collicci	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> When I was speaking with elder sister (your wife) 105 rupees was said
20	<i>Karthikeyan</i> atāvatu vantu, itu	<i>Karthikeyan</i> Approximately that much

	reṅṭum pāppa vāṅkiṇatu	came (he's calculating)... these two were bought by baby-girl (your daughter)
21	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> nūttiañci pirpatu-tāṅ kaṅṅakku-ṅu // -tāṅ	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> <u>105 only was put on account-(quotative)// only</u>
22	<i>Karthikeyan :</i> //pāppa vaṅkiṇatu, kēṭṭukkōṅka pāppa kitte	<i>Karthikeyan //</i> Baby-girl (your daughter) bought, go ask baby girl (your daughter)
23	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> // eṅṅa vāṅki-irukku	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> // what was bought?
24	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> cāma vāṅkuṇatu-tāṅ, reṅṭu vāṭi cāma vāṅki-irukku	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> stuff-only was bought (the word for stuff here implies the usual household goods), two times buying stuff happened (she came and bought stuff two times)
25	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> nāppatiañci oṅṅu nāppattiṅāllu oṅṅu	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> 45.5 once 44 once
26	<i>Karthikeyan :</i> mmmm ippo vantu kālaiyile muṭṭai reṅṭu kālai-le vāṅkiṇatu, nēttu muṭṭe vāṅki-irukiṅka, payyan itu iṅṅikki kālaiyile vāṅkiṇatu	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> Mhmmm just now, in the morning (emphatic) two eggs were bought this morning, yesterday it seems you were buying eggs, the boy, this one, (your son) came and bought this morning.
27	(a child comes and asks something) <i>Thirumalavan:</i> illeyē, atullēm, kaḷiccu pōṭṭu 105-tāṅ, atukkappuro	(a child comes and asks something) <i>Thirumalavan:</i> No (emphatic), all of that, was paid and cleared, 105 (emphatic) after that
28	<i>Karthikeyan :</i> ella kalici viṭṭu nūttiañcu rūpa, cari, atu right-u atukku piraku reṅṭu vāṭṭi vāṅki-irukku pāppa	<i>Karthikeyan :</i> everything was cleared and got rid of 105 rupees, OK, that's right, after that baby-girl (your daughter) came two times and bought
29	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> taṅiya atuvā vāntu vāṅkiṭṭu pōccā, atu taṅiya reṅṭu vāṭi vāṅkiṭṭu pōyirukka	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> Alone? That one (meaning her)? came, bought, and went, did (she)? It (she) came and bought two things by herself did she?
30	<i>Karthikeyan :</i> atu vāṅkiṇatu,	<i>Karthikeyan :</i> It (she) bought (things), but she said "I'll give (quotative) (payment)",

	<u>āṇa</u> <u>nāṇ</u> <u>tarēṇu</u> <u>collici</u> <u>atu</u> , <u>āṇā</u> <u>atu</u> <u>eṇṇa</u> <u>oṇṇka</u> <u>kanakkā</u> ?	but, what was that but your account?
31	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> <u>ah</u> <u>eṇṇa</u> <u>vāṅkiṭṭu</u> - <u>pōci</u> <u>innē</u> ( <u>n</u> )	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> Ah, what was bought then?
32	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> <u>cāmāṇ</u> - <u>tāṇ</u> <u>aṇṇakki</u> 1/2 liter color bottle	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> stuff only, on that day a half liter bottle of soda.
33	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> <u>ata</u> ( <u>n</u> ) <u>kēṭkarēṇ</u>	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> I'm asking (about) that only!
34	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> <u>reṇṭu</u> <u>mūṇu</u> <u>cāma</u> <u>vāṅkiccu</u> . <u>itu</u> <u>vāntu</u> <u>nētta</u> <i>munta nālō</i> <u>vāṅkiṭṭu</u> <u>pōṇatu</u> <u>cāmaṇ</u> <u>vāṅkiṭṭu</u> <u>pōyci</u> <u>natakku</u> <u>vāntaṇ</u> <u>nettikku</u>	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> (She) bought two or three things. It (she) came yesterday, <i>or the day before or so</i> , bought things and went. Things were bought yesterday it seems
35	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> <u>atu</u> <u>eṇṇa</u>	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> What (was) that?
36	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> <u>kāy</u> - <u>tāṇ</u> , <u>veṅkāyam</u> <u>apparo</u> <u>eṇṇamō</u> <u>vāṅkiṭṭu</u> <u>pōyci</u>	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> Vegetables only, onions, after that (she) bought something or other and left-(completive)
37	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> <u>cāmma</u> <u>ellā</u> ( <u>vīṭulernu</u> ) <u>atu</u> <u>eṇṇamu</u> <u>tiṅkura</u> <u>poru</u> ! <u>vāṅkiṭṭu</u> <u>pōkutā</u> ? <u>eṇṇ</u> - <u>eṇṇanun</u> <u>kēṭṭkirēṇ</u> .	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> Was the stuff all stuff for the house or was there some snack item bought? What all (was purchased) I'm asking.
38	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> <u>ella</u> <u>cāmmannu</u> <u>cēttu</u> - <u>tāṇ</u> <u>vāṅkirci</u> <u>atu</u> <u>eṇṇanun</u> <u>nā</u> ( <u>n</u> ) <u>eppaṭi</u> <u>collratu</u>	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> All the stuff was bought together (he wrote just the amount number). How will I say <u>what exactly was bought</u>
39	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> <u>atukku</u> - <u>tāṇ</u> <u>ella</u> <u>vīṭṭu</u> <u>cāmāṇum</u>	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> That only (I want to know), was the stuff (emphatic) all for the house?
40	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> // <u>atukiṭa</u> <u>kēṭṭukōṅka</u> <u>coloru</u> // <u>vēra</u> <u>eṇṇa</u> <u>kūṭikku</u> <u>atu</u> ?	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> //Go ask (her, your daughter) about that, soda..// what else will she drink/take?  [his implicit meaning is that it's not as if she's buying cigarettes.]
	(an unknown woman comes and speaks-at this point, I've left her out for clarity)	
41	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> <u>nēttu</u> <u>kīre</u> <u>vāṅki</u>	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> yesterday (they) were

	irukkarāru iṅṅakki kīre vāṅki eṅṅa paṅṅratu	buying spinach, why will they buy spinach today
	( <i>Amutha</i> comes and collects a debt for cilantro bought by <i>Thirumalavanmalavan's wife</i> see chapter four for details.)	
72	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : tī kuṭikirata maḷḷikki koṭutāci um ah evalavu vāntiruci	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : I gave the change that I was going to use for tea to buy cilantro, um ah how much has it (my account) come to?
73	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : avalavu-tāṅē vēr eṅṅa, avalavu-tāṅ itu reṅṅu pāppa-kiṭa vāṅkikkirēṅ nūttiañcu	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : Just that much, what else? I gave 105 rupees worth of things to your daughter on those two trips
74	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : nāpattiañcu eṅṅakki vāṅkiyā itu	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : 45 on what day was this (amount) bought for?
75	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : atu reṅṅu vāṅki oru vārum irukkum	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : That second time was about a week ago
76	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : nāppatti nāllu?	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : 44?
77	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : atu vāṅki reṅṅu mūṅu nāl irukkum, nūpatti añci um aru ampatiaru itu vatu oṅka kaṅakku. itu vantū-ṅu pāppa kaṅakka, cari-tāṅē itule muppatiompatu rūpa koṭuturukiṅka	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : It'll be about two or 3 days since that was bought, 105 um 6, 56, all that's your account, it comes to baby-girl (your daughter's) account, OK then, isn't it? Within all that you've given 39 rupees
78	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : ellatayum oṅṅā cēruṅka	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : It's all one, add it
79	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : oṅṅa cēttura vā? aprō pāppa kiṭṭe colliruṅka ēṅṅa(l) atu taṅi-ṅū collici ataṅāle collerē(ṅ) apparo atu kitta pōy tiṭṭratu	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : Add it all, huh? Afterward go and tell baby-girl (your daughter), because she told to keep separately, for that reason I'm telling you, for that <u>go and scold it</u> (your daughter) after this
80	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : eṅṅa tiṭṭratu eṅṅa irukku? atukku eṅṅa taṅiya iṅka kaṅakku vaikkiratu// itu muṅṅāṭi ellam kāte-pakko(m) vārakkūṭātu-	<i>Thirumalavan</i> : Is this any (reason) for scolding? What is there (in it)? For it (for her) is there anything separate? The accounts are all kept here// before all of this (implicit quotation) <u>don't go to the shop, it's a mistake</u> (she was told)

	<u>tappu</u>	
81	<i>Karthikeyan://</i> veṇṭekaiyum kayuma	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> // What if there's some urgent need?
82	<i>Thirumanlavan ://</i> vāramuṭiyālē. āttiro(m) mammalāle muṭiyaleyē ṭiṭiruṇu avacarattukku vāṅkikkōṅke	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> (she) won't come at all (emphatic) generally by us it won't be done (emphatic) (we won't send our daughter to the store)if suddenly there's some urgent need (we'll say) <u>go and buy</u> (addressing daughter in formal)
83	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> uṅkala teriyāma ((5) 0:24) vāṅkikki-rukku tu iṅkirīṅkalā?	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> without it being known by you they are making purchases, aren't they?
84	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> ata! avacara ativatu ikkum mmm vīṭe vīṭṭe veliya viṭuratilē ippo oṅka kaṭa vāntatukku appurantāṅ... vāṅkikoṅka-ṅṅu collratu. atu rompa ketu paḷakama poyirum pola-irukku	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> (It's) just that! There may be some urgent need mmm <u>don't go near the shop, out of the house, outside</u> (it's been said) Only after all of you came here has <u>go to the shop and get (things)</u> been said. Like that some very bad habits have come
85	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> (adding sounds) (give accounts) oṅṅu aṅṅakki evalavu-pā 39.5 oṅe aṅṅekki evalavu-appā	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> Once on that day <u>how much was it</u> (tag suggests he's voicing OM addressing his daughter) once (emphatic) on some day or other <u>how much was it father?</u>
86	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> atakku muṅṅāṭi reṅṅu tripa nippāṭṭiṭu pōṅeṅē(ṅ)	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> Before that (I) went on two trips (he may be voicing the daughter here)
87	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> atu kiṭaicāci	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> Got that (completive)
88	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> atu kiṭaicācā? (something) annaikki nāllu rūpa	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> Got that, isn't it? (inaudible) on that day four rupees
89	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> cari appar o pāttompāttara mupāttiompātara nāppāttināllu	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> OK, so after that 19.5, 39 (you gave), 44, were gotten (completive)

	kalicaci	
90	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> mmmm (:52)	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> Mhmmm
91	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> cari-tā-ne?	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> So that's OK isn't it?- (emphatic)
92	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> tiṭṭātīnkā	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> Don't scold (your daughter, you-honorific)
93	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> appaṭi illa tiṭṭiratu eṇṇa irukku? ella ketta paḷākama irukku eṇṇa āmpala paiyel kala? muṇāṭi viṭṭe viṭṭu vēḷiye vāratē tappu// nāma inta vēḷaiye vaicikaratille	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> Not like that. What is there to scold about. For it (her) all bad habits are these. After all she's not a man or a boy, is she? First of all leaving the house bit by bit and going out and about is a mistake// we-(inclusive) shouldn't permit this going out.
94	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> vēḷiye varamā// eṇṇa?	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> without going outside// what then? (what problem will there be?)
95	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> nāmā inta vēḷiye vaicikarat-ille aṅke ella irukkira-pā nāṅka vāṅki koṭukkīratu-tāṅ	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> this going out, we-(inclusive) shouldn't allow it. There (at home) <u>everything is</u> <u>there</u> -(girl, as if to daughter) what we buy and give (it all, emphatic)
96	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> āmpila piḷḷaiyai- viṭa pompalla pillai-tāṅ // (laughs)	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> As compared to boy children girl children only// (laughs) (the implication is that, contrary to stereotypes girls misbehave more)
97	<i>Thirumalavan :</i> nāma vacikirate iṅke vantū-tāṅ cari appaṭi irukkīratu	<i>Thirumalavan :</i> we-(inclusive) keep it (emphatic), since (you've) come here only (emphatic), OK, it will be like that
98	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> allātaiyum vāravu vacciravā? poluṭeṇṇaikkū kaṭaiyile vāntu kaṇṇakkeṭṭuṭṭu vāratu ellā koṭukkīratu-tāṅē	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> For all of that can (they) be kept from coming? Even with us giving everything (emphatic) coming to the store, asking for credit, it will be like that.
99	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> ah	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> ah

100	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> (something) mmm ella aṅke-runtu koṅṭuvāraṅuma?	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> Hmmm even with everything there is there need to come and get things here?
101	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> nā(ṅ) aṅke iruntu paiylta ella koṅuttu-taṅ aṅupirēṅ uh aṅke-runtu koṅuttaṅumrē(ṅ) payalakaliṭṭe	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> When I'm there I give and send everything through that boy, I send everything through the boy
102	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> ah	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> ah
103	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> <u>color piscut-u puṅ-um-ṅu</u> cumma itu pārtṭukku yātaiyāvatu vāṅki vāṅki koṅutukiṭṭu īmaḷi tāṅāma pōyīṭa-kūṭātule ah kāy-kari cāmma itu mātirīṅa//	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> “ <u>colors biscuits and buns</u> ” –quotation just for fun it (she) tries with someone or other to buy and buy and give (to me) continually, like a thief without eating (the snacks) (she'll) go and give, ah (suggesting that it's) vegetables and things (it's) cheating
104	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> //itu mātirīṅa koṅcam kaṅṭici pompale pillēṅkale ippaṭṭi-tāṅ	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> //It's cheating just give a little warning/condition, girl children are just like that (emphatic)
105	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> um kāy-kāri cāmāṅ viṭṭu cāmāṅ ella vāṅki koṅuttu-kiṭṭu irukkēṅ	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> yeah vegetables and things like that and household things, all of that, I'm constantly buying and giving
106	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> eṅka pilliṅka ellām appaṭi-tāṅ kācu-kīcu ellā kiṭaiyātu etuta kiṭa-pōy kācu kai-le koṅutām-ṅā nālakki vāntu aṅciṅkum pattiṅkum apparo// nālakki vantu <u>etuvum vēnumā?</u> <u>īṅkē-iruntu eṭuttuṭṭu kō</u> kacē kay-le koṅṭutā? apparo(m) aṅciṅu <u>pāttiṅum..</u>	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> All of our kids are exactly like that. If (they) get cash and things at the next chance they go (and buy) if cash is given into their hands the next day (they'll) go and waste it, (asking) five (rupees) and ten (rupees) after that// (you) go that next day (and ask) <u>do you need anything?</u> It's (all) <u>here take it from here</u> (informal command) If you put (emphatic) cash (emphatic) into their hands after that (they'll ask) five rupees and ten rupees (more)
107	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> //kāy-karri veṅkāyam ellā vāṅkiṭṭu viṭṭule irukku ah	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> // vegetables, onions, all of it is bought and at the house ah
	(yet another man speaks,	

	removed for clarity)	
108	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> inṅakki reṅṅu nālu vāramutiyātu inke ellam vāṅkikōṅka-ṅu phone-paṅṅi conṅē(ṅ) appeti-ṅṅu conṅē(ṅ)	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> Just now (lit today) for two days (I) couldn't come “(you-pl/hon) buy <u>everything here (meaning SDK)</u> ”- (quotative) I phoned and said,
109	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> cari	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> OK
110	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> nā(ṅ) appaṅi conṅēṅ, atu right tēvai illāma itu paṅṅikiṅṅu irukka koṅṅat-illa nā colli-irēṅ inime etu vaṅṅu kēṅṅālum koṅṅukkāṅṅa	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> I said (it) just like that, that's right, without need it (she's) doing it, don't give (to her) I'm saying. Form now on if it (she) asks for anything don't give (to her.)
111	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> cari-ṅṅā	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> OK elder brother
112	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> ah	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> ah
113	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> āma	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> : yes
114	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> enta cāmaṅ kēṅṅālum koṅṅukkāṅṅa avaṅṅkā taṅṅkatci vāntu kēṅṅa(l) koṅṅuṅka ah	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> No matter what (she) asks don't give (it to her), if her younger sister comes and asks give it (to her) ah
115	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> cari-ṅṅā	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> OK elder-brother
116	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> atukku-tāṅ collrēṅ veruṅṅa-ille viṅṅu cāmaṅ kēṅṅa kūṅa ille-ṅṅu colliṅṅiṅka <u>koṅṅukkavēṅṅāṅṅu</u> collitaṅṅka-ṅṅu colliṅṅiṅka ketta paṅṅakkamaka pōyitom. apparo(m) illē viṅṅu cāmaṅṅu kēṅṅālum <u>koṅṅukka vēṅṅam</u> appaṅi-ṅṅu collittuṅka	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> I'm just saying for that (the elder daughter), not for anything else, even if (she) asks for things for the house say “ <u>I won't give them</u> ”(quotative) say (like that). All of the bad habits will go. After that, no, even if she asks for household things “ <u>I won't give</u> ” say it just like that (quotative)
117	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> mmmm inṅakki ciṅṅa-tāṅ irukkatu perica pōytum	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> Mhmmm today's small bad habits can become big ones
118	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> ah ah nā eṅṅa collrēṅ ippa ampatu arupatu	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> uh hu that's what I'm saying. Now (she's) buying for 50 or 60

	rūpakki cāma vāṅkikkoṅka-ṅu conṅēṅ//	rupees..
119	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> cari// ippō itu vēṅū vāṅki-koṭu appaṭiṅa(l) nāmo(m) eturu(m) vāṅkki koṭukke-ṅa irunta parava- vaicille	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> OK// “ <u>I want this now give it to me</u> ” if it’s like that we-(inclusive) won’t take anything and give it (to her) if it’s like that is it’s alright, isn’t it?
120	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> //paiyankiya etuṅum vāntu tātukitu avan kēṭṭanna koṭuṅka, ave(ṅ) vāntu viṭṭu cāma etuvum kēṭṭkirāṅ vaccikiṅka ave(ṅ) kēṭṭa koṭuṅka ava(l) taṅkacci vanta kēṭṭā(l) koṭuṅka itu vāntu kintu kēṭṭannā(l), pattu paica kātāṅ koṭukka kuṭātu-ṅṅu appā collittāṅka taṅi kaṅṅakku atu kaṅṅakku ellām koṭukkatāṅka	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> // If the boy comes and he asks (for credit) give (to him), if he comes and asks for anything for the house go ahead, if he asks give (what he asks). If her younger sister comes and asks (for things) then give (them to her). If it (the elder daughter) comes at all and asks “ <u>10 paise of credit isn’t available (to you) (your) father has said</u> ” (quotative) don’t give (her) a separate account or any account at all.
121	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> avan-tāṅ (something)	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> He only (inaudible, <i>Karthikeyan</i> seems to be resisting command slightly)
122	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> appa-amma conna(l) kotuppēṅ appaṭi-ṅṅu colluṅkā	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> “ <u>If mother and father give permission I’ll give credit</u> ” (quotative) tell (her) just like that
123	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> vēṅṅum-ṅa(l) uṅkakiṭa keṭṭu-kō collitirēṅ	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> If (she) wants (credit) (I’ll) tell (her to ) <u>go ask (informal command)</u>
124	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> amma-appa vāntu conna(l)-tāṅ kotuppēṅ	<i>Thirumalavan:</i> “ <u>If mother and father come and give permission only then will I give</u> ”
	(a boy comes and asks for a sweet)	

Like *Revathi* and *Pushpa* in earlier conversations that I described, *Thirumalavan* and *Karthikeyan* work to confirm, assume, and possibly reconfigure responsibility for an ongoing transaction by shifting the configuration of voices within an interaction. As in the conversation with *Revathi*, they tacitly agree to treat a non-present household member

as the source of trouble in the transaction and recreate conversations within the household in order to identify and ostensibly resolve the source of trouble. Yet, rather than animating *Thirumalavan's* daughter's voice as the source of trouble and thereby implicitly blaming her, *Thirumalavan* speaks only as himself. The problem is not that he failed to correctly communicate about purchasing (as did *Revathi's* husband) but that his daughter failed to hear him.

In the earliest sections of the conversation, *Thirumalavan* attempts to get *Karthikeyan* to report on his daughter's speech and action. *Karthikeyan* speaks for her, in lines 30, 106, and 119, and in doing so implicitly accepts responsibility for her actions at the shop. *Karthikeyan* consistently resists this move, and refuses to reconstruct what *Thirumalavan's* daughter said and bought. He insists on treating her speech as an extension of her father's. *Thirumalavan* disagrees with this alignment in lines 21, 80, 84, 95, and 108 by reporting commands that he made to his daughter, which may not have been heeded. After he pays *Amutha* in the middle of the interaction (see Chapter Four), and, perhaps, implicitly re-assures *Karthikeyan* that payment is on its way, *Thirumalavan* resolves the conversation about the account by instructing *Karthikeyan* to speak to his (*Thirumalavan's*) oldest daughter in a voice that he (*Thirumalavan*) has authorized. In lines 116, 120, 122, and 124, he presents a fix to his past failed conversations with his daughter by instructing *Karthikeyan* in how to make future conversations successful. Rather than simply saying that he will correct his daughter's behavior himself, he gives *Karthikeyan* the ability to refuse her credit.<sup>273</sup> In doing so, he takes the shop into his

---

<sup>273</sup> *Thirumalavan* and *Karthikeyan's* concern with keeping their daughters at home fits with the norm of respectable women and girls spending as little time as possible away from home (especially unescorted) or mixing with strangers. Their lament echoes a common refrain of both male and female relatives to many

household. *Karthikeyan* supports this move by joining *Thirumalavan* in the projected future conversation in line 123 and by suggesting that he has similar difficulties in controlling the spending habits of his three daughters. Although they are discussing an unpaid debt, *Karthikeyan* and *Thirumalavan* align around questions of patriarchal authority and share a voice in it.<sup>274</sup>

There are, of course, limits to the ways in which shifting responsibilities and slippery subjects may be embraced in interactions with shopkeepers. Gaps between moments of spoken interactions and enacted transaction are permissible only if they do not become too wide. Deflecting responsibility for poor behavior to other family members may work for brief periods of time and in single conversations, but a speaker's ability to successfully perform such shifts may depend on his/her willingness to produce call, on, and evaluate another's actions. As shopkeepers stressed to me in conversation, ongoing communication and delays in payment are valuable primarily as ways in which to ensure the payment of future purchases. People who continually prolong delays in payment, who endlessly chatter and demand attention without making purchases, and who disappear with unpaid debts are quietly bemoaned and, in the last case, vilified. Manipulations of voices in conversation need not be interpreted as a conscious strategy. Instead, they can also be read as emergent moments of sympathy between shopkeepers

---

young women who complained of their tendencies to want to play outside, go shopping, and generally mix with the public.

<sup>274</sup> It's possible that some of the comments about the impropriety of women moving about are meant as a very indirect negative comment on the behavior of the female anthropologist sitting on the shops steps during the course of this interaction. Yet the tone of this conversation and their emphasis on children leads me to suspect that they had simply forgotten I was there. Other customers did occasionally make comments to me or to shopkeepers about my presence in the road as problematic.

and customers who are simultaneously neighbors and, in some cases, co-participants in parenting.

### *Shops as Mediators in Domestic Relations*

I draw connections between the voices and roles assigned to and assumed by speakers, and qualities such as gender, age, and family relationships, yet do not mean to suggest that these traits have equal salience or significance across all contexts of interaction. Despite the reserved women's-only queues at railway booking rooms, banks, and ration shops, women who interact with representatives of these institutions are assigned the same responsibilities for speech, and requirements for upfront payment, as are male customers. Even though customers and shopkeepers in my study site acknowledged the systems of responsibility and potential relationship conflicts that could be discussed and indexed in *mafi kaṭai*, they did not recognize them as equally applicable in other contexts.

The later part of the conversation between *Roja* and *Pushpa* suggests the roles that interactions in *mafi kaṭai* may play in mediating domestic relationships and aligning them in ways different from those that are possible elsewhere. While buying a small amount of sugar and discussing the family's unpaid bill, *Roja* explains that she plans to go home and fight with her husband in order to get cash to buy sugar at the ration shop tomorrow. Her plan for the fight is to present him with tea without sugar (even though

she is, ironically, buying sugar as she explains this) in order to motivate him to give her cash).<sup>275</sup>

## 12. “Get it from him” Continued

*Karthikeyan*: male shopkeeper and owner

*Pushpa*: *Karthikeyan*’s wife, she also works as a clerk in the shop,

*Roja*: A regular customer, younger than the shopkeepers

10	<i>Roja</i> : avarukku koduthēna(l) avarkittā vāṅkiṅṅka	<i>Roja</i> : If you gave to him get it from him
11	<i>Pushpa</i> : ēṅ uṅka viṭṭukar-ammā vārum vāṅkikōnganaru	<i>Pushpa</i> : why? (Your husband) bought saying my wife will come, get it from her
12	<i>Roja</i> : ennaṅṅe kācu koddkkale	<i>Roja</i> : He doesn’t give cash to me
13	<i>Pushpa</i> : oru rōpā-tān	<i>Pushpa</i> : It’s just one rupee
14	<i>Roja</i> : athu-tāṅ colrēṅ correct-a koṭuttutu-vāru. avare teriyāṅṅa-kkum. kālaileye ippadi-tān correct-a kācu koṭṭuttiṭṭu ah pōyirukkaru. appuram vantu, avare enṅṅate piṭṭicci vāṅkiratu. rāvaṅṅi pēcuvaru. vaicciṅṅukāru āṅṅa koṭukamāṅṅa-ṅṅkirāru nammakittā <sup>276</sup> ennakum,	<i>Roja</i> : I’m saying just that. He will give (payment) correctly. I know him <i>well</i> (empathic). In the morning he’ll come just like that, give cash correctly and ah go. After that, what can I get from him? He’ll speak uselessly (if I object). He’s keeping (money) but he’ll not give it to me. That’s constantly a quarrel between him and me. As you’ve said, tomorrow he’ll ask for tea and I’ll point out that I need money to go to the ration shop

<sup>275</sup> In normative middle- and working-class households, women are expected to prepare coffee or tea with sugar for all household members (with men, guests, and children usually being given priority) each morning and evening. While there may be exceptions to this norm, and some flexibility, the job is typically performed by women who spend much of their time on household duties and other acts that are unlikely to generate a stream of income. I note this because, although I have focused on roles assigned to women and men, similar conflicts over money might occur between working and non-working women.

<sup>276</sup> *nammakittā* literally translates as “we (inclusive)+(sociative case).” This could be translated as “he has cash but he won’t give it to us” – with the “us” referring to Roja and both shopkeepers, or just to Roja and Padmavathi (perhaps commenting on the ways of husbands generally). Yet, given that elsewhere in the conversation Roja stresses her husband’s willingness to give money to the shop, interpreting this “nam” to mean “I” (some women use a sort of “royal we” to refer to themselves) makes more sense.

	avarukkum athan santa. nīṅka enenna (something) nalakki ration-le vāṅki (something) ṭi kēppārille appe iruntu	[Roja describes a campaign in which she will refuse to put sugar in her husband's tea because he has not given her money to buy it from the ration shop.]
15	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> vēṅu cār	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> what else sir (to a man who has been buying silently)
16	<i>Man:</i> atu-tāṅ	<i>Man:</i> just that
17	<i>Pushpa:</i> mīṭi vāṅkiṭṭiykaḷā	<i>Pushpa:</i> You couldn't get change (from him)?
18	<i>Roja:</i> nālikki vāṅkiruvōm appiṭṭiṅṅu pōraru. appurōm, kālaikki vēṅnum-le appurōm, sollanum irukke~ ration vāṅkiṭṭu vāntu ṭi pōta-tārēṅ- ṅu	<i>Roja:</i> “We'll get it tomorrow” saying like that he went. After that, in the morning (he'll) want (tea), after that there's a (chance) to say 'if I go and get (sugar) at the ration shop afterwards I'll come and make tea.’
19	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> ūṅkalukku vē eṅṅa vēṅnum ?	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> What else do you want?
20	<i>Roja:</i> eṅṅakku atu-tāṅ jiiṅi kāḷ-kilo vēṅnum	<i>Roja:</i> I want just that, give (me) ¼ kilo sugar

While making a purchase from *Karthikeyan's* shop, *Roja* announces a plan to wheedle money from her husband in order to successfully purchase sugar from the ration shop, thereby successfully fulfilling her role within the household. In doing so, she displays a strategic understanding of the advantages of presenting relationships differently in the various circuits of commerce in which she operates. In order to fulfil the relatively circumscribed role of paying citizen customer at the ration shop, she shows herself to be an independent conniver at the neighborhood *maḷi kaṭai*, while humorously enacting her dramatization of a relatively helpless and dutiful wife at home.

*Roja* suggests that she is making her purchase of sugar at the *mafi kaṭai* not only because it enables her to buy a smaller quantity of sugar closer to home, but because her ability to make an immediate purchase on credit does not require the same direct struggle with her husband that the purchase at the ration shop is likely to entail. *Pushpa* lends a sympathetic ear to her complaints about divisions of resources within the household, but also offers a way in which the participation of others may be enlisted in intra-household conflict.<sup>277</sup> Shops and shopkeepers may be invited to insert themselves into family economies, so that payment for purchases required to enact the duties of one member of the family may be extracted from those who benefit from the performance of these duties.<sup>278</sup>

Relatively flexible definitions of persons and responsibilities were not a problem in *mafi kaṭai* conversations. Rather than signifying trouble, ambiguous assignments of voice and responsibility offered a remedy for gaps in payment that might otherwise have places transactions, reputations, and relationships in jeopardy. As suggested by *Karthikeyan's* attempts to avoid placing responsibility too firmly, permitting such slips was often a useful, and even a necessary, means to preserve the relationships needed to secure credit/debt payments. Such strategies also preserved the more general sense of credibility needed to allay suspicion between shopkeepers and customers. The forms and

---

<sup>277</sup> It is not a coincidence that *Roja* enlists *Pushpa's* aid in family relations, whereas *Thirumalavan* enlists *Karthikeyan's*. While there were certainly exceptions to this pattern, women were more likely to share domestic complaints with female shop workers.

<sup>278</sup> While I have no idea what sorts of reported speech may have been produced by the interaction above, the general tendency for conversations in and around the *mafi kaṭai* to be reported in other interactions around the neighborhood may, in and of itself, constitute a sort of mobilization of support. By explaining in detail her reasons for buying sugar and her need to struggle with her husband to get cash, *Roja* might be taken as inviting overhearers in the neighborhood to take part or intervene in her interaction with her husband.

timings of payments permitted by *mafi kaṭai* interactions shaped the social and temporal configurations of financial relationships enacted by customers' households and the broader networks of transactions within which they were embedded.<sup>279</sup>

When making choices to buy provisions at departmental stores, ration shops, or *mafi kaṭai*, customers chose not only from an array of products and prices, but also from a variety of possible subject positions and participant role configurations. The possibilities of shifting identifications of actors and flexible assignments of accountability were one of the ways in which *mafi kaṭai* interactions were metapragmatically distinct from shopping in other domains. In contrast to ration shops, departmental stores, and wholesale markets, the ability to negotiate responsibilities, and thereby intervene in domestic relations allowed *mafi kaṭai* shopkeepers to provide a distinct set of services for customers. Interactions at a regularly visited *mafi kaṭai* might allow for intervention in, reflection on, or transformation of household relations. Through conversation, shopkeepers and customers might re-assign or negotiate the ways in which speech and action were assigned to members of a household. While the results of such negotiations were not necessarily sincere, durable, or significant, there were certainly situations—such as those when shopkeepers pressured some household members to pay for purchases made by others—in which *mafi kaṭai* shopping served to shift speech, money, and objects

---

<sup>279</sup> Customers and shopkeepers alike pointed out that their participation in credit/debt transaction in some domains helped and necessitated their participation in others. Shopkeepers were able to accept short delays in payment beyond the promised date from customers because many wholesale suppliers were willing to accept similar delays in payment by shopkeepers. In conversations with shopkeepers, customers frequently discussed their needs to meet the demands of less flexible institutions, such as schools that demanded payment of fees by a fixed date, and contrasted them with the more flexible demands made by shops. The ability to delay payment on one front might allow payments to occur on another. It is difficult to be sure of the extent to which informal finance in the form of credit given by *mafi kaṭai* shopkeepers shaped their customers' participation in other domains, but it certainly played some role.

between household members in ways that might not otherwise have been possible. Indeed, many customers explained that despite relatively higher prices, lower quality and stale goods, and longer waits for service, *mafi kaṭai* are the best and easiest places to shop precisely because they allow greater flexibility in payment, and the trust implied by ambiguous assignments of responsibility.

As I suggested in Chapter Three, *mafi kaṭai* are perpetuated and supported, in part, because of their ability to work as a backstage to domestic relations. As well as providing a space in which people could complain about family members, briefly escape from household routines, and acquire many of the goods needed to make these routines possible, shops provided financial and social services that were necessary to the functioning of many households. Perhaps more importantly, because they were assumed to be insignificant and unremarkable, interactions with and interventions by shopkeepers and bystanders in *mafi kaṭai* happened in ways that maintained and perpetuated the metapragmatic divisions between inside and outside or home and the world.

## Chapter 6:

### Keeping Agents Accountable: Texts, Transparency, and Trust in Two Circuits of Commerce

“A man’s duly certified balance-sheet is the one reliable voucher of his actual position: all other information that we can gain respecting him must be more or less at second hand and imperfect and it may be delusive. But there is no mistaking the figures of an honest balance sheet.” From George Rae’s *The Country Banker* (as cited in Poovey, 2002, p. 27).

Shopkeeper (in response to question about what has been purchased to incur a debt at his shop):

“I don’t know about all that.”

Customer: “OK, then, what shall we do?”

—An interaction between a shopkeeper and customer recorded at *Pushpa kaṭai* on February 3, 2007

#### *Accounting as Semiotic Ideology*

As the first of these quotations suggests, there is a widely distributed and relatively long-standing association between the careful keeping of legible accounts and successful business practice (see Aho, 2005). Account keeping is often a domain through which social actors and their relationships are evaluated. For example, George Rae asserts that a properly audited account is a transparent window onto its author—an icon

of his position. Like other aspects of commerce, as explained in Chapter One, written accounting is sometimes treated as a uniform and universal practice, one that will look the same everywhere if it is done well.

This chapter is an attempt to understand a situation that I initially found perplexing, one that goes against the understanding of accounting supported by Rae's description of balance sheets and against depictions of record keeping by the Indian government, corporate distributors, and a large number of NGOs seeking to accomplish political and economic reform both inside and outside of India.<sup>280</sup> Account books kept in the ration shops run by the Tamil Nadu state government are beautifully legible, openly displayed, and audited on a daily basis. In contrast, accounts of transactions kept in *mafi kaṭai* tend to be relatively sloppy, elliptical, and interpretable only by the shopkeepers who produce them. Yet customers usually treated the fragmentary accounts kept by *mafi kaṭai* owners as accurate and reliable, even while they reported assumptions that the scrupulously neat and comprehensive records written in ration shops were false and corrupt.

For example, in the conversation quoted at the beginning of this chapter, a regular customer, *Anuradha*, has admitted that she is unsure which of her family members might have bought products on credit, what amounts they purchased things for, or when the purchases were made. *Karthikaiyan*, the shopkeeper, responds by suggesting that his accounts are devoid of this information. Although both parties are familiar with and capable of producing precise written records, *Karthikaiyan* fails to produce what Rae and those like him would consider an honest balance sheet. Yet, rather than treating the

---

<sup>280</sup> See, for example, *Transparency International's* 1992 reports on global corruption.

paucity of his record as a mark of deficiency, a possible falsehood, or sign of failure in keeping the shop, the shopkeeper and customer treat this deficiency as normal. The discovery of this gap in records allows them to examine and report their memories of events in order to work out an agreement as to what might have happened, and what amount might reasonably be owed.

How is it that, despite mutual recognition of their conflict of interest, the shopkeeper and customer in this relatively typical interaction are able to reach an agreement on debts and the events that produced them while keeping their pretensions of honesty and generosity intact? Why, despite a shared knowledge of contexts in which precise writing is associated with correct behavior, don't they draw more heavily on written records in their attempt to do so? This chapter attempts to trace the ways in which contrasting ideologies of account-keeping inhabit and distinguish particular circuits of commerce in Thanjavur and to explain why shopkeepers with the skills and knowledge needed to produce full and legible written accounts of credit/debt (*kaṭai*) transactions might not be asked, or even expected, to do so.

I suggest that understanding the use and interpretation of written accounts demands an examination of the language ideologies, of associations between linguistic and social phenomena, and of the ways in which political and moral interests work to produce these associations. Drawing on a comparison between practice and interpretation of writing in ration shops and the use of written accounts in *mafi kaṭai*, I argue that rather than simply serving as a transparently reliable voucher of the author's position, practices of accounting draw on and perpetuate specific assumptions linking written records of monetary transfers with participant roles, systems of expertise, and associated evaluations

of relationships. I suggest that account-writing in ration shops should be understood as governed by an ideology of bureaucratic textualism, which assumes that all writing will reveal a single meaning to all competent readers in the same way. This understanding of accounts assumes that writing should be transparent and context-independent and that, by extension, the numbers given in an account should, if the account is correct, be addable to equal the total amount of the transaction that was written about. In contrast, *maḥi kaṭai* owners and their indebted customers draw on a different language ideology, one that they described as *speaking well* (*nalla pēccuvāṅka*). A significant facet of *speaking well* in *maḥi kaṭai* was the practice of treating written accounts as merely subordinate or supplementary to attempts at building and maintaining relationships and the sense of credibility necessary to continue trade through face-to-face conversation.<sup>281</sup>

As Bill Maurer (2006) notes in his review of anthropological work on money, contrasts between modes of trade are often made as part of a story of transition or transformation in which locally situated knowledge, and the experts and evaluations they enable, are rendered invalid and replaced by more distant structures of interpretation, verification, and governance. Yet I do not mean to suggest that either one of these systems is disappearing or transforming into the other. In order to avoid this assumption, I draw on Viviana Zelizer's (2004) definition of circuits of commerce. Zelizer argues that instead of classifying transactions as belonging to naturalized domains, such as households or markets, analysts should consider the ways in which people actively work to produce and maintain differentiated ties across multiple domains of activity. She

---

<sup>281</sup> Although they identified other practices, such as visiting often, remembering details, and not getting angry as components of *speaking well*, no one with whom I spoke talked about this way of using accounts directly. I doubt that shopkeepers or customers thought of this use of account books in anything resembling the terms that I use to describe it.

suggests that histories and ethnographies of trade should examine the ways in which circuits of commerce produce and draw on distinct understandings, practices, rights, symbols, and media of exchange. I argue that, rather than reflecting a transition or natural opposition, contrasting systems for the interpretation of writing and the circuits of commerce within which they are embedded are mutually enabling and, to some extent, constitutive.

Although Zelizer is more interested in the implications of these divisions than in their semiotic production, her work points to the ways in which deployments of media, and distinctions between channels of communication that define them, may emphasize or produce shared meanings of ties amongst participants (2004, p. 125). Written accounts of transactions, and the processes through which such accounts are produced, kept, read, and interpreted, constitute key sites of media use through which circuits of commerce may be defined. In other words, I argue that account writing in *maḥi kaṭai* inhabits a metapragmatic frame that is distinct from, but not unrelated to, account writing in ration shops. As I explained in Chapter One, metapragmatic frames are those words, gestures, and practices that provide participants and other potential interpreters with clues as to which pragmatic function is in play at a given instance. They are a form of reflexive activity within a sign system (Keane, 2008; Silverstein, 2003). As I explain in detail in the conclusion of this chapter, the persistence of these different framings, and other associated semiotic ideologies, helps to define these types of shops as inhabiting distinct circuits of commerce.

Although I use “accounts” to describe both careful written records that are meant to be interpreted by a wide variety of readers, as well as nearly illegible notes scrawled

on scraps of paper and made legible only through conversation, I argue that these text-artifacts and the situations that produce them should be understood as two distinct forms of media that shape and are shaped by the circuits of commerce within which they are situated.<sup>282</sup> Specifically, in contrast to other circuits of commerce where relationships between participants are de-emphasized and accounts are read as true or false in relation to the movements of objects and money through the institution, in *maḷi kaṭai*, accounts are more likely to be read as felicitous or infelicitous in relation to their ability to fit within social relationships. This interpretation of account writing draws on the observation, now relatively common in linguistic anthropology (Ahearn, 2000; Blommaert, 1999; Hull, 2003; and others) that “writing” is not a single kind of practice or object, but rather, like talk, a term that covers a multiplicity of practices whose significance and salience should be examined both ethnographically and contextually.

I use the term “writing” to describe not only the production of written records but to name the cluster of potentially separable actions that range from the procurement and keeping of writing materials, the inscription of text on paper, the acts of reading and use of written texts, and later acts of keeping or disposing of objects that are, or were once, writing. Many recent ethnographies of writing have used it to emphasize the materiality and situatedness of signs. For example, Noy (2008, p. 77) cites Hull’s observation that “anthropologists have long recognized that things are signs, but have often ignored that signs are things” (2003, p. 292). This perspective is a particularly useful one for

---

<sup>282</sup> I use “accounts” to describe these documents because both are referred to by the Tamil term *kannakku*. *Kannakku* can also be used to refer to mathematics and other forms of calculation, such as some of those used by astrologers. I use “writing” to refer to the objects and activities that people described as *ezhuthu*. The Tamil term, much like the English one, describes both the physical act of writing and the material letters that it produces.

understanding the meanings and uses of written things in *maḥi kaṭai* because the forms of writing produced in and around the shops are often written and read in ways that fail to fit with hegemonic assumptions about texts and literacy.<sup>283</sup>

The dominance of the assumed utility of neat and complete account writing is so strong that many readers of earlier versions of this chapter have assumed that the difference between accounts kept in ration shops and *maḥi kaṭai* must reflect differences in the shopkeepers' backgrounds or educations. There is an assumption, particularly among readers in the US, but also among some audiences in India, that failure to produce neat and complete accounts indicates a lack of capacity or familiarity with the practice. This is far from the case. *Maḥi kaṭai* shopkeepers in my study area had educational backgrounds that were comparable to those of ration shop workers. All of the shop owners in my study area had completed school through grade 10, several had attained college degrees, and one of them was simultaneously employed as a government clerk.<sup>284</sup>

---

<sup>284</sup> While *maḥi kaṭai* owners were sometimes less educated than people who worked in businesses that relied more heavily on written records, their non-use of writing to record small debts and their relative lack of neat account keeping cannot be explained by lack of ability. Lack of education and the material implements needed to keep records of trade may be a factor for some very small-scale traders, such as women who sell vegetables and flowers from blankets in the street or some of the vendors who sell from carts. Other barriers may be present as well; one of the flower sellers who stayed in *Vishnu's Lake* had problems with her hand that made writing difficult. On one occasion, she used this as a reason to ask me to write a name and phone number for her (though, given that other more fluent Tamil speakers were present it's also possible that she wanted to check my handwriting). Yet, written records of transactions were also not kept by vendors of the types who seemed to have the means and education to keep them. Both of the banana cart vendors who I knew best in the *King's Community* and *Vishnu's Lake* areas had studied through 10<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> standards respectively. One was sometimes accompanied by his daughter, *Danavali*, who had studied up to 9<sup>th</sup> standard and who I had seen keep a very neat record of sales while working in a phone shop and photocopy booth. Many *maḥi kaṭai* workers write elegantly when called upon to do so, and read newspapers during times of day when business is slow.

When asked to explain the lack and general sloppiness of written accounts kept by *maḥi kaṭai* workers and other small-scale traders, my friends and neighbors in Thanjavur never drew on lack of education or knowledge as an explanation. Instead they, like shopkeepers themselves, usually responded that such records were unnecessary. Most *maḥi kaṭai* workers and owners were also successful participants in interactions where written receipts and accounts were the norm. For example, *Francis*, a *Nadar* Christian

*Maḷi kaṭai* shopkeepers frequently received carefully printed, itemized bills from distribution agents, which they reviewed and occasionally checked off when arranging to make payments.

The written accounts that I discuss in this chapter are a small and limited subset of the ways in which accounting may be practiced by shopkeepers and their customers. For example, many Hindu families, including *Karthikeyan*'s, kept very neat and carefully recorded *moy kannaku*, lists of (usually monetary) gifts that were given at weddings, ear piercing ceremonies, and other life-cycle rituals. Some *moy kannaku* keepers claimed to use the records to ensure that they paid back similar amounts when they attended events held by the people who had given *moy* to their families on earlier occasions<sup>285</sup>. My purpose in this chapter is not to describe all possible types of written accounting that were practiced by people who frequented shops in Thanjavur, or to fully explain how

---

shopkeeper who kept a shop in the front of his house (located between *King's Community* and *Vishnu's Lake*) also worked as a salesman for a life insurance company. He would sometimes invite friends and customers to purchase policies, successfully guiding them through filling out piles of neatly kept forms, while, at the same time performing sales for which no written record was openly kept. On the few occasions when *Francis* did note a purchase on credit, he did so using scraps of paper held together in a stack on a clipboard, using a system that was surprisingly similar to that of *Karthikeyan*. The meaning of writing in *maḷi kaṭai* depends, in part, on the shared understanding that it is always possible but rarely necessary.

<sup>285</sup> Most people who claimed to keep such books had trouble finding them when I asked to see them; they were often stuck in the bottom of a bureau beneath carefully folded silk saris and old wedding photos. For this reason, and because the amounts usually given as *moy* are standard and easy to calculate (often Rs 51 or 101 depending on the closeness of the relationship), I doubt that *moy kannaku* were actively used in the same way that accounts of credit/debt in shops might have been. Instead, it is likely that the act of writing and keeping *moy kannaku*, which people took pains to do neatly and openly, was a way in which those who received *moy* demonstrated their recognition.

Although *moy* and *katan* inhabited very different circuits of exchange, their potential for overlap was occasionally acknowledged. *Gayathri* and several other friends described an increasingly popular practice of holding *moy viruntu* (which might be translated as “debt feasts”) in which invitations were given and a feast was held without the excuse of a life-cycle event. *Gayathri* suggested that such feasts, which were sometimes described as more common in other cities in the district (particularly *Patukotai*), could be used to pay off immediate and pressing debts. A family who held such a feast would usually not expect *moy* to be given by those who would attend their next life-cycle event. *Gayathri* described this practice as a way of taking an “advance” on *moy*, of turning what was usually classified as something closer to a gift transaction into something that more closely resembled a financial instrument.

these uses of writing interacted with other regimes of record keeping and calculation. Instead, by comparing emblematic and distinct understandings of written accounts in two circuits of commerce, I hope to illustrate the possible breadth of understandings of accounting that operate within a single place and to suggest the ways in which these understandings relate to other semiotic ideologies and associated practices.

As I explain in the conclusion, attention to the “thingness” of written signs and the ways in which it is valued and interpreted across circuits of commerce allows for consideration of the relationship between the interpretation of written objects and the uses and values assigned to money. I do not mean to assert that the materiality of account pages is entirely tied to their status as writing, however. The social lives of text-objects in *maḥi kaṭai* often extend to later stages, such as in use as wrappers for eggs, sugar, and other objects whose transit requires packaging, in which words remained legible but the presence of writing *as writing* ceased to be a salient characteristic.<sup>286</sup> Yet in order to explain why I think that this matters, I need to first explain how account writing works in ration shops.

The government-run ration shop located in *King’s Community* served the same population as *Anbu kaṭai*. The ration shop was located about 600 meters further down the road to town, on the opposite side of the street: out of sight but within shouting distance. Customers frequently went to both shops as part of the same trip, and both shops offered many of the same products, including lentils, peanut sweets, cooking oil,

---

<sup>286</sup> These boundaries were not always entirely clear, however. *Gayathri’s* mother might find a moment’s amusement in the midst of cooking eggs by reading the newspaper that had been used to wrap them. Although wrappers were usually dismissed as scrap paper, choices of wrapper might occasionally have been communicative. For example, *Pushpa* underscored her concerns about her daughters’ educational status by stressing that pages from their English-language schoolbooks were being used to wrap goods in the shop.

sugar and rice. Yet the conventional organization of interactions—of turn taking, record keeping, and purchasing—in the ration shop was radically different from an ordinary transaction in a *maḥi kaṭtai*. As I suggested in Chapter Five, differences between ration shops and *maḥi kaṭtai* were apparent in the ways that customers planned for and organized the kind of shopping they would do there, in the ways that interactions in the spaces were managed, in the spatial and social divisions evident within the shops, in the ways that participants in interactions marked and responded to time, and in the networks of organization, control, and supply that surrounded these interactions. One of the most striking signs of these differences, and a driving force behind them, was the way in which ration shop workers made use of written accounts.

### *A Visit to the Ration Shop*

In an attempt to get a sense of how interactions in ration shops might differ from those in *maḥi kaṭtai*, I spent 90 minutes on February 1, 2007 interviewing two men who worked in the main section of the ration shop located in *King's Community*.<sup>287</sup> Although my questions examined multiple details of their daily work, such as the languages used to speak to customers, the schedule they kept, and the content of a “typical” interaction, both workers brushed aside details of their spoken interactions with customers as relatively uninteresting. Instead, they continually returned the conversation to discussions of the procedures for keeping accounts. They focused on the written

---

<sup>287</sup> I also made a follow-up visit to ask a few more questions and had several other “social” conversations with ration shop workers during my stay in Thanjavur. I checked what they had told me about ration shop interactions by interviewing people who frequented the shop about how things ran there. However, for reasons that will become clear later, I spent very little time observing interactions in the ration shop or documenting what happened there.

elements of transactions: checking the customer's ration card for appropriate identity and allotted amounts of commodities, recording the sale on the card, and making sure that each sale was accurately put into the ledger with zeal. In answer to questions, they repeatedly invited me to examine the large and meticulously kept ledger in which all shop transactions had been recorded with a clear and elegant hand. During the course of conversation, the ledger book was turned to face me. Its imposing size and physical location on the table between us gave it a prominent and almost intermediary role in our interaction.<sup>288</sup> Although customers were expected to request items and give payment to shop workers, the acts of writing, which were clearly visible to customers during interaction, could serve to verify and provide cues for the transaction as it was being conducted.

Unlike the cash box and goods for sale (most of which were kept in an adjoining room or on the dust covered shelves beneath and behind the long counter) the accounts ledger presented itself as eager for examination. As customers waited for purchased goods to be brought out and measured, they were invited—as I had been—to observe the perfectly matching entries that were made on each ration card and in the ledger. The ledger was, literally, open and easily surveyed by anyone who entered the room. This writing was the main mechanism by which the ration shop spoke for itself to both government administrators and the public it served. As both workers explained multiple

---

<sup>288</sup> I don't want to take this too far. The ledger was not treated to a soda and snacks (as I and the two official shop workers were), but the friend who claimed to be working in the shop as a "trainee" (and was rumored to be a non-government worker there to gather and transport rice and sugar for sale on the black market) was not either.

times and with apparent pride, the ledger was taken each night to be checked for accuracy, to the amount of one rupee, at the local *taluk* office<sup>289</sup>.

Because ration “shops” are really a form of government distribution rather than a for-profit business, and because ration shop workers are government employees, the accounts that they generate as a result of daily sales are the primary product of their labor.<sup>290</sup> These accounts are also one of the most durable signs of the shop’s activities and existence. Both the thick account books kept by the ration shop, which are later stored at the *taluk* office (from which the sub-district was administered), as well as the ration cards kept by individual patrons, are retained for years at a time, long after goods have been consumed and other traces of transactions have been erased or forgotten. Despite their social, temporal, and spatial distance from Poovey’s discussion, workers at the government-run ration shop in *King’s Community* seemed to draw from and assume that I shared beliefs about the relationships between duly-certified accounts, the transparent truth or falsehood of written reports, and the honesty of subjects that authored and were otherwise entailed by them.

Ration shop workers’ descriptions of properly kept accounts constitute an extreme version of the contested yet pervasive ideology of literacy that James Collins (1996) calls “textualism.” Using a third grade classroom in Chicago as a case study, Collins describes textualism as the belief that literacy is a context-independent, uniform, and transparent process, with the assumption that all technically correct reading and writing will produce

---

<sup>290</sup> Rather than making a profit, ration shops are supposed to be run at a predictable loss, the cost of which is born by the state government.

the same meaning in the same way. In much the same way that Collins describes the ability to produce correct reading as a means towards positive valuation and positioning within the classroom, and Poovey describes it as linked to morality in the annals of Victorian finance, ration shop workers tended to treat the performance of writing precise and legible accounts as a sign of propriety and success.

The legibility and transparency of ration cards and ration shop records is assumed to extend to all literate members of the Tamil Nadu public and so can be taken as a sign of the legibility and transparency of the state itself.<sup>291</sup> A ration card must be carried by anyone purchasing goods at the ration shop and contains details on the family's composition and the quantity of items allotted to them. Additionally, it contains spaces within which the ration shop staff records the quantities of items purchased and the dates on which they were purchased. Within the official framework of ration shop interactions, all participants seemed to agree that anyone who was literate was capable of correctly checking and interpreting accounts. Even I, an obviously foreign interviewer with a poor Tamil accent who asked many questions about what should have been obvious, was assumed to be capable of reading and evaluating accounts without any special training.

During our conversations, shop workers stressed record keeping as an icon of the shop's overall correctness and success. Like the work of Japanese stenographers described by Miyako Inoue (2010), the display, review, and auditing of ration shop accounts could be described as collapsing the distinctions between precision and accuracy. Shop workers' insistence on displaying their accounts implicitly asserts that

---

<sup>291</sup> "The state" here refers to the Government of Tamil Nadu which is in charge of running and regulating ration shops. Yet there are multiple states alluded to by this state which range from the specific district officers who issue ration cards and audit the ration shop's books, to the Central Government of India, which administers other aspects of the ration shop regime.

the presence, neatness, and consistency of the account keeping can serve as an implicit guarantee to their accuracy with respect to the material transactions that they are supposed to represent. At my invitation, shop workers compared record keeping to other practices, such as forcing patrons to wait quietly in line, which distinguished ways in which business happened in the ration shop from the way business happened in a *mafi kaṭai*.

Like distribution agents, workers in large “departmental stores,” and members of a women’s self-help group who briefly attempted to run a small provision shop in *Vishnu’s Lake*, employees at the ration shop drew on account keeping as a mark of social distinction. In discussions of account keeping, those who kept written records and accounts often depicted themselves as more organized, more honest, and more educated than those who failed to do so. When I asked one distribution agent if the *mafi kaṭai* shopkeepers with whom he worked kept the same kinds of account books that he did, he laughed and mimed opening a drawer and checking how much cash was in it to explain the ways in which *mafi kaṭai owners* were likely to keep accounts. This gesture and explanation were done in a sort of clowning pantomime that seemed to suggest a certain clumsiness and deficiency on the part of those who failed to keep neat written tallies of balances and business transactions.

### *Fixing Bureaucratic Subjects*

Ration shop workers insisted that they would be scolded if the ledger that they turned in at the end of the day showed sums that failed to add correctly or contained any other mistakes. Similarly, they made much of the procedures for checking the ration card

of each person who entered the shop to ensure that it was being used correctly by the person to whom it belonged. Ration shop workers' explanations for these procedures, and many of the explanations given by their customers, depicted written accounts as easily readable, universally interpretable, and obviously verifiable as true or false. This system of scrutiny seemed to be accepted and expected by most shop patrons, and resembled a wider set of checks and verifications within which ration cards were made to operate.

Shop workers were not the only subjects who were defined through the bureaucratic rituals of written accounting. The careful production of written records of transaction in ration shops required customers to be named and identified as responsible in ways that could dramatically restrict their possibilities for speech and action. Kathryn Jones (2000) examines the relationship between bureaucratic regimes of documentation and the subjects they produce in a brief ethnography of the filling-out of animal control forms at a UK cattle market. In order to enter their animals into the market, farmers are required to translate their relationships with cattle into forms that meet the expectations of government documents. In the process, government workers at the site must often help to explain the procedures for documentations and the expectations and requirements of the government systems. Similarly, in order for transactions in ration shops to work, citizens must present themselves and their family relationships in ways that meet the expectations of the Tamil Nadu state government. At the same time, government agencies and workers must discipline themselves to produce documentation that fits the forms and expectations dictated by government agencies and, as embodied by these

agencies, a vaguely defined citizen public in whose interest the government claims to speak.

Ration cards, which take the physical form of small paper booklets in colors that correspond to the economic status of the family of the holder, are issued by the Tamil Nadu state government, usually on a district-by-district basis. There was debate among many of my friends in Thanjavur as to the number of colors of ration cards available and the ways in which the colors corresponded to the economic status of the holders. Most of my friends, almost all of whom had blue or green cards, agreed that there were between three and five colors, with blue for lower middle-class people/middle-class, green for wealthier people (a family of famously prosperous engineers was volunteered as an example of people who might have a green card, though some of their neighbors said that their card was blue), and rose or brown for those who were in greatest need.<sup>292</sup> There was also some discussion of yellow ration cards (also mentioned on the Tamil Nadu government website), although no one I talked to was quite clear on who was supposed to get them. In addition to specifying a household's economic status, ration cards provide the name and photo of the family head (or the person who is expected to make purchases at the ration shop), and the names of all other family or household members covered by that card. Ration cards are assigned to particular household addresses, which are under the jurisdiction of a particular ration shop. Ration cards thereby serve to fix their users geographically to a particular dwelling and a particular shop.

---

<sup>292</sup> Each card color corresponded to a government defined social class and associated "rations" of commodities and prices.

One of the most striking effects of ration cards was their tendency to document and thereby motivate or create patrilocal, patrilineal, male-headed households.<sup>293</sup> As Karin Kapadia (1995) writes, Hindus throughout Tamil Nadu recognize patrilineality and patrilocality—which used to be associated more with upper castes—as the social norms to which to aspire. Like Kapadia, I found that many families I knew had daughters who lived near or with them, and were supported by their brothers and parents after getting married, although pains were usually taken either to provide some justification for this situation or to avoid drawing attention to it. Even in cases where daughters openly lived with their parents or brothers most of the time, often with the excuse of looking after parents or being unable to live with husbands working elsewhere, their ration cards listed them as living with their husbands and/or husbands’ parents. Other common scenarios included children moving between the houses of different relatives (eating meals in different places at different times of day), relatives from villages living with relatives in town while studying or providing aid and childcare when someone was ill, and families having live-in servants who ate and acted as part of the household. This meant that the ways in which Thanjavur’s families, and associated purchase quotas, were configured on ration cards often failed to match the geographic location or social configuration of the households in which they actually lived.

---

<sup>293</sup> The Tamil Nadu government officially allows ration cards to be issued to a far greater variety of persons and households than most of the people who I interviewed in Thanjavur identified as possible. Although most people that I spoke with in Thanjavur insisted that ration cards must issued in ways that assumed male-headed households and patrilocal or neo-local residence, a wide variety of other living arrangements could legally be recognized on ration cards. For example, as Elaine Craddock explained at the 2010 Tamil studies conference *aravanis* (male-to-female transsexuals that are usually referred to as *hijras* in other parts of India) can legally be issued ration cards as 3<sup>rd</sup> sex persons. Friends living in Chennai report ration cards being issued to same-sex couples that recognize their status as a household. The gap between official possibilities and the forms of registration that the people I interviewed saw as possible may have been created either by local officials or by a general reluctance to put stigmatized living arrangements on record.

The official and primary use of ration cards is to identify the citizens on visits to government “fair-price” or ration shops and indicate their family composition, income status, and recent purchasing history so as to ensure that they receive only the correct quotas of rationed or government fixed-price items. The cards provide the name, personal details, and a black and white passport photograph of the family member who is seen as most likely to procure goods from the ration shop—normally the male head of the household. Yet, like driver’s licenses in the US, the common and practical uses of ration cards extend beyond the sphere for which they are officially designed. Especially for the family member whose image it bears, a ration card serves as form of identification in a variety of interactions and transactions. Copies of ration cards are required by graduate students applying for government scholarships, by people applying for passports, and by people registering the sale of land and similar transactions at the registrar’s office. Although various kinds of identity documentation are accepted, according to lists given in newspapers, ration cards are one of the forms of documentation that are used most commonly to identify citizens as they attempt to register their votes in state and national elections. In fact, ration cards seem to be the only form of identification recognized as available for use by many people who lived in the neighborhoods I describe.<sup>294</sup>

The photo shown below was taken from *The Hindu*, an English-language daily newspaper that is read throughout South India; however, it is similar to photos that are frequently run in *Thina Thanthi*, *Thina Mazhar* and Tamil-language daily papers. It depicts one of many continually renewed and revised schemes by which the state

---

<sup>294</sup> Although other forms of identification were advertised in the newspaper as acceptable for use when voting, I knew several people who claimed, sadly, that they were unable to vote on election day either because their ration cards listed them as living somewhere other than in Thanjavur or, in the case of one relatively recently married woman, because she had been removed from her parent’s ration card and not yet been added to that of her in-laws.

government hopes to announce its beneficence and efficacy through the new or somehow improved distribution of ration cards to its citizens. Because ration cards are the necessary means through which to acquire subsidized subsistence goods such as sugar, rice, kerosene, and gas cylinders, as well as items promised by government campaigns—such as bicycles given to children studying in +1 and +2 in 2006 or color televisions given to families that lacked them in 2008—ration cards can serve as a material embodiment of the relationship between citizens and state institutions.<sup>295</sup> When used as identification for voting, scholarship applications, and other procedures, ration cards embody other less-tangible rights of citizenship. In much the same way that the precision of ration shop accounts is offered as a sign of their accuracy, increased technical precision in ration card design and distribution, through the introduction of “biometric” ration cards in Delhi or the assignment of new cards to members of various disenfranchised groups, is offered as a sign of the just delivery of rights and benefits to citizens.

Similarly, the printed writing on ration cards is offered as a way in which citizen subjects (usually in the form of patrilocal, male-headed households), can be visible to state agents such as ration shop workers, the police, and workers at the registrar’s office—not to mention the ranks of non-state bureaucratic agents, such as typing shop workers, photocopyists, and professional document handlers, who help to produce and move papers for these various institutions. Records written by ration shop workers are one of the ways in which the state government (or the district office, current ruling party,

---

<sup>295</sup> An increasing number of goods delivered by the state government are in fulfillment of election promises made by competing parties. In the 2007 election discussed above, much was made of the contest between the DMK’s promise of color televisions and the AIADMK’s promise of gold for every bride.

or one of the other agents who could be seen as partial author of the ration shop's words) makes itself, in turn, legible to its citizens.

Ration shop workers enact the state's transparency and legibility to participants by recording transactions on ration cards that shop visitors take home and by keeping them in large neat ledgers that can be viewed by all visitors to the shop, as well as by overseeing officials and any dignitaries that happen to be visiting. Emphasis on, and display of, the easy accessibility and cross-contextual legibility of these records (not just to district officers but to a foreigner with accented Tamil) is emblematic of bureaucratic textualism. Bureaucratic textualism supports the validity and critical role of written accounts as a means towards ensuring trust and good behavior, via accountability.



“The Minister for Environment and Forests, R. Vaidyalingam, handing over the new ration card, to a woman at Thanjavur on Saturday. — Photo: R. Shivaji Rao” -from *The Hindu* (online edition) Sunday July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2005

### *Bureaucratic Textualism*

In her discussion of the development of financial journalism in Victorian England, Poovey (2002) describes a continuum of possibilities for truth and transparency, in which account books come second only to Protestant readings of scripture as a site where truth should be obvious and easily discerned.<sup>296</sup> She cites an injunction by James William Gilbert, director of the London and Westminster Bank and author of “The Moral and Religious Duties of Banking Companies”: “insert no erroneous statements in your prospectus. Make no incorrect calculations... and let your annual report contain nothing but the truth” (as cited Poovey 200, p. 26). Gilbert asserts that correct calculation is not simply a good business strategy but a moral end in itself. Poovey and others who describe the privileged status of accounts as a form of writing, in which truth is both possible and easily evaluated, make connections between ideologies of account keeping and common assumptions about the referential transparency of mathematics and numbers. Yet numbers alone cannot account for the privileged status of accounts as a genre in which the morality of subjects, authors, and participants can and should be legible. Like categories and evaluations applied to spoken features of language, meanings assigned to the physical act of writing and assumptions about the processes of reading and interpretation constitute language ideologies. These, in turn, help to define the forms and possibilities associated with written records, as well as social worlds inhabited by shops and their customers.

Although she is more concerned with the politics of auditing than with the particular linguistic and material forms it occupies, Susanne E. Freiberg (2007) reveals

---

<sup>296</sup> Although Poovey’s work is concerned with financial record keeping in a Protestant context, there are useful parallels between the attitudes that she describes and the behaviors and assumptions expressed by some of my study subjects. At the same time, I do not mean to suggest that religious practices are the same across these domains or entirely separable from the ways in which money, objects, and writing itself may be taken as meaningful.

the ways in which power relations are enacted by practices of record keeping in grocery trade. In “Supermarkets and Imperial Knowledge,” she examines French and British supermarket chains’ attempts to control the quality of products and labor produced by their African suppliers, chronicling efforts to codify, standardize, and centralize knowledge and practices of knowledge production. She suggests that these efforts, which are undertaken through the proliferation of documentation and accounts, are a critical part of state development projects in the early-20<sup>th</sup> century and of neoliberalism and similar self-regulatory ideologies at the end of it.

Drawing on Michael Power’s (1999) description of “audit culture,” Freiberg examines the late-20<sup>th</sup> century version of Poovey’s finance writers by describing four ideological tenets in support of rigorous recordkeeping. She summarizes them as the beliefs that (1) information collected by organizations has the capacity to demonstrate how well they work; (2) this information should be collected according to objective standards, using procedures that are harmonized across the organization; (3) transparency produces trust and accountability; and (4) transparency allows for critique and self-discipline and so encourages continuous improvement in organizational performance and output. I find her summary of the third point particularly useful for understanding the ways in which state and development projects in Tamil Nadu portray the value of record keeping:

...audit culture assumes that the very presence of *transparency* -- that is, the sharing of information – not only demonstrates *accountability*, but also builds trust between those “checking-up” and those being checked-up on. (Freiberg, 2007, p. 328)

Rather than simply enabling the efficient enforcement of rules and evaluation of behavior, the creation of clear and correct accounts is assumed to transform relationships. Power's invocation of ritual seems particularly apt as a way in which to understand the production and interpretation of accounts in audit culture because, rather than being seen as a means towards communication between parties or parts of a system, they are often portrayed as transformative and efficacious in and of themselves.

Power's work is grounded elsewhere, but this ideology of bureaucratic textualism, which links the act of comprehensive transparent writing to trust and accountability, is consistently applied to record keeping in ration shops and other institutions in contemporary India. For example, in a 1999 study of "Corruption in Public Service Delivery," Samuel Paul and Munubhai Shah argue that:

...if parties are not ...transparent and accountable as public organizations ought to be, how can we expect them to lead the government in terms of *efficiency, accountability, and transparency*? Maintenance of audited accounts...and public disclosure of information are practices that have to be insisted upon.(p. 74).

Paul and Shah argue that corruption arises from abuse of the "principal-agent relationship," in which clerks and low-level bureaucrats mismanage the authority given to them by ruling parties and the government (and to the government by its citizens). Clear and durable written accounts are supposed to remedy the problem of separation between these principals and agents, by allowing the possibility of audits to bring the latter in line with the former.<sup>297</sup> Bureaucratic textualism makes written accounts a guarantee of good

---

<sup>297</sup> The possibility of auditing, and the assumed efficacy of the process, provides support for the ideological collapse of precision and accuracy. Precision, and the transparency that it enables, is assumed to ensure accuracy because it allows a text to be audited by a party who could check the referential context of a text against the positions of objects in the world. Yet, like other processes in trade, auditing is subject to a temporal collapse. Precision and transparency are supposed to work like a panopticon, to ensure accuracy even before an audit takes place. Like other advocates of transparency, Paul and Shah assume that account writers who know that they may be audited will take care to ensure that their accounts are accurate. The problem with this system, which substitutes the careful display of balance sheets for

behavior because it makes the act of writing into one of social disembedding. An independently transparent and auditable text is one whose message can be separated from its author.

For this reason, written account books, ration cards, and other bureaucratic texts are often held up as a sign of the Indian (or Tamil Nadu) state's responsibilities to its citizens. As figures in their own right, bureaucratic texts are said to stand for transparency, accountability, and responsible behavior. When the Tamil Nadu state, the ruling party, the district office, or other agencies aim to perform improvement, they usually do so by issuing a new and increasingly precise set of texts, which often takes the form of issuing new or additional ration cards or, more recently, suggesting new precision technologies such as the use of biometric identification techniques.<sup>298</sup>

### *Failures of Transparency*

---

appropriate behaviors, is, of course, that it assumes careful and honest audits will eventually take place and that account writers are genuinely concerned with producing records that will read as honest and accurate when audited.

<sup>298</sup> The government of Tamil Nadu, like that of Maharashtra and several other Indian states, has announced that in the early winter of 2011 it will introduce biometric ration cards, which are supposed to be both more difficult to counterfeit and faster to interpret than traditional ration cards. Newspaper articles (such as one appearing in *The Hindu* on April 6, 2010) announcing the logic behind this change suggest that these new technologies are a more extreme form of the ideology of bureaucratic textulism (bureaucratic digitalism, perhaps?) that supports the current use of carefully written account books. Although the accuracy of these new cards is supposed to be supported by data collected during the 2010 Indian census, the primary shift in technology is one towards greater precision. I suspect that, as with account books, problems of fraud and corruption that are produced by the movement of material goods such as rice and sugar cannot be altered simply by transforming the ways in which these movements are recorded. As most public discourses on corruption in India assert, the problem lies not with the precision of records, but with the ways in which the production of records serves only to obfuscate what happens in the world. As Akhil Gupta (1995), Michael Herzfeld (1992), and others have noted, accounts do not necessarily produce accountability. Given the extent to which this is widely recognized in talk amongst friends and neighbors, popular films (for example *Sivaji* (2008)), and other everyday discourses that circulate in Tamil Nadu, it may be interesting to ask which audiences the biometric ration cards are intended to assure and impress.

The ideology of “bureaucratic textualism,” which equates precise and transparent accounts with truth, openness, and accuracy, is familiar to government officials who design ration shop policies, shop workers who carry them out, and shoppers who are subject to them. However, there is a great deal to suggest that this ideology fails to shape most practitioners’ evaluations of the writing that ration shop workers actually perform. For anyone familiar with the stereotypes about ration shops in most parts of India, the sentence above will have been long in coming. The same shops that serve as emblematic sites for performance of the state’s generosity and care for its citizens are also infamous centers for the enactment of its failures and imperfections.<sup>299</sup> As Akhil Gupta (1995, 2005) illustrates in discussions of talk about development projects in Maharashtra in the 1980’s, talk about corruption supersedes carefully written records as the means by which Indian states (including district, state, and central government bureaucracies) are constituted in people’s experiences.<sup>300</sup> In newspaper articles, policy briefs, and conversations among my neighbors in Thanjavur, it appears that ration shops are not famous for their production of strikingly neat, precise, and legible accounts so much as for producing accounts that are blatantly false and finding uses for public goods that are undeniably corrupt. None of these findings conflict with the ideology of textualism, or the rationalized production of state and citizen subjects, however. Declarations that accounts have been falsified simultaneously declare that they are legible.

---

<sup>299</sup> I chose the picture of ration card distribution from *The Hindu* in the previous section because the woman’s face, probably by accident, shows the sort of incredulous eye-roll with which promises to eliminate fraud through elaboration of regimes of documentation are greeted by members of many of India’s publics.

<sup>300</sup> Similarly, in a study of the distribution of agricultural implements and materials in Tamil Nadu, Jenny Springer (2000) observes a clear non-overlap between the written accounts kept by government agents and the different spoken reports of actual uses of and transactions in goods that circulate amongst government officers and the farmers that they serve. In her case as well, spoken reports are taken to represent the truth, or at least a more credible version, of events, whereas accounts are seen as bureaucratic artifice.

Much of my conversation at the ration shop was carried out with the winking smirk of an obvious put-on. The two official shop workers, and others who were present during my interviews, all smiled at the knowledge that there were certain questions that had answers other than the ones that I could officially receive. Amidst passages of seemingly sincere, detailed, and helpful discussion of the conventional daily workings of the ration shop, the workers also presented me with an equally conventionalized and nearly obligatory recitation of evident untruths. Although they extolled the quality of government products and implied that they themselves ran things better than most *maḥi kaṭai* owners, ration shop workers displayed their hospitality by treating me to a soda and snacks which they had a friend purchase from a *maḥi kaṭai* located down the street. In the same paragraph, and almost the same breath, in which they described the importance of keeping precise accounts of transactions and ensuring that goods went to the right places, shop owners noted that some of the free saris that had been distributed to the poorest women in the community for *Pongal* were still available in the shop and jokingly offered to give me one.

When I asked about the function of a third man in the room, who was not officially a shop worker in the shop, the other workers smilingly described him as an “unpaid trainee.” The friend through whom I knew the man later explained that he made his living by taking quantities of sugar and rice that were marked as sold by the shop and selling them elsewhere for a small profit that he split with the government workers. I did not delve further into the truth or falsity of this explanation. Yet the laughter in shop worker’s voices as they give the “unpaid trainee” explanation suggests that it was correct.

Returning home after conducting my interview at the ration shop, I explained the careful accounting procedures as they had been described to me. *Sunitha* and several other neighbors who shopped at the same place literally laughed at me. They pointed out, as did several people living in *Pushpa Nagar*, that shop workers would routinely mark customers as having purchased goods, especially rice and sugar that they didn't actually buy, in order to facilitate the goods' transfer onto the black market. Since I preferred not to attempt to directly validate these statements, I cannot entirely say that the accounts kept by the ration shop were false. However, I can confidently report that most neighborhood residents believed them to be and that I encountered such statements so frequently that, soon into my fieldwork, I stopped attempting to record or note them in any detail. What is important, from the standpoint of my argument, is not whether or not the books being kept by this particular ration shop were being falsified, but rather that, by accusing them of being false, area residents shared the belief that they were legible and meant to contain a complete record of a potentially knowable set of transactions. No one seemed to think that it was likely that anyone would ever verify the ration shop books against the content of actual transactions.<sup>301</sup> Ironically, both the state government's insistence that careful and accurate records be written and the constant chorus of accusations of corruption embodied by falsified accounts, worked to co-construct a belief that a transparent and accurate written record of ration shop transactions was both possible and desirable.

---

## *Accounts in Maḷi Kaṭai: Maintaining Credibility*

A dramatically different regime of account writing, interpretation, and validation applies in *maḷi kaṭai*, where the creation of written accounts was a rare component of any transaction. As illustrated in transcripts of conversations given below, “writing” in the context of making a purchase at *Pushpa kaṭai* meant to buy on credit. In these and many other interactions customers are able to ask to buy on credit, announce that they will need credit, or check the status of their debts simply by saying “write it” or asking if anything has been written. Although some shopkeepers, such as the owners of a *maḷi kaṭai* in one of the government colonies inhabited by clerical workers, seemed to keep receipts from agencies in a fairly organized way, and others might have kept records of transactions that I never saw, the main kind of written accounts that were known to be kept by *maḷi kaṭai* owners were records of the debts owed to them by regular customers. In all of the 16 shops located in my study area, and in all three of the shops on which my project focused, writing was optional, indexically loaded, and a possible topic of conversation between shopkeepers and customers. Most transactions, even those that involved multiple people and relatively long temporal gaps, occurred without reference to writing.

For example, in the fragment of conversation with which I began Chapter Five, *Pushpa* remembers and mentioned the Rs 1 debt that *Roja*’s household needs to pay, without resorting to a written account.

### **13. An Unwritten Reminder of a Debt**

*Pushpa*’s shop at about 4:15 pm on the afternoon of July 1, 2008

1	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : uṅkalukku eṅṅa vēṅum?	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : What do you want?
2	<i>Roja</i> : eṅṅkku taviṭum puṅṅakkum, taviṭu oṅṅu puṅṅakku oṅṅē-kal	<i>Roja</i> : For me rice bran and oil cake, one (measure) of rice bran

		one and a quarter of oil cake
	...(several lines removed)	
6	<i>Pushpa</i> : ēnga, oru rūpay cettu-kkīṅka ippa-tān bubble gum vāṅkiṭṭu pōraru	<i>Pushpa</i> : dear, add one rupee, just now he came and bought bubble gum
7	<i>Roja</i> : yāru?	<i>Roja</i> : Who? (to Pushpa)
8	Pushpa: perumāl-tāṅ unka perumāl-tāṅ	<i>Pushpa</i> : Perumal only, your Perumal only

In contrast to a ration shop transaction, where the use of a ration card fixes households into relatively durable units and assigns one member as the primary responsible party, *Roja*'s talk highlights the much more flexible and fluid definitions of households and relationships between members that are at play in *mafi kaṭai* interactions. Many of the same women who were carefully listed on their ration cards as living with their husbands, and required ready-cash to make purchases at ration shops, could explain to the *mafi kaṭai* shop owners that they were staying at and buying as part of their parent's household or some other social unit, if only for an occasional weekend visit.

In *mafi kaṭai*, uses of writing to record events other than purchase on credit tended to be sporadic and ephemeral. When a customer bought a relatively large number of items, perhaps more than five, shopkeepers might write the amounts on a sheet of paper. While this seemed to be done mostly to facilitate their own arithmetic, it also provided an easy way to keep track of objects whose purchases were interspersed with competing interactions. *Karthikaiyan*, the owner of *Pushpa kaṭai*, usually wrote only amounts, while *Anbu*, the owner of *Anbu kaṭai*, sometimes wrote amounts along with a list of items. In both cases, the tallies kept and written on scraps were sometimes passed to customers who might use them as a way to check that all objects were purchased and the amount given was correct.

When customers came to the shop with lists written on scraps of paper, it was common for *maḷi kaṭai* shopkeepers to write and tally the prices for items next to the words on lists written by the customer. While these makeshift receipts were occasionally carried home as a way to report back to family members who had requested or financed some of the purchases, they were often simply dropped in the dust at the front of the shops. The shops in Thanjavur on which I focused tended to write such notes on small torn scraps of waste paper and newsprint, referring to them only as *tundu* (scrap) sheets. Shops elsewhere, however, such as the fruitstand I frequented near the bus stand in Chidambaram, used full sheets of waste paper that might then be recycled for other purposes, such as wrapping bunches of grapes. While larger agencies sometimes gave shopkeepers bills or receipts upon the delivery of items, these tended to be kept loose in a pile or drawer.

The accounts (*kannakku*) of credit/debt kept by *Pushpa* and *Karthikeyan* are an exemplary case of the ways in which written accounts, and writing generally, occur and are interpreted in *maḷi kaṭai*.<sup>302</sup> The accounts, referred to as *kannakku* by the shop owners and *note* (occasionally pronounced *note-u*) by some of the customers, were written on several sheets of paper that *Karthikeyan* kept covered by a blank sheet on a clipboard he stored on a hook on the wall near the cash box. Rather than being written in easy-to-follow lines, these accounts consisted of notations representing either the names or identities of household members and tallies of the amounts for which they had

---

<sup>302</sup>Smaller debts, such as the Rs 1 that *Pushpa* requests from *Roja*, frequently remained unwritten and were rarely referred to as *kaṭai*. Although shopkeepers described behavior in these transactions as a way in which they could determine whether or not a customer was worthy of larger amounts of credit, these smaller loans seemed to be treated simply as transactions that took a long time to happen. In this way, the act of writing helped to mark and make a distinction between kinds of debt.

purchased goods. *Karthikeyan* and *Pushpa* were not comfortable with my copying this account directly for use in my dissertation, even though a copy of the document itself would give me little information without their aid. Written hastily during or after a credit transaction had occurred, the account kept in *Pushpa kaṭai* was less a full record of what had happened than a symbol of the seriousness with which a debt was treated and an aid to memory that could be used to guide future transactions.

Similarly, *Pushpa* and *Karthikeyan* sometimes announced the status of a debt by asking if they should write it, by saying that it was being written, or mentioning that an amount must be paid but “is not being written.” This announcement is comprehensible not only because writing in *Pushpa kaṭai* referred to purchases made on credit but also because credit purchases that are written represent a particular subset of possible debts.

Customers often made purchases simply by saying that they would pay shopkeepers later in the day, explaining that they would give the full amount when change became available, or that some other person would pay on their behalf. This later form is especially common when children make purchases at the shop on behalf of their parents or other area adults. It is a handy system both for area adults, who may not wish to leave the house to buy an ingredient while in the midst of cooking, entertaining guests, or doing some other work, as well as children, some of whom seem to enjoy the opportunity to run an errand. However, it may also create problems. For example, my friend *Miriam*’s three-year-old son *Joseph* would occasionally amuse himself by going to the shop in front of his parent’s house and asking for items, such as tea packets, without his mother’s permission.<sup>303</sup> Assuming that the items had been requested by *Joseph*’s

---

<sup>303</sup> This was a direct enactment of the sort of unauthorized buying that *Thirumalavan* fears in his conversation with *Karthikeyan*.

mother, the shopkeeper would give them to *Joseph*, thereby producing confusion and awkwardness when the tea packets were discovered and *Miriam* had to return them.

While the ability to provide some form of delayed or partial payment is extended to most customers, with shopkeepers occasionally asking similar favors of customers when they run out of change, most debts for small amounts over short periods of time remain unwritten.

With the exception of people who worked in large shops catering to the wealthy, most people who sold goods and services in Thanjavur explained that such small loans and the trust that they would be paid back were essential to successful commerce. When I asked *Ajit*, a wholesale tomato shop owner, if he allowed people to buy on credit, he laughed and answered that without credit business would not be possible. Similarly, agents who sold goods to shops, most *mafi kaitai* owners, and people who ran other shops, such as phone and photocopy booths, agreed that allowing short delays in payment, especially for small amounts, was an essential part of conducting business. Writing, talk about writing, and references to written documents were some of many ways in which these transactions could be enacted and negotiated.

An agent who did distribution work for Cadbury's chocolates and a man who managed sales and marketing for a non-name-brand mosquito coil company were proud to explain that, unlike the clients with whom they worked, they were required to keep detailed records of their actions and the movements of goods. For such workers, the need to keep written accounts, and associated record keeping practices and artifacts (such as the use of business cards and vinyl-bound planners), were positive signs of participation in a network that extended beyond Thanjavur district to other parts of Tamil Nadu, other

states, and in the case of Cadbury, other nations. In contrast, the lack of written records, file folders, and typed reports, were, as viewed by distribution agents, one of the signs of geographic and social limitations of *maḥi kaṭai* shopkeepers and their businesses.

Although the physical structures and general functions that defined the work of ration shop and *maḥi kaṭai workers* were fairly similar, most people that I spoke to in Thanjavur saw little similarity between their jobs and social positions.<sup>304</sup>

The transcript below records two minutes of conversation in *Pushpa kaṭai*, which were demonstrative of the ways in which money, writing, and debt are talked about. In the first transcribed lines, an adult male resident comes to the shop with a small boy to whom he has given an Rs 100 note. He prompts the boy to hand the note to *Karthikeyan*, the shopkeeper, and they collaboratively make a request for change, with which *Karthikeyan* quickly complies. They then hurry down the road out of the neighborhood in order to complete some other business. As they leave, *Kauselia*, a middle-aged woman who lives in *Pushpa Nagar*, asks for curry leaves. She is waited on by *Pushpa*, who responds to *Kauselia* by clarifying the amount that is on her account already and announcing the current price of potatoes. As a regular customer, *Kauselia* is able to get a .50 paisa/ kilo reduction in the price of potatoes simply by asking. *Pushpa* implicitly

---

<sup>304</sup> Neighbors and shopkeepers with whom I discussed kinds of shops explicitly noted that ration shop workers had lifetime government jobs with fixed salaries, fixed hours, multiple holidays, government pensions, and relatively little need to please their customers, whereas *maḥi kaṭai workers* often struggled independently to run businesses seven days a week and win the loyalty of demanding customers. While it may not have been central to the differences in their positions, attention to writing and the ways in which it shaped the pace of encounters with customers—who could be forced to wait in line and make requests at a pace dictated by ration shop workers—may have helped to define the lives and statuses of ration shop workers as distinct from those of other neighborhood shopkeepers. Dress and bodily comportment provided a parallel marker of difference. While workers in the ration shop always wore trousers and button-down shirts, maintaining the neat appearance of men who worked with packaged goods in a concrete room cooled by fans, most *maḥi kaṭai* workers dressed in a *veshti* (a dhoti in Hindi/English) and shirt, or just a *veshti* and banyan when it was particularly warm. *Maḥi kaṭai* workers were more likely to be sweaty and to have very muscular arms, in part because acquiring, loading, and unloading goods by motorcycle on a daily basis constituted a fair amount of physical exercise.

agrees to this request by not responding. In line 10, *Kauselia* declares her intention to buy on credit by telling *Pushpa* to “write it.” This type of exchange is relatively typical. Rather than directly mentioning credit when making purchases, customers usually ask for it either by telling shopkeepers when the money will be given, as *Kauselia* also does in this encounter, or, if they are of a status that allows them to buy for written amounts, by telling the shopkeeper to write it. Despite rare exceptions, such as requests for an address or the name of a specific product that a shopkeeper might obligingly write on a scrap of paper, mention of “writing” in a *maḥi kaṭai* usually refers to a purchase made on credit.

#### 14. Talk about whether or not to write a debt

Pushpa kaṭai July 4, 2008

1	<i>Man:</i> change irukkā	<i>Man:</i> Do you have change?
2	<i>Child:</i> fifty reṅṅu āmpatu // two fifty reṅṅu āmpatu	<i>Child:</i> Fifty two fifties// two fifties two fifties
3	<i>Pushpa:</i> intaṅka m	<i>Pushpa:</i> Take it-(you hon) hm
4	<i>Kauselia:</i> karuvepulla oru kuṭu koṭuṅka	<i>Kauselia:</i> One bunch of curry leaves please (you hon)
5	<i>Man:</i> ceri vā vā time acu	<i>Man:</i> (to the child) OK, come come it’s time
6	<i>Pushpa:</i> m m m nālakki yaru kāca eḷutirukku evulo intu iruṅka vārēṅ poṭuma eṅṅa vāṅkirēṅ-irukke (inaudible phrase) paṭiṅaṭu rūpa colluriṅka	<i>Pushpa:</i> Hmmm tomorrow who’s writing how much is there wait.. I’m coming ...is that enough? What is it you’re buying did you say it was fourteen rupees?
7	<i>Kauselia:</i> m kai-kilo, urulekiḷaṅku evlo itu?	<i>Kauselia:</i> Hm a quarter kilo of potatoes how much is it?
8	<i>Pushpa:</i> nallu rūvayi-illa	<i>Pushpa:</i> Four rupees, isn’t it
9	<i>Kauselia:</i> kai-kilo urulekiḷaṅku nallu	<i>Kauselia :</i> Quarter kilo for four rupees,

	rūpa cari pōṭuṅka mōṅara rūpa. eḷutuṅka eḷutuṅka nā tanturēṅ nālaṅṅakki pāti amount-te otikkiralāṅ-ṅu pā(r)kurē(ṅ) muṭiyalle nālaterucu oru ampatu rūpa oṅkalukku tārēṅ atalavuntu paṅam pōy cetitālām paravalla (?)	OK put it for three and a half. Write, write (it) I'll give (the balance) the day after tomorrow. Half of the amount I tried to allot separately but I couldn't do it. I'll give you one fifty rupee note, go and add all of the money (on my account) together, well OK (she becomes inaudible) <sup>305</sup>
13	<i>Pushpa:</i> paṅam pōy ceratā? (something)	<i>Pushpa:</i> Shall I go and add-up the money?
14	<i>Kauselia:m</i> (something inaudible)	<i>Kauselia :</i> Yeah
15	<i>Pushpa:</i> patimūṅrruva nettu kācu	<i>Pushpa:</i> thirteen rupees (in total) from yesterday's purchases
16	<i>Kauselia:</i> atayum cettu oṅṅa eḷutavēṭiya-tāṅē	<i>Kauselia :</i> That much combined is one, this needs to be written separately
17	<i>Pushpa:</i> inta eḷutīrukēṅ	<i>Pushpa:</i> Here (take it) I'm writing
18	<i>Kauselia:</i> eḷuṭṭiṅkalā cari cari cumma cumma eḷutippuṭātinka	<i>Kauselia:</i> Are you writing? OK, OK don't write it over and over. <sup>306</sup>
19	<i>Pushpa:</i> eḷutaṅumā?	<i>Pushpa:</i> Does the amount need to be written?
20	<i>Kauselia:</i> illa vēṅtam	<i>Kauselia:</i> Nope, no need
21	<i>Pushpa:</i> apparom, ito eḷutīrukkiēṅ, pāruṅka, appati ellam eḷutamattēṅ, patimūṅṭu rūpa-tāṅ eḷutirukkēṅ potumā?	<i>Pushpa:</i> OK then, something like this is what's written, look at it, in that way, I won't write over and over again (accidentally). I'm writing just 13 rupees, that's all, isn't it?
22	<i>Kauselia:</i> cari right nā(ṅ) eḷutu-tāṅ conṅē(ṅ) oṅkalā	<i>Kauselia:</i> OK, right, I'm the one who told you to write it
23	<i>Kauselia?:</i> karavepullaya kaya vaicu kaya vaicuvacurukayā	<i>Kauselia:</i> The curry leaves have gotten dried out haven't they?

<sup>305</sup> This could be a reference to an attempt at budgeting but might also refer to a way of saving without someone else in her household knowing or interfering.

<sup>306</sup> This literally means “don't accidentally write the debt twice”, but it may be meant more as a joke or mild expression of surprise that *Pushpa* sees this debt as in need of recording than a real concern with her record keeping practice.

25	<i>Pushpa</i> : kalai-le oru rūpava ceta nā(ṇ)?	<i>Pushpa</i> : (uncertainly, with question intonation) I added one rupee this morning?
26	<i>Kauselia</i> : m atayum cetukkaṅka āma poṇe paṇṇūvāṅka, illa?	<i>Kauselia</i> : Yeah, that much was added, yes. A phone call was made wasn't it.  [the subject making the phone call is unclear, but it was probably some other member of <i>Kauselia</i> 's household.]

*Pushpa* responds to *Kauselia*'s request by clarifying how much debt she already owes. Although *pai amount* is frequently used to refer to something that must be paid from a previous transaction, it can also be used to refer to change or an amount that the shopkeeper will transfer to the customer at a later date. After *Kauselia* specifically promises to give an Rs 50 note, suggesting that the money is already available within her household and she simply doesn't have it with her yet, *Pushpa* confirms the remainder that *Kauselia* might still need to give. *Pushpa* clarifies that *Kauselia* already has 13 rupees debt from purchases the day before. *Kauselia* accepts this by saying “*entha*” (“take it”) as if she were giving money at the time of her current purchase. This passage is followed by a brief discussion of writing that illustrates the multiple meanings associated with the keeping of written records in *maḥi kaṭai*.

As this passage demonstrates, writing is only one of several ways in which a debt may be recorded and agreed upon, and the use or non-use of writing has implications for the relationship between the shopkeeper and customer. Although allowing a customer to buy on credit is, in and of itself, a demonstration of trust, recording purchases in an account suggests that the shopkeeper thinks that the debt is significant or likely to be outstanding for a significant amount of time. Once *Kauselia* has clarified her intention of

buying on credit and paying the shop back with an Rs 50 note later, she asks in line 18 “*ezhuthirukken-a?*” (literally, “Am I writing/being written about?”). *Pushpa* responds “*ezhuthiththingala? seri seri summa summa ezhuthippuTathinga*”, (“Are you getting written about? Ok, ok just approximately you’re getting written”). *Kauselia* responds to this by asking “*ezhuthanumaa?*”(“Is there need to write?”)<sup>307</sup> - *Pushpa* responds “*illa vennam*” (“no, [there’s] no need”). In these four lines, after *Kauselia* has already made a firm promise of payment, she seeks to confirm that *Pushpa* has confidence that the payment will be speedily delivered. If the amount of her debt for the potatoes is explicitly written as part of her account, it suggests that it is taken as a full outstanding debt, thereby negating or questioning her firm promise of prompt payment.

When *Kauselia* asks if her debt is being written, she seeks to discover whether or not *Pushpa* is willing to treat it as already on the path to being paid. By responding that she need only be written about approximately, *Pushpa* confirms that she trusts that *Kauselia*’s debt does not need to be recorded. *Kauselia* then seeks further confirmation by asking again, this time more directly, if there’s need for the debt to be written, and *Pushpa* further assuages her concern by responding that there’s no need. As the conversation concludes, *Kauselia* goes on to imply that, since she is only buying for a debt of 13 rupees (which will become 14 once a debt of Rs 1 for a call made using the shop’s pay-phone is acknowledged), it is odd that *Pushpa* feels the need to keep a written account of her debts.

After *Kauselia* has asked if Rs 13 is really enough to justify keeping a written account of her purchases, *Pushpa* responds with a direct confirmation that is

---

<sup>307</sup> *Num* can refer to both want and need and the subject of the verb is unspecified so this might also be translated “Do you want to write?” or “Is writing necessary?”).

simultaneously an implicit denial of her position. She begins by agreeing with *Kauselia*'s claim "*m sari right*" ("Hmmm ok, right"), but goes on to clarify that she's saying only what's written of the debts that *Kauselia* is responsible for. Indirectly, she is suggesting that there is a further, unwritten debt that the shop is owed and that *Kauselia* has failed to directly remind her of it. In contrast to written debts, for which there are written accounts, debts that are unwritten depend even more heavily on shared memory and good relations between the shopkeeper and customer for payment to be achieved. It is important to note that neither of the participants in this interaction treats the writing of debts as a necessary aid to memory. However, once the status of writing in defining their relationship is called into question, *Pushpa* makes a distinction between the Rs 13 that she has written as owed for purchases in her initial mention of *Kauselia*'s debts, and the unwritten Rs1 that she is owed for the phone call she suddenly remembers, and adds them together.

Although *Pushpa*'s shop's use of a pile of scrap paper held together by a clipboard might appear to be a makeshift response to the lack of other options, the material form of debt records, and the means of their interpretation, is better understood as part of a language ideology and associated praxis that helps to mark a particular circuit of commerce and associated relationships. Rather than representing deficiency or inability, the seemingly haphazard forms of record keeping used by shop owners helped to position them as belonging to a circuit of commerce that was distinct from ones in which carefully written records were required. As in the conversation above, the act of writing a debt into an account meant that the relationship between shopkeeper and customer was, to some extent, implicitly at stake in the debt's payment. Although both

shopkeepers and customers tended to distinguish written and unwritten debts in terms of importance and monetary scale, rupee amounts alone were not what distinguished them. Debts of as little as Rs. 1 might be considered writable, and both shopkeepers and customers treated seriously amounts below Rs. 50. Indeed, arguments and long haggling sessions often occurred over amounts of Rs. 1 or less. Debts could be made more or less serious, in part, by the act of writing itself.

During the eight months that I spent time observing interactions in *Pushpa kaṭai*, I never saw the accounts of debt directly shown to or read by anyone other than *Karthikeyan* and *Pushpa*.<sup>308</sup> In contrast to the account book kept in the ration shop, where durability and transparency were explicitly part of the model of good record keeping, this account was meant to be minimally shared. Although *Karthikeyan* and *Pushpa* were the only ones to read written records directly and, as in the earlier example, this reading was enriched by their memory, interpretation of written accounts tended to rely on collaboration and conversation with customers. Since payment of balances was acknowledged by *Karthikeyan* or *Pushpa* physically striking out the amount owed so that it became illegible, the invitation to help to interpret written accounts allowed shopkeepers to remind customers of debts in ways that were unlikely to be seen as aggressive, impolite, or threatening to their reputations..

The transcript below records part of a conversation between *Karthikeyan* and *Anuradha*, a woman who lives within a few minutes' walk from *Pushpa kaṭai*, in which there is a disagreement about the amount of *Anuradha*'s family's debt. This is a relatively typical example of a discussion/debate about written accounts.

---

<sup>308</sup> They were occasionally brought out and shown to be read—however, customers were not invited to read or interpret them independently.

## 15. “Tell me what I’ve bought”

Pushpa kaṭai on February 13, 2007 at around 4 pm in the afternoon

1	<i>Anuradha:</i> eṇeṇṇa vāṅkinēṅ -nu colluṅka.	<i>Anuradha:</i> Tell (me) what-all I’ve bought
2	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> (incomprehensible)	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> (incomprehensible)
3	<i>Anuradha:</i> illa Abi-appa	<i>Anuradha:</i> No, Abi’s father
4	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> orē kaṅṅaku-tāṅ eḷutivaicirukkē~	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> I write and keep just one account
5	<i>Anuradha:</i> motamē mupatuompatu-nu eliti-irukkīṅkāḷe	<i>Anuradha:</i> so in total the amount you’ve written is 39, isn’t it?
6	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> āma	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> yes
7	<i>Anuradha:</i> aiyo kaṭavulē!	<i>Anuradha:</i> (in mock horror) Oh god!
8	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> taṅi-taṅiya, nīṅka coṅṅe	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> separately, you (hon) said....
9	<i>Anuradha:</i> nettu..illa Abi-appa oru kalla mitaiyi itu ella nētto koṭutuṭṭu pōṅṅēṅ kaṭale muṭṭāyi vāṅkinṅēṅ mita itu vāṅkiṭṭu pōṅṅēṅ Abi-appa cāyantiramā	<i>Anuradha:</i> yesterday...no Abi’s father, one peanut sweet..for all of this yesterday or so I gave (money), while buying a peanut sweet and gave the remainder before leaving, Abi’s father, in the evening...
10	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> nāṅ collra pāruṅkā kaṅṅakku coṅṅatu-tāṅ orē kaṅṅakka eḷuti vaicirukirēṅ	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> Listen to what I’m saying, the account says this (emphatic), I write just one (emphatic) account
11	<i>Anuradha:</i> illa aṅṅekki paṅa(m) ampaṭu rūpa koṭutuṭṭu kaliciṭṭu ella mutcitu kaṅṅakka muṭicciṭṭu pōṅṅēṅ reṅṭu nal-tāṅ vāṅkirukkēṅ atukk-ulla iḷalavu kāca koṭukonum-iṅṅīṅkāḷe? uṅmaeyē putiy-illiyē(.) eṅṅa colluṅka porumaiya alintu	<i>Anuradha:</i> no, on that day I gave 50 rupees and cleared the account. (I) totally finished it, finished the account. For two days only I was buying (on account) within that (time) you <u>need to give this must cash</u> , you said, didn’t you? I really don’t understand any of it. Clarify what you’re

	vāraṅkiṅu-tāṅ vetkapaṭṭitu pōytēṅ.	saying slowly, coming (buying on account) I was so embarrassed.
12	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> inta vārēṅ	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> just wait (he's checking the account)
13	<i>Anuradha:</i> eṅṅa "vārēṅ"? colluṅka pōrumaiya. āḷuke vāntatā-la pōyṭṭēṅ	<i>Anuradha:</i> what "just wait"? say it carefully. Someone has come (bought) and gone, it seems?
14	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> orē kaṅṅakkā-tāṅ eluti vaiccirukkēṅ, aṅṅekki vāntu nīṅka-tāṅ colli orē kaṅṅakka eḷuṭṭu pōṅiṅka (longish pause here) mupatompaṭu orē kaṅṅakku colli-irukkīṅka	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> I write and keep just one account, when coming that one time you- (emphatic) said write a joint account (he tallies again) 39, you said to give it jointly
15	<i>Anuradha:</i> enna-nu teriyilla (pause)	<i>Anuradha:</i> What (to do) (I) don't know
16	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> atu enna ella	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> I really have no idea about it
17	<i>Anuradha:</i> sari apparo (.) enna vāṅkiṅēṅ	<i>Anuradha:</i> Ok, well then, what did I buy/
18	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> eṭṭu rūpaikki vāṅkiṭṭu pōṅiṅka	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> You bought for eight rupees
19	<i>Anuradha:</i> āma muṭṭe vāṅkiṅēṅ	<i>Anuradha:</i> (remembering) yes, I bought eggs
20	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> appurom iṅṅakki kālaile paṭiṅalu rūpa	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> After that, you bought for 14rupees this morning
21	<i>Anuradha:</i> āma, iṅṅakki kālaiyila? iṅṅakki eṅṅa vāṅk-iṅōm? Abi vāntalā?	<i>Anuradha:</i> yes, this morning? (questioning with surprise) what did we buy today? Did Abi come?

22	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> teriyaleyē? (pause) ah-Abi-tān vantucci	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> You don't know, is it? (pause) uh-yeah Abi only came
23	<i>Anuradha:</i> illaiye-iṅka iṅṅakki capparte ēṅ viṭṭe iṭṭi-tāṅ ileṅka	<i>Anuradha:</i> No-(respect particle), today at my house we had only rice-dumplings, isn't it-(respect)?
24	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> kēḷuṅka kālaiyile-tāṅ eṅṅamo vāṅkicci, illa netu night-ā?	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> (go home and) ask, this morning something or other was purchased, if not perhaps yesterday night?
25	<i>Anuradha:</i> netu <i>night-tāṅ</i> -ṅa nālu muṭṭai vāṅki-vāra colli-irukkēṅ	<i>Anuradha:</i> Just yesterday <i>night</i> I came and bought 4 eggs I said (it) just now
26	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> atu eṭṭu-rūpa-ṅka irukku, appa, atukkuppiraku-tāṅ ....	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> That 8 rupees is there, sister, so, after that something ...(his voice fades as he considers what it might be, and invites her to join in consideration)
27	<i>Anuradha:</i> ippo-tāṅ-ṅa vāṅkiṅē(ṅ) paṭiṅalu rūpayikku neyyum ituvum	<i>Anuradha:</i> just now (respect particle) I purchased ghee and this for 14 rupees
28	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> appo atu-tāṅ itu	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> so that is this then (referring to a number on his sheet)
29	<i>Anuradha:</i> kaṅṅakku cettukkiṭṭiṅkalā?	<i>Anuradha:</i> So you've added up the debts, isn't it?
30	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> atu-tāṅ, cettu-tāṅ collrē(ṅ)	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> Just like that, I'm saying them jointly
31	<i>Anuradha:</i> evalavu?	<i>Anuradha:</i> How much?
32	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> mupatiompatu -itu oru eṭṭu nāpaṭielu, itu oru paṭiṅallu arupattaṅcu	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> 39 – this is from 8, 47, this is a 14, 65
33	<i>Anuradha:</i> M-m-sari eṅṅeya cētturīṅkiṅka eṅṅaikkellam kācu koṭuttuṭṭēṅ nala eṅṅe vāṅkiṅeille? kāl liter at-ellam kāco koṭuttuṭṭu	<i>Anuradha:</i> Mhmm OK, are you adding the oil (emphatic), for the oil and all I gave money, I bought sunflower oil didn't I? For that –all of it, I gave cash, Abi's father

	vānkiṅēṅ api-appa	
34	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> atu ella cēkkalle akka	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> I didn't add all of that in elder sister
35	<i>Anuradha:</i> Ah	<i>Anuradha:</i> Ah
36	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> āmma, oṅkakiṭṭa conṅēṅā? anṅekki vāntu, inṅainṅṅu jāmmanṅṅu conṅiṅkalā atu koṭukkalaiya paṅo(m) uṅkallukku...	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> yes, didn't you say? On that day, for some things or other it seems you said that (you'd buy on credit) you didn't pay for that, for you...
37	<i>Anuradha:</i> koṭutaviṭurēṅ-ṅṅu conṅiṅka koṭuttirutā(ṅ)	<i>Anuradha:</i> You're saying I said I'd have someone pay for me, he paid
38	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> orē kaṅṅakka eḷutiṭṭu...	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> I'm keeping a joint account
39	<i>Anuradha:</i> inṅṅum uṅkalukku aru rūpa tāraṅum-ā?	<i>Anuradha:</i> So I still need to pay you six rupees
40	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> ām aru rūpa innum tāraṅum	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> yeah, you still need to pay six rupees
41	<i>Anuradha:</i> ayyō! nā(ṅ) (laughing) koṭuturēp-pā orē kuḷupama(ka) irukkēṅ	<i>Anuradha:</i> Oh my! (laughing) I'm giving it (affectionate particle), I'm fully confused.
42	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> (laughing) itukku-tāṅ taṅi-taniya eḷuti vaiciratu	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> (laughing) for this reason only I'm writing purchases separately
43	<i>Anuradha:</i> sari sari (walking off or at least fading out)	<i>Anuradha:</i> OK, OK

In the segment of conversation described above, *Anuradha* and *Karthikeyan* face a situation that might threaten the sense of trust necessary for them to continue doing business. After checking the amount on her account, *Anuradha* finds that more is owed than she originally expected. *Anuradha* responds with an exclamation of horror and consternation and proceeds to implicitly question the accuracy of *Karthikeyan*'s statements in lines 9 and 11, insisting that she is sure her recent purchases have been paid

for in cash. *Karthikeyan* implicitly draws on acts of writing to support his statements in lines 10 and 12 by insisting that *Anuradha* herself told him to keep a joint account of the family's purchases and, in a mirror to many of the conversations that I discussed in Chapter Five, suggests that the confusion might be the result of actions taken by another family member who is not present.

In contrast to statements in and about the ledgers kept in the ration shop, *Karthikeyan* and *Anuradha* do not attempt to address the problem either by asserting the truth of the records that *Karthikeyan* has written or by suggesting that they might be false. Customers may occasionally suggest that what shopkeepers have written might accidentally be wrong (as in the conversation with *Revathi* described in Chapter Five), but I never heard accusations that incorrect accounts were used to cheat them.<sup>309</sup> Instead, *Karthikeyan* and *Anuradha* address their potential conflict in lines 13 and 14, which I quote at the beginning of this chapter, by acknowledging that they may not be quite sure what is going on.

Rather than treating what is written as an obvious record of what has taken place in the shop, *Karthikeyan* acknowledges possible faults in his writing and reading of the account book and thereby invites *Anuradha* to assist him in reconstructing, and thereby validating, her responsibility for a debt. He reports information from the written account in lines 16 and 18, and supplements it with memories of which family members might have purchased what and when, in lines 20, 22, and 24, which he asks *Anuradha* to consider and confirm. Although *Anuradha* seems uncertain in her response to the

---

<sup>309</sup> I heard accusations of cheating/being unfair in all three of the shops where I conducted observations; however, these accusations usually occurred as a response to the prices verbally quoted for items. My argument draws on the assumption that cheating is distinct from corruption.

amounts quoted, from the written accounts she seems willing to participate in *Karthikeyan's* co-construction of events using her own memory. When she denies that there was food cooked in her house that morning, she does so in a questioning tone that invites *Karthikeyan* to supply some other explanation, rather than in outright refusal. *Karthikeyan* returns to the written account as a source of authority in line 26, suggesting that he is saying only what is written, implying, as in the conversation between *Pushpa* and *Kauselia*, that his information may be incomplete. This invitation to collaborative interpretation seems effective. When *Karthikeyan* quotes written amounts yet again in line 28, *Anuradha* responds with direct agreement. *Karthikeyan* emphasizes quotation yet again in line 30, and in line 32 suggests that *Anuradha* herself told him to write the account in this way—thereby assigning her the role of author as well as that of co-interpreter.

I am hesitant to declare the interaction a complete success. *Anuradha* leaves the shop making only a promise of payment and reiterates that she is thoroughly confused, suggesting that she has less than full confidence in what has been agreed upon. Yet compared to the opening lines of the conversation, in which she seems entirely unsure of, and somewhat shocked by, the state of her financial stance with the shop, she seems to have claimed greater knowledge of and responsibility for the debt explained by *Karthikeyan*. In contrast to the kind of writing performed in the ration shop, in which the completeness and legibility of a text is supposed to provide its authority, *Karthikeyan* manages to preserve a harmonious relationship, and thereby legitimate his position in this conversation, by undermining writing's individual authorship and claim to independent authority.

I refer to accounts of credit and debt as those that are “known to be kept” both because these were the only accounts mentioned by people who regularly did business with the shop (both customers, agents, and family members) and because they were the only kind of account that shopkeepers mentioned in conversation with me, with the exception of the lists kept by part-time workers in *Majeeda kaṭai*. As I discuss at greater length in the Conclusion (Chapter Seven), some neighborhood residents suggested that *maḥi kaṭai* owners kept modified written accounts of their transactions, in order to avoid paying taxes or otherwise cheat someone. Yet these allegations, which seem more likely to apply to larger provision shops located near town than to smaller neighborhood shops, were usually made about shopkeepers in general instead of any one shop specifically and do not seem to fit with the ways in which business in the shops that I studied was actually done<sup>310</sup>. More importantly, even when they were made, allegations of cheating on the part of *maḥi kaṭai* owners tended to describe the records that they kept as a sort of creative strategy rather than as false or corrupt.

In contrast to the account writing that occurs in the ration shop, which may be evaluated as true or false depending on the extent to which it is consistent both with itself and with the flow of goods and cash through the building, written accounts in *maḥi kaṭai* are meaningful by virtue of their presence or absence. As demonstrated in the conversations above, they are designed to be legible to the shopkeeper alone and their contents may be continually questioned or altered in the course of later interactions.

---

<sup>310</sup> In order to be liable for government taxes, a shop had to make a profit of at least Rs 10,000 per month. Although one particularly successful *maḥi kaṭai* in *Vishnu's Lake* was rumored amongst neighbors to bring in a monthly profit of around Rs 8000, this estimate strikes me as fairly high (it may have included the family's income from a pension and housing rents). The owners of *Pushpa kaṭai*, whose shop seemed to be of average size and success, claimed to bring in about Rs 6000 per month.

Rather than being transparent to all readers, they derive their meaning from use in the context of sale and repayment. Their use by the shopkeeper serves to mark a particular mode of interaction and index relationships. The challenge of reading *maḥi kaṭai* accounts is not one of deciphering their words (in fact, *kaṭai* and *Pushpa* rely on memory for their reconstruction of transactions) or ruling on their accuracy. Instead, *maḥi kaṭai* accounts are read as one of several resources that can be used to reach an agreed-upon understanding of events. Reading debts as part of discussions produces payments, or implicit demands for payment, in a way that all parties will find satisfactory.

Haridimon Tsoukas (1997) provides a useful discussion of the implications of non-transparent record keeping. In a discussion of the ways in which various forms of bureaucratic transparency have been deployed in attempts to reform organizations, he argues that “the paradox is that the more information on the inner workings of expert system observers seek to have, the less practitioners are trusted, the less likely it is for the benefits of the specialized expertise to be realized” (p 834). Rather than focusing on the ways in which transparency and related forms of governmentality enhance domination over already marginalized subjects, he examines the ways in which transparency, while working to flatten and diminish expert regimes of knowledge, may impair the ability of systems to operate. Tsoukas examines contemporary US debates about the utility of video-recording surgical procedures, in the hope of averting and providing evidence for potential medical malpractice suites, and suggests that destruction of expert knowledge regimes in the name of transparency may destroy the trust required for a system to function. He argues that although the ability to see what happens in the surgery may be inviting to those who are connected to medical practice, patients’ trust in the

professionalism of surgeons, and through it the transfer of care, may be undermined by the ability to see into the surgery, where practitioners are likely to joke, swear, listen to heavy metal music, or engage in other behavior that is likely to be judged as incompatible with the professional front that must be presented to patients and their families.

Rather than serving as a record of transactions, accounts kept in *maḥi kaṭai* were used to mark and create particular kinds of debt and the relationships that accompanied them. While most customers might be allowed to use some forms of credit, only a particular subset had their names used in written accounts. *Pushpa* and *Anbu* described similar criteria for offering to give credit on written accounts: they only wrote for families who had a known steady source of income, were well known to them, and/or had someone else with this status introduce them with the implicit understanding that they would be responsible for that person's debt.

### *Writing as an Index of Relationships*

In *maḥi kaṭai*, the act of writing itself offers a comment on the presumed content of the text and on the relationship and situation in which it occurs. Yet I do not mean to argue that written accounts in *maḥi kaṭai* carry no weight, nor that readings of them are entirely flexible. Although they struggle to work towards a consensus of past events and debts with customers, *maḥi kaṭai* workers exert a great deal of effort to gain customers' acceptance of their readings of accounts. As illustrated by *Pushpa's* comments about a customer who engages in a long and heated struggle over a debt in Chapter Five, customers who refuse to work with shop owners to interpret and act in accordance with

written accounts may be judged negatively and eventually denied credit or the ability to buy at a particular shop.

Knowledge of these behavioral expectations, and the ways in which they reflected both social status and the history of a relationship seemed to be pervasive among *mafi kaṭai* customers. Some customers expressed shame about buying on credit, in part because it was often associated with some degree of financial deficiency or instability. One woman who shopped at *Pushpa kaṭai* preferred to discuss her account in a near whisper, positioning her body as far away from me as possible while doing so, while another area resident made multiple requests that *Pushpa* not tell her husband she was buying on credit. Yet, at the same time, buying through a written account was also a sign of the shopkeeper's belief in a customer's trustworthiness, good conduct, and eventual financial solvency, as well as the depth of the relationship between them.

During July of 2008 I recorded a spirited conversation in which two women who reside near *Pushpa kaṭai* jokingly argue about whose family owes a greater debt to the shop and is, therefore, a stronger contributor to its success. Although this argument might be understood, in part, as one friend's attempt to assuage the other's embarrassment or worry about her degree of indebtedness, the pride and pleasure evident in these women's voices suggests that something else is at stake. Even though it is the end of the month and *Karthikeyan* is currently running at a loss of over Rs 1000 because of them, the size of these women's debts also represents the degree to which they have supported, and must continue to support, the shop. In relation to other, seemingly more ideal, customers who always buy in cash, the size of their debts allows them to announce and emphasize the high degree to which their households support each other.

As suggested by the conversation between *Pushpa* and *Kauselia* in which *Pushpa* confirms that writing is not necessary, written accounts are not a problem between shopkeepers and customers because they may be erroneous or because they demonstrate the presence of debts, but because they suggest the possible failure of trust that debts will be agreed upon and paid without interference from other persons or channels. When they fail to write debts, *mafi kaṭai* owners may do so not because they are unaware of the usefulness of written accounts, but because the act of writing has indexical implications for the status of the relationship that in low stakes transactions may best be avoided. Especially when conducting business transactions with people who were friends of friends, I had a great deal of difficulty in obtaining receipts or written documents of payment in Thanjavur, even when it seemed likely that such documents would be to the advantage of the person with whom I was conducting the transaction.<sup>311</sup>

Perhaps the strongest evidence for bureaucratic textualism as a sign of failed relationships is the strong correlation between careful account keeping and shop closure. Through the first section of this chapter, I have treated *mafi kaṭai* as relatively homogeneous in their account writing practices. There were, however, two notable exceptions in the neighborhoods that I focused on. The first was a small shop briefly established and run by members of the *Vishnu's Lake* women's self-help group from roughly January of 2007 until sometime in the fall of that year. It was similar to a *mafi kaṭai* in size and type, though it did not carry vegetables, and carried an unusual number

---

<sup>311</sup> When I returned to *Vishnu's Lake* for a brief visit in the summer of 2008 and made arrangements to stay in the upper portion of a house that was owned by close friends of *Gayathri's* family, *Gayathri* explained that getting a receipt for the advance amount that I had given them was unnecessary because both of us were particularly close friends of the same family. Similarly, when I subscribed to a drinking water service through a friend of a friend, the people assisting me with the transaction refused to let me pay the deposit on the plastic water can or to issue me a formal receipt, as they did with many other customers.

of bangles and “fancy” items. The shop was managed by a few group members and was staffed by others on a rotating basis. Members of the group were able to make purchases from the shop at wholesale rates, and the eventual goal was for the shop to generate a profit from the purchases of other neighborhood residents. My friend *Sandra*’s mother, who was a member of the association, and the women who worked in the shop were eager to have me interview them and encouraged me to make purchases there.

There were numerous problems with the operation of the shop, the most significant of which seemed to be the manner in which the shop was stocked. As opposed to most of the male-run area *maji kaṭai*, whose owners stocked them by making purchases from the wholesale markets in the mornings and evenings and bringing them back by motorcycle, this shop was provisioned by groups of women who carried things to and from town by bus or auto-rickshaw—an expensive and inefficient process which they described as limiting both their profits and the ability to open at appropriate times.

In retrospect, a sign that things were not going well at this shop—a signal that it was more of a performance of shopkeeping than a functioning enterprise—was an elaborate system of recordkeeping that workers in the shop demonstrated to me with glee. They carefully marked down each purchase that was made by a customer on a neat form that other members of the association could read and kept track of the discounted purchases by group members in an even more elaborate ledger. Shop workers seemed particularly proud of the neatness and care with which they produced these documents and were eager to show them to me, along with an album of the shop’s opening day functions, which had been accompanied by banners and speeches by local political dignitaries. These documents, however, seemed to signal that the shop operated under a

regime of scrutiny and suspicion that had more in common with the ration shop or with play at shopkeeping than with successful privately run shops in the area.

Similarly, from March of 2007 until sometime later in that year, *Majeeda kaṭai* was run not by *Amlan*, his wife, and a part-time male worker, but by *Rājēswari*, a young woman who lived in *Vishnu's Lake* and was employed as a “worker”.<sup>312</sup> Since *Amlan* had fired his previous worker, whom he believed had been stealing from the shop, he insisted that *Rājēswari* keep a tally of everything that was sold while she was working. This could be quite cumbersome in the evenings when the shop was fairly crowded, and she didn't always seem to do it with particular care. Although she kept a record of paid transactions, *Rājēswari* rarely gave anything to customers on credit. She did occasionally give gifts of candy to area children, such as her elder sister's youngest daughter, whom she sometimes looked after while keeping the shop. Customers, most of whom were *Rājēswari*'s neighbors, were aware of the tally sheet and sometimes asked her why she was keeping it. I never heard any of my neighbors negatively comment on the practice directly, but by the time that *Rājēswari* had taken over the business, it was clear to most area residents that *Amlan* was not interested in serious shopkeeping. People who lived in *Vishnu's Lake* had already noted and commented on the fact that he came to work much later in the day than most other *maḥi kaṭai* owners and that he seemed less interested in keeping goods that were fresh or a variety of items in stock.<sup>313</sup>

---

<sup>312</sup> *Amlan* was careful to describe her using the English word.

<sup>313</sup> I generally found *Amlan* to be more pleasant and easy-going than many of the other people running shops in *Vishnu's Lake*, and several of my neighbors agreed with this evaluation. Despite *Amlan* and *Rājēswari*'s strong relationship with many of the neighbors who came to the shop in the evening, most people in *Vishnu's Lake* talked about the shop as one that would soon fail.

People in the neighborhood were persistent in their gossip that *Amlan* had already earned plenty of money while working as a house painter in Oman, that he had other sources of income from family-run businesses, and that, despite spending a fairly large amount of time keeping the shop in *Vishnu's Lake*, he was keeping the shop just as a side concern. As was the case with the shop run by the women's self-help group, the *Majeeda kaṭai* had closed by the time I returned to Thanjavur in 2008, and it was ruled a failure by its former customers. *Amlan* was rumoured to have gone back overseas. I don't think it is a coincidence that, of the 16 *maḥi kaṭai*-like shops within the area of my study, two of the three that failed were those that were unique in keeping written accounts of transactions.<sup>314</sup>

I do not mean to claim that interest in producing precise records of accounts was in any way directly responsible for the failure or closure of either business. In both cases, area gossip and the relatively lower flow of traffic at each shop during critical business hours (especially in the morning) were indicative of the shops' likelihood of failing long before they actually closed. Yet the blatant production of precise accounts can be read, retrospectively, as symptoms for the lack of relationships and ability to build understandings that could have ensured each shop's survival. Most concretely, insistence on precise accounts advertises the relative lack of trust between shop workers. By stressing the weakness of these relationships, and blatantly advertising it to customers, these practices also show a lack of adherence to the norms and procedures that characterize and are an expected part of business in more successful area shops. Marilyn

---

<sup>314</sup> I do not mean to suggest that written accounts were a sign of failure across all possible categories of shops. *Shoper's Stop*, *Nilgiri's*, and similar large chain grocery and departmental stores kept computerized inventories and issued printed receipts to customers. They inhabited a distinct circuit of commerce, however, and drew most of their profits from cash transactions with wealthy customers.

Strathern (2003) observes that concerns with accountability apply when “people want to know how to trust one another, to make their trust visible, while (knowing that) the very desire to do so points to the absence of trust” (2000, p. 310). Neat and carefully kept accounts, which are designed to be read by people other than the writer, are a symptom of this sort of concern.

*Mañi kañtai* continually received goods from wholesalers and distribution agents, many of whom issued printed itemized receipts for their goods. Agents and distributors often used these printed records and associated writing paraphernalia, such as notebooks of customers and planned schedules, to organize sales, distribution of items, payments for goods that had been sold, and orders for more goods. *Mañi kañtai* owners and workers seemed to be comfortable and familiar with this use of writing, were patient with distribution workers who needed to note things down, and took receipts for payments given. Yet they did not seem particularly concerned with preserving or organizing these receipts once that transaction was over. I was continually surprised by the frequency with which receipts and records were tossed away by shopkeepers, many of whom were willing to pass them directly on to me and told me not to bother when I offered to copy and return them.

When I asked *mañi kañtai* owners why they did not keep receipts for goods, most shopkeepers simply shrugged, and when I pressed them further for explanation, suggesting that such sheets could serve as a sort of in-house market research, they explained that there was no need because they already knew all of the relevant information. This is not to say that they found the slips of paper given by agents to be entirely useless (*Anbu* in particular tended to look them over briefly or keep them for a

short period of time to remind himself of a debt that must be paid), but rather that they were not interested in keeping or treating them as a primary record or source of authority in interactions. Shopkeepers' shrugging insistence that inventories, price lists, full account books, and carefully preserved receipts were unnecessary might be taken as evidence of their embodied understandings of the business, solid memories, and quick math skills. More importantly, I think that they also mark shopkeepers' understandings of the ways in which their relationships and interactions differ from those of businessmen and traders who feel the need to keep careful books.

### *Circuits of Commerce within an Interaction*

Writing and reading of accounts in Thanjavur shops is not shaped by memory, control, or education, so much as it is by systems of accountability and the kinds of relationships through which they are asserted, questioned, and produced. Conversations in *mafi kaṭai* often demonstrated customers' nuanced awareness of the different ways in which subjects, objects, and money were configured by particular circuits of commerce. Customers from a variety of backgrounds demonstrated an explicit awareness of the variety of costs and benefits, both fiduciary and social, that they might encounter when shopping in each of many kinds of shops.

For example, *Kamraj*, a middle-aged man who lived near *Pushpa's* shop with his wife and niece, shopped there regularly. He had a nephew who was employed as a clerk at the new *Shopper's Stop*, a Western-Style grocery store located in a different part of town, and explained the difference between people who shopped at *Pushpa's* shop and those who shopped where his nephew worked as principally one of laziness (*somberi*).

He noted that although customers were likely to get better prices and decent quality at their neighborhood *maḥi kaṭai*, in order to shop there they had to jostle with other people, make conversation with the shopkeeper, request each item individually, pay greater attention to what they were doing, and go to different places for different products. In contrast, shoppers at *Shopper's Stop*, where *Kamraj* never went, had simply to pick up the objects they desired and pay for them, all in the comfort of an air-conditioned store. The “laziness” of this type of customer was further confirmed for *Kamraj* by the fact that such people usually had access to cars or other personal motorized vehicles that they could easily use to shop for things.

The difference between the circuits of commerce is certainly not one of “laziness,” since ration shops are particularly important for Tamil Nadu’s poorest residents and often require long waits in line as well, as careful planning and correct paperwork. A conversation in *Pushpa kaṭai* on the first day of the month, as many recently-paid customers are planning trips to the ration shop in order to procure basic provisions, shows similar awareness of the kinds of struggle and benefit involved in different shopping environments.

In the exchange transcribed below, *Sundari*, a regular female customer, requests old rice, one of the main commodities available for subsidized purchase at the ration shop, probably as a way to tide her family over through the next few days of crowds until someone can be sent to buy it either from a wholesale shop in town or a ration shop. Her question as to whether or not old rice, which some people prefer to eat, is available at *Pushpa kaṭai* suggest that she does not buy it there often. An adult male neighbor, *Mani*, has inquired about the increase in wholesale prices. Although he is gently ribbing

*Karthikeyan* with the implicit accusation that he is paying too much, *Mani* agrees to buy more rice now so as to avoid paying a higher price later. Part of *Mani*'s joke is that if prices at *Karthikeyan*'s shop and similar places continue to increase, *Mani* may need to shift to buying rice at the ration shop. Like the departmental stores described by *Kamraj*, *Mani* suggests that going to the ration shop may require less work than shopping at the *maḷi kaṭai*. Yet, the lamenting tone he adopts as he depicts shopping at the ration shop without speaking—“*pecama ratioṇ kaṭai-leye arici vaṅki cāpiṭulam*” (“[We can] go to the ration shop buy and eat without saying anything”)—suggests that he views this form of shopping as the result of powerlessness rather than laziness. At least when shopping at a *maḷi kaṭai*, it is possible to complain to the clerk about the prices that you are paying.

## 16. At least this isn't a ration shop

*Pushpa's shop at about 4:30 pm on the afternoon of July 1, 2008*

*Mani, who has come to make a purchase, has asked the amount of his debt and Karthikeyan confirms it. Mani complains about the amount in a way that sets the tone for a more general discussion of the cost of living. This stretch of conversation begins with Karthikeyan announcing the wholesale cost of rice, which is about to go up.*

5	<i>Karthikeyan: eṇupati napatu cār</i>	<i>Karthikeyan: 740 (rupees) sir</i>
6	<i>Mani: ahh</i>	<i>Mani: ah</i>
7	<i>Karthikeyan: eṇupati napatam-aci</i>	<i>Karthikeyan: It's come to 740</i>
8	<i>Mani: arici-ā</i>	<i>Mani: For rice?</i>
9	<i>Karthikeyan: ah [laughs]</i>	<i>Karthikeyan: ah (laughing)</i>
10	<i>Mani: evalovu vikkaṇu-mā?</i>	<i>Mani: That much (emphasis) needs to be paid? (questioning in disbelief)</i>
11	<i>Karthikeyan: mupatu rūpai vikkaṇum-ām</i>	<i>Karthikeyan: thirty rupees needs to be paid (per kilo)</i>

12	<i>Mani:</i> mupatu rūpai vaikkaṇumā	<i>Mani:</i> thirty rupees needs to be paid?! (in more exaggerated disbelief)
13	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> [laughing] āma	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> (laughing) yes
14	<i>Mani:</i> appathina, iṇṇakki iṇṇoru pathi nenju irubathu kilo koṭuruṅka	<i>Mani:</i> in that case that give me another 20 kilos for 15 rupees today
15	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> atu enge irukku enkiṭṭe	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> where is it? (looking for something to give another customer)
16	<i>Sundari:</i> palaya arici irukkīṅkaḷa?	<i>Sundari:</i> Is old rice available?
17	<i>Mani:</i> “vella etiṭuvēṇ” collraru - iṇāru, appo iṇṇeke koṭutturuṅka.	<i>Mani:</i> “I’ll raise the price” you said, so (I’m) buying today
18	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> nā(ṇ) eṭittāl-tāṇ sār cumma collakkuṭatu eta mutiyum cumma eṭamutiyatutu-ille, uṅkalukku eṭukka ate vellakki koṭurēṇ ātu-tāṇ	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> I’ll raise the price, sir. I won’t just say I’m doing it. I can raise it, but I’ll not raise it without reason, (right now) I’ll sell for exactly the same price that you bought for earlier.
19	<i>Mani:</i> pecama ration kaṭai-leye arici vaṅki cāpiṭulam, pōlayirkkū	<i>Mani:</i> It’s possible to go to the ration shop, buy rice, and it eat without saying anything. Just like that. <sup>315</sup>
20	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> [laughs] appati-tāṇ pōkum pōlakku-o	<i>Karthikeyan:</i> Perhaps (you can) get accustomed to doing it just like that.  [This is teasing, but it’s also a bit rueful. If <i>Mani</i> does just that <i>Karthikeyan</i> will lose business.]
21	<i>Mani:</i> muppaṭu rūpa (cilōṇṇal) kattuṭeṭuyakumā?	<i>Mani:</i> If they say (rice) will sell for 30 rupees, can (we) possibly afford it?  [literally, can paying that amount be borne?]

<sup>315</sup> The implication of his speech is: If prices get higher we (people who currently buy rice from private shops—those who might call themselves middle-class) will just have to go get rice at the ration shop without being able to do anything about it.

22	<p><i>Sundari:</i> āñcu rūpa ēthurāṅkalām-ille? Inta velle-yum <i>ethaporaanga-</i> <i>lamae</i> kotumai patinaña rūpa ration-le. inta veleyum ēttappōrāṅkalām. ippoṭaikku 15 rūpa koṭukirōm-illa veliyile 30 rūpa vikkutille?// muṅāra rūpā vitta jīni 15 rūpayām iṅṅeyillentra</p>	<p><i>Sundari:</i> (joining in) <b><i>It seems</i></b> it (the price) is getting raised just like that. <b><i>It seems</i></b> (they) will raise it. (now) wheat costs 15 rupees at the ration shop. <b><i>It seems</i></b> that they're raising that price. Right now they're giving wheat for 15 rupees, isn't it? Outside they're giving it for 30 rupees, isn't it? The sugar that they're giving for 3.5 rupees is having the price raised to 15 rupees.</p> <p>[<i>Sundari</i> marks the news in the first part of this turn as uncertainly reported. She has probably heard this information on the news or through similar talk elsewhere.]</p>
23	<p><i>Karthikeyan:</i> atā-ṅka veliya mupparuppy-kki vikkirāṅka</p>	<p><i>Karthikeyan:</i> Just like that – sister, outside they're giving it for 3.5 rupees</p>
24	<p><i>Sundari:</i> //eṅṅamo pōṅka, maṅucālē cākatikk-irāṅka ellā paiyikalum-ṅu cetukkitu irukkiruṅka ellā <i>vāla</i> <i>ventiyitu-tāṅ</i></p>	<p><i>Sundari:</i> //Whatever, get out! (expression of frustration), all the people will (starve) die together, all the boys will be together, everyone will be in need</p> <p>[This is an exaggerated and formulaic complaint about the increasingly high cost of food. “At these prices we're all going to starve” – which has a status similar to a proverb<sup>316</sup>]</p>
25	<p><i>Susheela:</i> illātavāṅka ellām pōkavēṅṅiyatu-tāṅ.</p>	<p><i>Susheela:</i> those people who are in need (poor people) just need to go and be in need together.</p> <p>[This is another common expression – similar to “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer”, only it means that the rich will get poorer and the poor will be destroyed.]</p>
26	<p><i>Karthikeyan:</i> itoṭa nikkāppokutuṅ-ṅu pāttīnala</p>	<p><i>Karthikeyan:</i> Can you see them raising it (the price) higher than this?</p>
27	<p><i>Sundari:</i> iṅiyum eṅṅ-</p>	<p><i>Sundari:</i> (How can we know) what all they'll still</p>

<sup>316</sup> Gayathri described this saying with the English word “slogan”.

	eṇṇa paṇṇappōkutō?	go and do?
28	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : eṇṇaenṇā paṇṇappōkutō-vā? velenja-tāṇē vārum	<i>Karthikeyan</i> : “(How can we know) what all they’ll go and do?” huh? Can’t it (prices) go lower too?
29	<i>Shilpa</i> : jeṇṇi koṭuṅka ara kilo campā evalavu?	<i>Shilpa</i> : Give me sugar, how much for a half kilo of broken wheat?  [After this, all participants in the conversation continue to laugh ruefully together about the high cost of living. It becomes impossible to follow individual comments in the commotion.]

This conversation occurred in the middle of the summer of 2008, when increased oil prices had led to an increase in the wholesale costs of many common vegetables. The shift was rapid enough that the increasing costs were a regular feature in newspaper stories and on the nightly news. Although this conversation comments on the potentially opposing roles of shopkeepers and customers, as well as the potential benefits received by customers who buy goods at the ration shop, it also demonstrates a shared agreement on the part of *Karthikeyan* and his customers that ration shops will not provide the quality, prices, and flexibility required for many residents of *Pushpa Nagar* to maintain their current or desired standard of living.

Unlike visits to nearby *maḥi kaṭṭai*, visits to ration shops are often planned events. Although the distance travelled to reach them is trivial for residents of the neighborhoods on which I focus, plans must be made so as to arrive at times when desired products will be fresh and in stock (this is less of an issue for wealthier people who only buy sugar at the ration shops and more of an issue for those buying kerosene), lines may be avoided, and assistance carrying back heavy purchases may be available. Because ration shop

goods tend to be easily preserved, and are made cheap by government subsidy, they are usually purchased all at once on a monthly basis by many of the families that I interviewed.

### *Regimentation of Relationships across Circuits of Commerce*

In this chapter, I have sought not only to describe how written accounts are used and interpreted in two very different kinds of shops, but also to describe the ways in which they can be seen to work to produce the worlds of people who live and shop in Thanjavur. By identifying the ideologies that define “good writing,” and by allowing potential readers/users of texts to interpret what might be considered a misuse or error, I have sketched some of the ways in which uses of accounting create understandings about responsibility, credibility, and the nature of participation that shape interactions in each of these domains. The emblematic types of account keeping and use that I describe here are not a typology produced by people in Thanjavur, yet I think that many of them recognize this difference as salient and are able to correctly shift and orient themselves to the different forms of commerce that happen in each of these domains.

In contrast to ration shop accounts, for which workers stress precision, clarity, and accurate depictions of events as the signs of good record keeping, *maḥi kaṭai* accounts can work when they are hidden, illegible, and possibly incomplete. The eventual payment or non-payment of debts requires that purchasing events be remembered in a way that is agreed upon by the *maḥi kaṭai* worker and customer. In this context, the act of writing or reading an account works only to the extent that it serves this end in interaction. It is probably overly simplistic to declare that the evaluation of writing in ration shops is

governed by a framework of truth, in which good writing is transparent, precise, and accurate, whereas writing in *mafi kaṭai* is evaluated within a framework of efficacy in which its presence or absence and ability or failure to work in interaction are what render it meaningful. Yet, I find comparison between these understandings of the value and nature of writing to be useful in tracing the kinds of social relationships and obligations produced by each kind of shop. Although there may certainly be some overlap between these two models of account interpretation, they entail different practices of writing, record keeping, and reading, as well as different kinds of actors, practices of naming, and subject production.

The interaction between *Anuradha* and *Karthikeyan* that appears as an epigram for this chapter works because, through a performance of uncertainty about his accounts, *Karthikeyan* is able to invite *Anuradha* to collaborate with him in constructing her debt, thereby producing the sense of obligation and alignment that is likely both to encourage her to pay it and to keep her as a customer in the future. The performances of familiarity, trust, and overlapping personhood, which I described as characteristic of *mafi kaṭai* in earlier chapters, flourish through the creation and interpretation of accounts in face-to-face interaction. Although the figure of the static and somewhat independent account, which is deployed more fully in the ration shop, is occasionally useful as a way to check information and deflect responsibility, it is a system that these conversations implicitly refer to and refuse.

Ideologies of account keeping that value visibility and transparency, or assume the conditions of bureaucratic textualism, aim to minimize the expertise of the account's author and of that author's specific relationships with the subjects described. I am not

sure that they are always or entirely successful, however. In fact, I avoided conducting prolonged observations or recordings in the ration shop for fear of discovering otherwise, and thereby documenting information that could endanger the jobs of the people who working there. If, as my neighbors said that they were, ration shop workers were openly marking customers down for purchases that they did not make, the acts of writing that they performed with such explicit openness and care could simultaneously be read as a form of concealment. If corruption is hidden in open accounts and rituals of verification, its success depends on the interpretation of the discrepancy being limited to a few select experts. Rituals of visibility and verification may actually work as relatively successful forms of concealment. The form of interpretation that this ideology supports directs potential readers towards account books and away from the systems and situations that produce them.

I do not mean to suggest that the aim of transparency through the production of textual accounts is an acid that dissolves all relationships. As Strathern observes in her discussion of British higher education audits, “ ‘everyone knows’ that what is being tested is how amenable to auditing their [academics’] activities are” (2000, p. 310). To make one’s activities appropriately visible requires discipline. If actors and their efforts are to be recognized, visibility and transparency require a performance for (and through it a relationship with) some audience, even in cases where what is made visible is a false front and many of the audiences are imagined.



Figure 6. Customers in line to buy kerosene at a ration shop, April 2007.

Ration shop workers' insistence on "first come first served" lines, like the use of ration cards and uniform documentary procedures, implicitly asserts that all customers are equal and, to some extent, interchangeable as subjects.



**Figure 7. Customers buying soda at a *mafi ka tui* in Vishnu's Lake, February 2007.**

**Customers at cluster in bunches rather than lines and are often served in orders that reflect their relationships with shopkeepers, the urgency of perceived needs, and the importance of people that they are likely to represent. The bicycle belongs to an agency worker who is simultaneously delivering supplies and making a purchase as a customer at the shop.**



**Figure 8. Francis, who works as a life insurance agent while running his shop, helps a customer to fill out an application form.**

**In contrast to his *kaṭṭu kannakku*, which are kept as scraps of paper behind the counter and not shown to customers, he takes care to show her the form as he fills it out. Since many of his life insurance customers were also shop customers, Francis might engage in very different kinds of document production, subject identification, and written interpretation—even while dealing with the same set of people.**

## Chapter 7:

### Tipping Scales with Tongues: How Money is made in *Mañi Kañtai*

“Economic power lies not in wealth but in the relationship between wealth and the field of economic relations” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 184).

“To determine what a five-franc piece is worth one must ... know: (1) that it can be exchanged for a fixed quantity of a different thing, e.g., bread; and (2) that it can be compared with a similar value of the same system, e.g., a one-franc piece, or with coins of another system (a dollar, etc.). In the same way a word can be exchanged for something dissimilar, an idea; besides, it can be compared with something of the same nature, another word...” (de Saussure, 1916 [1966]), p. 115).

#### *Buying With Words: Talk Isn't Cheap*

As I suggested in chapters Four, Five, and Six, *kañtai* transactions, like other forms of credit/debt, demand that participants transform their confidence in their interlocutors' future actions into something that can be treated as equivalent to money at the moment of sale. Histories of past transactions, or introductions by guarantors, which substitute for these histories, enabled the exchange of objects for *kañtai*. Similarly, the familiar routines of everyday shopping and expectations that define *mañi kañtai* as a circuit of commerce allowed spoken reconstructions of past transactions to shift the status of participants within households and to provoke repayment in cash. Even among cash-

paying customers, participation in supportive interchanges, maintenance of relationships with shopkeepers, and assumptions about proximity allow shoppers to assume that prices, weights, and descriptions assigned to goods will be fair. In all of these situations, speech, movement, interaction, and the semiotic frameworks through which they were evaluated were adequated through—and thereby produced—the value of money.

The same account keeping practices that I described as embodying ideologies of writing in Chapter Six can also be interpreted as shaping the value of money and defining the circuits of commerce through which it moves. For example, the assumption of textualism, which assumes that all (good) writing will be equally and identically legible to all literate subjects, runs parallel to—and perhaps implicitly enforces—assumptions about the fungibility assigned to money (see Gregory, 1997; Simmel, 1900). The observation that there is a connection between problems of linguistic, semiotic, and fiduciary value is, of course, far from new. As the quotation from Ferdinand de Saussure with which I opened this chapter illustrates, the source and nature of the value of money is often proposed as *the* emblematic semiotic problem for those who are interested in the ways in which value is produced in language (Maurer, 2005) and in social life (Bourdieu, 1977; Graeber, 2001). As Webb Keane (2001, 2008) observes, money, like writing and the ideology of referential transparency with which it is often associated, is often hailed as a transformative sign of and site for imagined possibilities of transcendence and processes of abstraction. Yet, Irvine (1989) and others (Fenigsen, 1999; Irvine, 2001; Inoue, 2002; Silverstein, 2003; Jacobs-Huey, 2006) have observed, rather than simply resembling each other, language and money participate in the same systems of exchange.

This dissertation adds to the list of cases that demonstrate that money and the commercial transactions and interactions through which it operates, need not work as uniform or as a mode of abstraction. Similarly, I hope to have illustrated that commerce, even when it is part of complex and transnational systems of trade, need not destroy local social relations and that emphasis on talk and relationships need not be signs of commercial deficiency.<sup>317</sup> I have suggested that researchers who have examined face-to-face talk in commercial interactions may have implicitly worked to support the notion that money dissolves other kinds of social relations by focusing on shopping situations that involve haggling and similarly adversarial moves (see Kapchan, 1995; Seligman 2005) rather than more mundane shopping encounters.

Yet rather than simply arguing that money and commerce are enmeshed with social relations—the standard cliché of economic anthropology—I have demonstrated that semiotic ideologies governing the use and meaning of money, including the very assumption of abstraction that I critique in general, are spatially, socially, and temporally situated in and produced through particular metapragmatic frames that support the enactment of distinct circuits of commerce. As well as supporting the investigation of commercial and linguistic exchange as mutually constitutive, this perspective suggests an explanation for why, despite its dependence on social relations, money may be viewed as inherently abstract and alienating.

Money, writing, and the participant frameworks in which they are embedded may work as abstracting at a ration shop—where transactions are recorded in uniform formats

---

<sup>317</sup> I think that this case has already been made clearly and consistently by others (Parry & Bloch, 1989); however, it does not seem to have been fully accepted into the common sense of contemporary anthropology.

and participants wait in line on a “first come first served” basis—while operating very differently in a conversation that occurs at a *maḥi kaṭai* down the street. While abstraction is often defined by the distinction between material and non-material, what matters in ration shops is not the materiality of writing, but the extent to which its meaning is evidentially dependent on a particular form of embedding within social relations. Rather than abstraction working through the repression or destruction of actual social relations, the practices that enact and comment on abstraction at the ration shop, and places like it, suggests that people undergo rituals of transparency as a way to remedy problems linked to particular forms of embedding. The abstraction of money, writing, and relationships in ration shops is set off as meaningful, evaluated, and critiqued in relation to practices that occur elsewhere. Many of the models and metapragmatic frames that anthropologists have ascribed to money and commerce as a uniform field of activity serve to differentiate and so produce value within commercial encounters.

The “hostile worlds” view of money, which I have investigated through the questions raised by the trader’s dilemma, embodies an opposition between profit and relationships that can be applied to multiple scales of social life. I hope to have suggested that the oppositions embodied by this ideology need not always be real or particularly at issue in the social life of Thanjavur and similar places. As Judith Irvine and Susan Gal (2001) have observed, such “fractal recursivity”, in which associations between linguistic-semiotic forms and social phenomena are applied in similar ways across scales and domains of activity, is a common feature of language ideologies. As I explained in Chapter One, Gal (2002) has also suggested that a “semiotic logic” which resembles the hostile worlds view applies at multiple scales and levels of social life. I

suggest that it may be useful to invert the assumed hierarchy of scales associated with the hostile worlds view of money to consider the ways in which the oppositions of generosity vs. self interest, familiar vs. unfamiliar, and internal vs. external may work to differentiate and organize spaces, actions, and actors within situations of commercial trade. It seems likely that, although they have been applied to commerce in general, these divisions are made most salient through, and to some extent maintained by, their significance within commercial transactions.

### *How Money is Made in Maḷi Kaṭai*

Equivalence is not merely a conceptual model; it is a concrete form of practice. In many of the transactions proposed in Thanjavur, pieces of currency that are assigned the same values by the Indian government are not treated as practically equivalent. Shopkeepers have a pronounced preference for smaller notes, which can more easily be used in later transactions, and for notes that are clean and in good physical shape. Whether or not a shopkeeper is willing to give change for a larger bill or to accept a note that is of poor quality often depends on a customer's relationship to the shop. While the connection between social relations and the acceptability of different kinds of payment is rarely discussed explicitly or at length in interactions, shopkeepers and customers encounter and enact a variety of situations in which the value of money is assessed, re-assigned, or otherwise made in the course of conversation.

Money can be seen as embedded in particular material objects or enacted through the state fiats that license them, but it is also produced through semiotic and social relations that allow value to be attributed to currency (see Hart, 1986, 1999). This

process is occasionally made explicit in interactions between shopkeepers and customers. When attempting to use torn and dirty bills in small provision shops, I was made aware of the ways in which relationships produced through talk, histories of transaction, and projected future interactions may be at issue in determining the fiduciary validity of cash as an object.

*While staying in Chidambaram in August 2005, I attempted to buy fruit from my usual vendor at the main bus stand using a particularly bedraggled ten rupee note. The first time that I attempted to pay with it, the shopkeeper simply refused the bill by explaining that its quality was too poor to be accepted as currency. Later that week, the same vendor was unable to give me change for a purchase that I made with the smallest bill that I had on hand. Since we both understood that I would come back, I agreed to allow him to pay me on the next day. When I returned to receive change and make a purchase on the following day, he accepted the same ten rupee note that he had refused from me earlier in the week. He explained that he now considered the bill acceptable because it came from me – marking a subtle change in our relationship produced by my willingness to extend him credit.*

Similarly, the *mafi kaṭai* owners whose work I observed in Thanjavur rarely seemed to question the quality of notes coming from regular customers. I never saw them offer notes to customers that were seen as being of unacceptable quality. While the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable notes and the relationships through which they can be transmitted are difficult to trace directly, there seemed to be a general consensus that the material qualities of currency were unlikely to be a problem among people who knew each other well. For example, when, with a friend from Tamil University, I attempted to use a particularly poor quality Rs 50 note to buy something near the main bus stand in Thanjavur, she pulled it from my hand and demanded to know where I had received it. I explained that I wasn't quite sure how I had gotten it; after all, I would have refused it if I had been paying attention. She concluded that I had probably gotten it on a recent trip to Chennai because people who expected never to see me again

were likely to try such tricky behavior. My friend then offered me a stern reminder that I needed to be particularly careful to avoid accepting such notes, which would be difficult to use in later transactions, when traveling. Although their effects were far from absolute or fully determinant, the boundaries that defined relationships, space, temporal rhythms, participants in transactions, and acceptable interpretations of linguistic forms, also shaped the ways in which value could be assigned to currency.

Although they were not entirely without value, torn, patched, and particularly filthy notes were difficult to get accepted. The easiest way to be rid of them was either to pass them off to a worker at a large institution, such as Oriental Departmental store, where cash was pooled and the qualities of individual bills was unlikely to be taken into account (or blamed on the clerk who accepted them). The most popular strategy was to exchange them with a merchant who was willing to take one of these notes from a regular customer and who could then trade it for a more usable bill when at the bank. *Ajith*, who worked in the wholesale vegetable market and so collected large numbers of worn small denomination bills each day, said that he did this for his regular customers and would be willing to trade-in an old bill for me. The value of an unacceptable bill could sometimes be revived through material repair—such as using cellophane tape to patch tears back together. It was also theoretically possible to trade a torn bill in for a new one at a bank; however, most people that I spoke with had never bothered to do this directly. Since such exchanges usually required a significant wait, I gave up trying to do this myself after half an hour in line; this were unlikely to be an efficient strategy for people who did not have other business or connections at the bank.

Despite my friend's assurance that conducting business transactions within a known and trusted social network was the best way in which to ensure that my rupees would be accepted and that any cash I was given in change would be of a type that was later accepted by other vendors, I found that it was equally, if not more easy, to get change and ensure that my notes would be accepted when conducting transactions at large institutions that kept careful written accounts. In part, I think because their flow of more affluent customers making larger purchases made change less of an issue, and because they employed large numbers of people, none of whom were likely to be held responsible if the bills in the till at the end of the day were too large or bedraggled to easily be used on the street. I could almost always change large bills, of Rs 100, 500, or 1000 at the large "departmental stores" located in town or similar shops located in Chennai. Similarly, I managed to pass on the Rs 50 notes of objectionable quality to the clerk in one of these stores. Although *Ajith*, who worked in the main vegetable market, volunteered to get the note changed in to a useable one for me on his next trip to the bank, and I suspect that any of the people who worked in the shops where I conducted observations would have also been willing to do so, I doubt that I could have handed that note to them without it being noticed, and without the work required to change it in to something that they could later use to make purchases elsewhere, adding to my sense of indebtedness to them. Instead, by using the torn note, in a shop where accounts were kept and, presumably, as long as the amount of rupees in the till at the end of the day was correct their quality was less of an issue, I managed to pass it one without incurring any sense of additional obligation.

I selected the first part of the title of this project “tipping scales with talk” when I assumed that interactions in *mafi kaṭai* would consist mostly of haggling encounters in which customers directly exhorted shopkeepers to tip the scale in their favor by adding just a little bit more of what was being purchased or take a little bit off the price. Although overt and aggressive bargaining is rare in routine provision-shopping encounters, such requests are occasionally made and shopkeepers often oblige. I have kept this phrase as the title of my dissertation because shopkeepers, suppliers, customers, and my analysis suggest that talk and associated semiotic practices are what allows the scales of provision-shopping interactions to tip in ways that participants find acceptable, credible, and sustainable. Provision shopping works because shopkeepers and their interlocutors use talk to build and frame the context of shopping in ways that allow them to assume that the scale will be balanced.

I have argued that *mafi kaṭai* as a type of shop, and particularly the *mafi kaṭai* that is seen as close, familiar, or routine for a particular customer, serves as a metapragmatic frame that guides the exchanges of talk, objects, and obligations across interactions. The ways in which shops are understood—in relation to networks of relationships, kinds of spaces, possible audiences and the probability of overhearing, rhythms of expectation, and possible frameworks for participation—shape the regimes of value which organize talk and associate it with the movement of objects.<sup>318</sup>

### *Scales of Circulation, Legitimation, and Control*

---

I have rejected a unified understanding of commerce, the opposition between public and private, space-based definitions of what counts as “local,” and the automatic assumption that co-presence creates intimacy as ways in which to interpret the possibilities present in small grocery shops. Instead, I have suggested that the everyday, “backstage”, and mundane characterization assigned to shopping interactions is what, paradoxically, makes them unique and significant. Following Goffman (1959), I have suggested that attention needs to be paid to the ways in which backstage interactions, like informality in speech (see Irvine, 1979), can be understood as an ordered and active performance. The Tamil term *cataranam*, which I have translated as “everyday” but also connotes “routinely” and “approximately”, is suggestive of the ways in which this framing informs not only speech, space, and dress, but also expectations about future actions and the ways in which evidence may be used in calculation.

Shops are “backstage” spaces where actors comment on, prepare for, and seek resources for use in both intimate household and mass political life. The shared nature of this “backstage” provides channels through which these seemingly separated domains can draw on or influence one another. Interactions in *mafi kaṭai* and similar small shops are critical to the production of everyday routines and stability, especially for households that experience minor economic instabilities. While changes in the availability of goods and transportation, the ease of obtaining cash or credit, and the costs of goods for sale in other parts of the city may succeed in drawing some business away from neighborhood shops, there is little to suggest that they will be shut down or removed from the landscape of small south Indian towns any time soon.

Small shops are important resources for urban life in contemporary India. There is no reason to see the persistence of *mafi kaṭai*, which flourish even in areas of Chennai where they have been officially banned or eliminated, as a sign of underdevelopment, lack of sophistication, or simplicity. They are conduits not only for goods and credit but also for information about neighbors, contemporary events, and available resources. Although their connections to recognized mass political events and powerful institutions are indirect, interactions in shops provide an arena in which some forms of participation and protest, or at least complaint, can be enacted by people who have difficulty accessing or acting protest in overtly public spaces. Rather than facing destruction in the wake of economic liberalization, urbanization, and increased demands for consumer goods (Economist 2006; Bijapurkar 2007; Jaya Halepete, K.V. Seshadri Iyer et al. 2008) *mafi kaṭai* are perpetuated by and flourish within the conditions of contemporary Indian life.

At the same time, although my sense of indebtedness to the people who helped me to carry out this project may have led me to adopt a tone that is more celebratory than critical, I do not want to suggest that this order of things is easy, equitable, just, or desirable. As currently practiced, interactions in *mafi kaṭai* discourage recognition of women's participation and control in business and financial relationships, allow various forms of discrimination, and support norms that may marginalize many of their customers. The basic business model of the shops that I studied depends on customers' lack of ready cash, transportation, and refrigeration to sell poorly preserved vegetables for a profit mark-up. The scale and size of these shops leaves their owners and operators vulnerable to collapse in the wake of relatively small shifts in markets, family networks,

or illness.<sup>319</sup> Rather than serving as relics of vanishing tradition, about which customers feel nostalgic, *mafi kaṭai* offer a means of adapting to contemporary conditions of relative instability and of economic and social marginality.

There is no reason to assume that the current form taken by *mafi kaṭai* is necessarily the best possible way in which India's grocery trade could happen, or that its current form is one that anyone involved would choose if given options other than those that are currently available. Many of the transactions and interactions that occur in shops described in this study already happen elsewhere and in other forms. Greater access to transportation, refrigeration (and the power supply needed to maintain it), and ready-cash (distributed to those household members who are expected to go shopping) would dramatically alter the ways in which people currently use *mafi kaṭai*. On contemporary Indian streets, *speaking well* and the semiotic processes, commercial interactions, and circuits of commerce that it supports are carried out as sophisticated elements of life in a connected and capitalist world. I hope that this account will have helped to explain why, despite some narratives of modernity with which they seem to conflict, small shops similar to the ones that I study continue to sprout on streets throughout India. They are, as Hart would say, the other side of the coin.

---

<sup>319</sup> When *Anbu* was unable to work for three months in 2007 due to an attack of dysentery, his shop simply closed, his family went without his income, and his customers went elsewhere.



**Figure 9.** The newest shop in *King's Community*, as of April 2007.

## Bibliography

Ahearn, L.

(2000). "True Traces" Love Letters and Social Transformation in Nepal." in *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*. D. Barton and N. Hall eds. Amsterdam, John Benjamins: 199-208.

Ahearn, L.

(2001). *Invitations to Love: Literacy, Love Letters, and Social Change in Nepal*. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press.

Aho, J. A.

(2005). *Confession and Bookkeeping: the Religious, Moral, and Rhetorical Roots of Modern Accounting*. Albany, State University of New York Press.

Agha, A.

(2005). "Voice, Footing, and Enregisterment." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 15(1): 38-59.

Akin, D.

(2005). "What Is the Problem with Bitter Money?" at "The Permeation of Monetary Resources into Gift-Exchange Economies." Goa, India.

Akin, D, J. Robbins, et al.

(1999). *Money and Modernity: State and Local Currencies in Melanesia*. Pittsburgh, PA., University of Pittsburgh Press.

Appadurai, A.

(1981). "Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia." *American Ethnologist* 8(3): 494-511.

Appadurai, A.

(2000). "Spectral Housing and Urban Cleansing: Notes on Millennial Mumbai." *Public Culture* 12(3).

Augé, M.

(1995). *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London, Verso.

Augé, M. and T. Conley

(2002). *In the Metro*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

Bakhtin, M. M.

(1981 [1975]). "Discourse in the Novel." in *The Dialogic Imagination*. M. Holquist ed. Austin, TX, University of Texas Press: 259-275.

Bate, B.

(2009). *Tamil Oratory and the Dravidian Aesthetic: Democratic Practice in South India*. New York, Columbia University Press.

Bauman, R.

(1986). *Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative*. Cambridge; New York, Cambridge University Press.

Besnier, N.

(2009). *Gossip and the Everyday Production of Politics*. Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press.

Bestor, T. C.

(1989). *Neighborhood Tokyo*. Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press.

Bestor, T. C.

(2001). "Supply-Side Sushi: Commodity, Market, and the Global City." *American Anthropologist* 103 (1): 76-95.

Bestor, T. C.

(2003). "Markets and Places: Tokyo and the Global Tuna Trade." in *The Anthropology of Space and Place*. S. M. Low and D. Lawrence-Zuniga eds. Malden, MA, Blackwell Publishers Ltd.: 301-319.

Béteille, A.

(1991). *Society and Politics in India: Essays in a Comparative Perspective*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ, Athlone Press.

Béteille, A.

(1996). *Caste, Class, and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village*. Delhi; New York, Oxford University Press.

Bijapurkar, R.

(2007). *We Are Like That Only: Understanding the Logic of Consumer India*, Penguin Books India.

Birla, R.

(2009). *Stages of Capital: Law, Culture, and Market Governance in Late colonial India*. Durham, Duke University Press.

Blommaert, J.

(1999). "Reconstructing the Sociolinguistic Image of Africa: Grassroots Writing in Shaba (Congo)." *Text* 19: 175-200.

Blommaert, J., J. Collins, et al.

(2004). "Polycentricity and Interactional Regimes in 'Global Neighbourhoods'." *Language Interaction and Practice Working Papers* 20.

Bourdieu, P.

(1977). *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge; New York, Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, P.

(1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.

Bourdieu, P.

(1991). *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge, Ma, Harvard University Press.

Brenneis, D.

(1987). "Performing Passions: Aesthetics and Politics in an Occasionally Egalitarian Community." *American Ethnologist* 14(2): 236-250.

Bucholtz, M.

(2001). "The Whiteness of Nerds: Superstandard English and Racial Markedness." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 11(1): 84-100.

Burrow, T. and M. B. Emeneau

(1984). *A Dravidian Etymological Dictionary*. Oxford; New York, Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press.

Carrier, J.

(1993). "The Rituals of Christmas Giving." in *Unwrapping Christmas*. D. Miller ed. Oxford, Clarion Press: 55-74.

Chakrabarty, D.

(1991). "Open Space/Public Place: Garbage, Modernity and India." *South Asia* 14: 15-31.

Chatterjee, P.

(1993). *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press.

Cody, F. P.

(2007). Literacy as Enlightenment: Written Language, Activist Mediation, and the State in Rural Tamilnadu, India. Anthropology. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan. PhD: 403.

Cody, F. P.

(2009). "Daily Wires and Daily Blossoms: Cultivating Regimes of Circulation in Tamil India's Newspaper Revolution." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 19(2): 286-309.

Cody, F. P.

(2009). "Inscribing Subjects to Citizenship: Petitions, Literacy Activism, and the Performativity of Signature in rural Tamil India." *Cultural Anthropology* 24(3): 347-380.

Daniel, E. V.

(1984). *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way*. Berkeley, University of California Press.

Das, V.

(2007). *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*. Berkeley, University of California Press.

Dickey, S.

(2000). "Permeable Homes: Domestic Service, Household Space, and the Vulnerability of Class Boundaries in Urban India." *American Ethnologist* 27(2): 462-489.

Dilley, R.

(1992). *Contesting Markets: Analyses of Ideology, Discourse and Practice*. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press.

DuBois, J.

(1993). "Meaning Without Intention: Lessons from Divination." *Responsibility and Evidence in Oral Discourse*. J. Hill and J. T. Irvine eds. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 48-71.

Dubois, J.

(2007). "The Stance Triangle." in *Stancetaking in Discourse: Subjectivity, Evaluation, Interaction*. R. Englebretson ed. Amsterdam, Benjamins.

Dumont, L.

(1980). *Homo Hierarchicus: the Caste System and its Implications*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Dumont, L., A. Stern, et al.

(1986). *A South Indian Subcaste: Social Organization and Religion of the Pramalai Kallar*. Delhi; New York, Oxford University Press.

Duranti, A.

(1993). "Intentions, Self and Responsibility: An essay in Samoan Ethnopragmatics." in *Responsibility and Evidence in Oral Discourse*. J. Hill and J. T. Irvine eds. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 24-47.

Duranti, A.

(1994). *From Grammar to Politics: Linguistic Anthropology in a Western Samoan Village*. Berkeley, University of California Press.

Eckert, P.

(1996). "Vowels and nailpolish: The emergence of linguistic style in the preadolescent heterosexual marketplace." in *Gender and Belief Systems*. J. Ahlers, L. Bilmes and M. Chenet eds. Berkley, Berkeley Women and Language Group.

Eckert, P.

(2000). *Linguistic Variation as Social Practice: The Linguistic Construction of Identity*. in Belten High. Oxford, Blackwell.

The Economist.

(2006). "Coming to market - Retailing in India." *The Economist* 379(8473): 76.

Elyachar, J.

(2010). "Phatic Labor, Infrastructure, and the Question of Empowerment in Cairo." *American Ethnologist* 37(3): 452-464.

Evers, H. and H. Schrader

(1994). *The Moral Economy of Trade: Ethnicity and Developing Markets*. London, Routledge.

Fairclough, N.

(1989). *Language and Power*. London and New York, Longman.

Fenigsen, J.

(1999). "Representing Bajan in Print." *Cultural Anthropology* 14: 61-97.

Ferguson, C.

(1959). "Diglossia." *Word* 15: 325-40.

Freidrich, P.

(1989). "Language, Ideology, and Political Economy." *American Anthropologist* 91(2): 295-312.

French, B. M.

(2001). "The Symbolic Capital of Social Identities: The Genre of Bargaining in an Urban Guatemalan Market." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 10(2): 155-189.

Freidberg, S.

(2004). *French Beans and Food Scares: Culture and Commerce in an Anxious Age*. New York, NY, Oxford University Press.

Freidberg, S.

(2007). "Supermarkets and Imperial Knowledge." *Cultural Geographies* 14(3): 321-342.

Freidberg, S.

(2008). "The Triumph of the Egg." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50 (2): 400-423.

Freidberg, S.

(2009). *Fresh: a Perishable History*. Cambridge, Mass., Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Fuller, C. J.

(1999). "The Brahmins and Brahminical Values in Modern Tamil Nadu." in *Institutions and Inequalities: Essays in Honour of Andre Beteille*. A. Beteille, R. Guha and J. Parry eds. New Delhi, Oxford University Press: 30-55.

Gal, S.

(1987). "The Political Economy of Code-Choice." in *Codeswitching: Anthropological and Sociolinguistic Perspectives*. M. Heller ed. Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter: 245-264.

Gal, S.

(2002). "A Semiotics of the Public/Private Distinction." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13(1): 77-95.

Gal, S. and J. Irvine

(1995). "The Boundaries of Languages and Disciplines: How Ideologies Construct Difference." *Social Research* 62: 967-1001.

Gell, A.

(1998). *Art and Agency: an Anthropological Theory*. Oxford New York, Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press.

Giddens, A.

(1984). *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Berkeley, University of California Press.

Giddens, A.

(1990). *The Consequences of Modernity*. Stanford, Calif., Stanford University Press.

Godelier, M.

(1999). *The Enigma of the Gift*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Godelier, M.

(2004). "What Mauss: Did Not Say: Things You Give, Things You Sell, and Things That Must Be Kept." in *Values and Valuables: From the Sacred to the Symbolic*. In C. A. Werner and D. Bell. Walnut Creek, CA, Alta Mira.

Goffman, E.

(1953) *Communication Conduct in an Island Community*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago.

Goffman, E.

(1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York, Anchor Books.

Goffman, E.

(1961). *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction*. Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill.

Goffman, E.

(1962). *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. Chicago, Aldine Pub. Co.

Goffman, E.

(1963). *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled: Identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall.

Goffman, E.

(1963). *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings*. New York, Free Press of Glencoe.

Goffman, E.

(1967). *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*. New York, Pantheon Books.

Goffman, E.

(1971). *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order*. New York, Basic Books.

Goffman, E.

(1974). *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. New York, Harper and Row.

Goffman, E.

(1976). "Replies and Responses." *Language in Society* 5: 257-313.

Goffman, E.

(1979). "Footing." *Semiotica* 25: 1-29.

Goffman, E.

(1981). *Forms of Talk*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press.

Goffman, E.

(1983). "Felicity's Condition." *American Journal of Sociology* 89 (1): 1-53.

Goffman, E.

(1983). "The Interaction Order: American Sociological Association, 1982 Presidential Address." *American Sociological Review* 48(1): 1-17.

Goswami, M.

(1998). "From Swadeshi to Swaraj: Nation, Economy, Territory in Colonial South Asia, 1870 to 1907." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. 40 : 609-636

Graeber, D.

(2001). *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams*. New York, Palgrave.

Gregory, C. A.

(1997). *Savage Money: The Anthropology and Politics of Commodity Exchange*. Amsterdam, Harwood Academic.

Guhan, S. and P. Samuel

(1997). *Corruption in India: Agenda for Action*. New Delhi, Vision Books.

Gupta, A.

(2005). "Narratives of Corruption: Anthropological and Fictional Accounts of the Indian State" *Ethnography* 6(1): 5-34.

Gupta, C.

(2001). *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India*. Delhi Bangalore, Permanent Black; Distributed by Orient Longman.

Habermas, J.

([1962]1989). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge, MA MIT Press.

Hardgrave, R. L.

(1965). *The Dravidian Movement*. Bombay, Popular Prakashan.

Hardgrave, R. L.

(1969). *The Nadars of Tamilnadu: The Political Culture of a Community in Change*. Berkeley, University of California Press.

Hart, K.

(2000). *The Memory Bank: Money in an Unequal World*. London, Profile Books.

Hart, K.

(2007). "'Money is Always Personal and Impersonal'." *Anthropology Today* 25(5).

Herzfeld, M.

(1997). *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State*. New York, Routledge.

Hill, J.

(1995). "The Voices of Don Gabriel: Responsibility and Self in Modern Mexicano Narrative". in *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture*. D. Tedlock and B. Manheim eds. Urbana, University of Illinois Press: 97-147.

Hine, T.

(1995). *The Total Package: The Evolution and Secret Meanings of Boxes, Bottles, Cans, and Tubes*. Boston, Little, Brown.

Ho, K. Z.

(2009). *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street*. Durham, Duke University Press.

Hull, M.

(2003). "The File: Agency, Authority, and Autography in a Pakistan Bureaucracy." *Language and Communication* 23: 287-314.

Humphrey, C.

(2002). *The Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies After Socialism*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press.

Hymes, D.

([1975]1981). "Breakthrough into performance." in *In vain I tried to tell you: Essays in Native American Ethnopoetics*. Philadelphia, D. Hymes ed. University of Pennsylvania Press: 79-141.

Inoue, M.

(2002). "Gender, Language, and Modernity: Toward an Effective History of Japanese Women's Language." *American Ethnologist* 29(2): 393-422.

Inoue, M.

(2010). "Fidelity to the Other: The Invention of Stenography in Modernizing Japan". *University of Michigan*. March 8, 2010

Irvine, J. T.

(1979). "Formality and Informality in Communicative Events." *American Anthropologist* 81: 773-790.

Irvine, J. T.

(1989). "When Talk Isn't Cheap." *American Ethnologist* 16: 248-267.

Irvine, J. T.

(1996). "Shadow Conversations: The Indeterminacy of Participant Roles." in *Natural Histories of Discourse*. M. Silverstein and G. Urban eds. Chicago, University of Chicago Press: 131-59.

Irvine, J. T.

(1998). "Ideologies of Honorific Language." in *Language Ideologies: Practice and Theory*. B. Schieffelin, K. Woolard and P. Kroskrity eds. Oxford, Oxford University Press: 51-67.

Irvine, J. T.

(2001). 'Style' as Distinctiveness: The Culture and Ideology of Linguistic Differentiation." in *Style and Sociolinguistic Variation*. P. Eckert and J. Rickford. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 21-43.

Irvine, J. T.

(2010). "Afterword: Disputing Consensus." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 20 (1): 214-224.

Irvine, J. T. and S. Gal

(2000). "Language Ideology and Linguistic Differentiation." in *Regimes of Language: Ideologies, Politics, and Identities*. P. Kroskrity. Santa Fe, New Mexico, School of American Research Press.

Jacobs-Huey, L.

(2006). *From the Kitchen to the Parlor: Language and Becoming in African American Women's Hair Care*. New York, Oxford University Press.

Jakobson, R.

(1990). "The Speech Event and the Functions of Language".in *On Language: Roman Jakobson*. L. R. Waugh, and M. Monville-Burston eds. Cambridge, Harvard University Press: 69-79.

Jaya Halepete, K.V. Seshadri Iyer, et al.

(2008). "Wal-Mart in India: a success or failure?" *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management* 36 (9): 701.

Jones, K.

(2000). "Becoming Just another Alphanumeric Code" Farmers' Encounters with the Literacy and Discourse Practices of Agricultural Burocracy at the Livestock Auction". in *Situated Literacies: Reading and Writing in Context*. M. H. David Barton, and Roz Ivanic eds. London, Routledge: 70-90.

Kapadia, K.

(1995). *Siva and her Sisters: Gender, Caste, and Class in Rural South India*. Boulder, CO., Westview Press.

Kapadia, K. (1996).

"Dancing the Goddess: Possession and Class in Tamil South India." *Modern Asian Studies* 30 (2): 423-445.

Kapchan, D. A.

(1996). *Gender on the Market: Moroccan Women and the Revoicing of Tradition*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press.

Kaviraj, S.

(1997). "Filth and the Public Sphere: Concepts and Practices about Space in Calcutta." *Public Culture* 10(1): 83-113.

Keane, W.

(2003). "Semiotics and the Social Analysis of Material Things." *Language and Communication* vol. 23, nos 2-3, pp. 409-425

Keane, W.

(2004). "Language and Religion." in *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*. A. Duranti ed, Blackwell: 431-448.

Keane, W.

(2008). "Market, Materiality and Moral Metalanguage." *Anthropological Theory*, 8: 27 - 42.

Keane, W.

(forthcomming). in *Ordinary Ethics Anthropology, Language, and Action*. M. Lambek ed. New York, Fordham University Press.

Keenan (Ochs), E.

(1974). "Norm-Makers, Norm-Breakers: Uses of Speech by Men and Women in a Malagasy Community." in *Ethnography of Communication*. R. Bauman and J. Sherzer eds. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Kockelman, P.

(2005). "The Semiotics of Stance." *Semiotica* 157(1-4): 233-304.

Kroskrity, P.

(2000). "Regimenting Language: Language Ideological Perspectives." in *Regimes of Language*. P. Kroskrity ed. Santa Fe, School of American Research Press: 1-34.

Leach, E. R.

(1970). *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure*. London, Athlone Press.

Lee, B. and E. LiPuma

(2002). "Cultures of Circulation: The Imaginations of Modernity." *Public Culture* 14(1): 191-213.

Lefebvre, H.

(2004). *Rhythmanalysis Space, Time, and Everyday Life*. London ; New York, Continuum.

LiPuma, E. and B. Lee

(2004). *Financial Derivatives and the Globalization of Risk*. Durham, N.C., Duke University Press.

Marriott, M. and R. B. Inden

(1977). *Toward an Ethnology of South Asian Caste Systems*. Delhi, The New Wind.

Marx, K.

(1978). "Capital, Volume One: Commodities." in *The Marx-Engels Reader* R. C. Tucker. New York, Norton.

Maurer, B.

(2005). *Mutual Life, Limited: Islamic Banking, Alternative Currencies, Lateral Reason*. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press.

Maurer, B.

(2006). "The Anthropology of Money." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35: 15-36.

Mauss, M.

( [1925] 1990). *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. New York, Norton.

Mazzarella, W.

(2003). *Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India*. Durham, Duke University Press.

McCloskey, D. N.

(2002). *The Secret Sins of Economics*. Chicago, Prickly Paradigm Press.

McCloskey, D. N.

(2006). *The Bourgeois Virtues: Ethics for an Age of Commerce*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Miller, D.

(1998). *A Theory of Shopping*. Cambridge, Polity Press.

Miller, D.

(2001). *The Dialectics of Shopping*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Milroy, L.

(1980). *Language and Social Networks*. Oxford, B. Blackwell.

Milroy, L.

(2001). "Britain and the United States: Two Nations Divided by the Same Language (and Different Language Ideologies)." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 10(1): 56-89.

Mines, D. P. (2002).

"The Hindu Gods in a South Indian Village." in *Everyday Life in South Asia*. S. Lamb and D. P. Mines eds. Bloomington, Indiana University Press: 236-248.

Mines, M.

(1994). *Public Faces, Private Voices: Community and Individuality in South India*. Berkley, University of California Press.

Mir, F. (2010).

*The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab*. Berkeley, University of California Press.

Miyazaki, H.

(2006). "Economy of Dreams: Hope in Global Capitalism and Its Critiques." *Cultural Anthropology* 21(2).

Miyazaki, H. and A. Reiles

(2005). "Failure as an Endpoint." in *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems*. J. Collier ed. Malden, MA. Malden, M.A.

Munn, N. D.

(1990). "Constructing regional worlds in experience: Kula exchange, witchcraft and Gawan local events." *Man* 25: 1-17.

Narasimhan, H. and C.J. Fuller.

(2008). "From Landlords to Software Engineers: Migration and Urbanization Among Tamil Brahmins " *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50 (1): 170-196.

Naregal, V.

(2001). *Language Politics, Elites, and the Public Sphere*. Permanent Black monographs. Opus 1 series.

Noy, C.

(2008). "Writing Ideology: Hybrid Symbols in a Commemorative Visitor Book in Israel " *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 18(1): 62-81.

Ogden, C., A. Richards, et al.

(1938). *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language Upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism*. New York,, Harcourt London, K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & co., ltd.

Pandian, A.

(2009). *Crooked Stalks: Cultivating Virtue in South India*. Durham, Duke University Press.

Parry, J. P.

(1986). "The Gift, the Indian Gift, and the 'Indian Gift'." *Man*, New Series 21(3): 453-473.

Parry, J. P.

(1994). *Death in Banaras*. New York, Cambridge University Press.

Parry, J. P. and M. Bloch

(1989). *Money and the Morality of Exchange*. Cambridge England ; New York, Cambridge University Press.

Peebles, G.

(2008). "Inverting the Panopticon: Money and the Nationalization of the Future " *Public Culture* 20(2): 233-265.

Placencia, M.

(2004). "Rapport building activities in corner shop interactions." *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 8/2: 215-245.

Placencia, M.

(2005). "Pragmatic variation in corner store interactions in Quito and Madrid " *Hispania* 88: 583-598.

Polanyi, K.

(1944). *The Great Transformation*. New York, Farrar & Rinehart.

Poovey, M.

(2002). "The Liberal Civil Subject and the Social in Eighteenth-Century British Moral Philosophy." *Public Culture* 14(1): 125-145.

Poovey, M.

(2008). *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-century Britain*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Power, M.

(1997). *The Audit Society: Rituals of Verification*. Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Price, P.

(1996). "Revolution and Rank in Tamil Nationalism." *Journal of Asian Studies* 55(2): 359-383.

Ramaswamy, S.

(1997). *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891-1970*. Berkeley, University of California Press.

Ramaswamy, S.

(1999). "'The Deamoness, the Maid, the Whore, and the Good Mother: Contesting the National Language in India'." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 140: 1-28.

Sahlins, M.

(2001). Cosmologies of Capitalism: The Trans-Pacific Sector of "The World System". in *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*. G. E. Nicholas B. Dirks, and S. B. Ortner eds. 249-260.

de Saussure, F.

(1916 [1966]). *Course in General Linguistics*. New York, McGraw-Hill.

Schiffman, H.

(1998). "Standardization or Restandardization: The Case for "Standard" Spoken Tamil." *Language in Society* 27: 359-385.

Seizer, S.

(1997). "Jokes, Gender, and Discursive Distance on the Tamil Popular Stage." *American Ethnologist* 24(1): 62-90.

Seizer, S.

(2005). *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage: An Ethnography of Special Drama Artists in South India*. Durham, Duke University Press.

Seligmann, L. J.

(2004). *Peruvian Street Lives: Culture, Power, and Economy Among Market Women of Cuzco*. Urbana, University of Illinois Press.

Shell, M.

(1982). *Money, Language, and Thought: Literary and Philosophical Economies from the Medieval to the Modern Era*. Berkeley, University of California Press.

Silverstein, M.

(1981). "The Limits of Awareness." *Working Papers in Sociolinguistics*. Austin, TX, Southwest Education Development Laboratory. 84.

Silverstein, M.

(1998). "Contemporary Transformations of Local Linguistic Communities." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 27: 401-26.

Silverstein, M.

(2003). "Indexical Order and the Dialects of Sociolinguistic Life." *Language & Communication* 23: 193-230.

Simmel, G.

(1978 [1900]). *The Philosophy of Money*. London/Boston, Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Smith, R.

(1998). "'Money Breaks Blood Ties': Chiefs' Courts and the Transition from Lineage Debt to Commercial Debt in Sipolilo District." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 24 (3): 509-526.

Spitulnik, D.

(1996). "The Social Circulation of Media Discourse and the Mediation of Communities." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 6(2): 161-187.

Springer, J.

(2000). "State Power and Agricultural Transformation in Tamil Nadu." in *Agrarian Environments: Resources, Representations, and Rule in India*. A. Agrawal and K. Sivaramakrishnan eds. Durham, Duke University Press: 86-106.

Stewart, S.

(1983). "Shouts on the Street: Bakhtin's Anti-Linguistics." *Critical Inquiry* 10 (2): 265-81.

Stoler, A. L.

(1995). *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*. Durham, Duke University Press.

Strathern, M.

(2000). "The Tyranny of Transparency." *British Educational Research Journal* 26 (3): 309-321

Taussig, M. T.

(1980). *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press.

Thomas, N.

(1992). "The Cultural Dynamics of Peripheral Exchange." in *Barter, Exchange, and Value: An Anthropological Approach*. Caroline Humphrey and S. Hugh-Jones eds. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 21-41.

Trawick, M.

(1990). *Notes on Love in a Tamil Family*. Berkeley, University of California Press.

Tsoukas, H.

(1997). "The Tyranny of Light: The Temptations and the Paradoxes of the Information Society " *Futures* 29(9): 827-843

Uberoi, P.

(1993). *Family, Kinship, and Marriage in India*. Delhi ; New York, Oxford University Press.

University of Madras.

(1936). *Tamil Lexicon*. Madras, University of Madras.

van der Grijp, P.

(2002). "Selling is Poverty, Buying a Shame: Representations of Work, Effective Leadership and Market Failures on Wallis." *Oceania* 73(1): 17-34.

Veerma, M. K.

(2001). "Language Endangerment and Indian languages: An Exploration and a Critique." in *Linguistic Structure and Language Dynamics in South Asia: Papers from the Proceedings of SALA XVIII Roundtable*. A. Abbi, R. S. Gupta and A. Kidwai eds. Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers: xxi, 409.

Warner, M.

(2002). "Publics and Counterpublics." *Public Culture* 14(1): 49-90.

Weidman, A.

(2006). "The Tragedy of Comedy: Staging Gender in South India." *Anthropological Quarterly* 78(3): 751-764.

Yang, A.

(1998). *Bazaar India Markets, Society, and the Colonial State in Gangetic Bihar*. Berkeley, CA, University of California Press: xi, 305 p.

Zaloom, C.

(2006). *Out of the Pits: Traders and Technology from Chicago to London*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Zelizer, V.

(1994). *The Social Meaning of Money*. New York, Basic Books.

Zelizer, V.

(2004). "Circuits of Commerce." in *Self, Social Structure, and Beliefs: Explorations in Sociology*. G. Jeffrey, C. Alexander, and C. L. Williams eds. Berkeley, University of California Press: 122-144.

Zelizer, V.

(2005). *The Purchase of Intimacy*. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press.

Zvelebil, K. (1995).

"Lexicon of Tamil Literature." *Handbuch der Orientalistik*. Zweite Abteilung, Indien, Abt. 2, Bd. 9.