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**Ciṅṅattampip Pulavar's *Kalvaḷaiyantāti*, or:  
Why did an Eighteenth-century Srilankan Tamil Poet Play Such games?**

This paper studies a once highly popular composition—in its own way, a minor masterpiece—composed in the eighteenth century in the Jaffna area by a virtuoso poet named Villavarāyar Ciṅṅattampi at the well-known site of Kalvaḷai, today Sandilipay, sadly notorious for a massacre of Tamil civilians by the Srilankan army that took place there on July 24, 1983. Situated close to Jaffna city, Kalvaḷai is home to an old Gaṇapati temple that inspired our poet's work. Ciṅṅattampi (1716-1780) was the son of Mutaliyār Nākanātar Villavarāyar, who was commissioned by the Dutch to produce a compendium of Tamil customary law, the *Teca-vaḷa-mālai*. The poet studied with an exacting Tamil poet known as Kuḷankattampirāṇ and is supposed to have begun composing poetry in Tamil as a seven-year-old boy. There are stories, still current, about his astonishing ability to improvise verses from an early age. He is also supposed to have solved, while still a child, a difficult line in the *Kamparāmāyaṇam* that no one else could interpret correctly. The family claimed descent from the medieval Tamil kings of Jaffna.

The *Kalvaḷaiyantāti* is a work of 102 intricate verses in a style and form typical of the so-called *cirṛ'ilakkiyam* or "Short Genres" of late-medieval and early-modern Tamil. It should, however, be seen against the backdrop of Tamil literary creativity in Srilanka, a remarkable story still waiting to be told. I might mention that Ciṅṅattampi was a contemporary of the great Jaffna poet Varata Paṅṅitar, whose large-scale poems are rich in intertextual resonance with the work we will be examining. Our dear friend Barney was, as you all know, deeply interested in the Srilankan Tamil world and on the verge of a long period of research there; hence this paper, a tribute to him and a lament for our profound loss.

Why should we be interested in a poem that cannot but appear to us today as arcane, overly configured, often impenetrable (at first glance), a display of linguistic and metrical prowess that seems and sounds remote from the kind of expressive and imaginative drives that we naturally look for in great art? This last sentence is long and tedious, and a satisfactory answer to it runs the danger of being equally tiresome. But I think it should be possible to say something intelligible by way of a possible answer, in an exploratory and experimental mode, possibly aligned in some way to the experimental quality of the Tamil text itself. To do this, we will have to read a few verses together.

Here is the technical information you need in order to read any of those verses. Our text is an *antāti*—that is, the final syllables of each verse are repeated in part or in full as the initial syllables of the following verse; and the very last verse ends in syllables that appear at the start of verse 1, so that the entire work, like earlier, prestigious precedents in Tamil, has a circular, thus infinite, structure. One could go on reading it forever, never exiting its charmed circle. Along with the *antāti* element, all the poems, with the exception of the two

invocation verses, are thick with the figure of *yamaka* or *maṭakku*—the precise recurrence of whole chunks of text, and in particular the opening metrical foot (*cīr*) that is reproduced verbatim, sometimes with bits or all of the second foot as well, at the start of each of the four lines of the poem, though each such recurrence means something different. In other words, we have in verse after verse strings of sounds that exactly replicate each other while changing their meanings. This makes *yamaka* into a kind of horizontal bitextuality, *śleṣa*, the figure of sound-cum-sense that Yigal Bronner has so brilliantly studied in his book, *Extreme Poetry*. More on this below. In addition, the first invocation is defined by the figure *tiripu*: here the opening foot is repeated in all four lines with only a change in the first syllable. It looks and sounds like this:

*tār kōṅṭa pū mallikaic cekkaiyir rumpi cālap pampuñ*  
*cīr kōṅṭa kalvalaiyantāti pāṭat tirai kaṭal cūl*  
*pār kōṅṭa pall uyirkk' āṇanta mummatam pāyūñ kumpak*  
*kār kōṅṭa kampak kaḷi yāṇai muṇṇiṇru kāppatuve*

Stand before me and watch over me,  
 elephant god tethered to a post,  
 your temples flowing with must that gives joy  
 to all that breathes on earth,  
 so that I may sing you a fine *antāti*,  
 a garland humming with bees  
 in a bed of blossoming jasmine,  
 here, in Kalvalai.

You can immediately see the *tiripu* in the rhyming metric feet that begin each line. There are more complicated forms of this device, but even a simple example like this introduces a charming musicality at the start of the poem, whose name—*Kalvalaiyantāti*—the author announces to us, or rather, to the god, his prime listener. The poet is confident of his prowess: he asserts in the *cīrappuppāyiram* preceding the invocation that his *antāti* should count as a book of the ancient Caṅkam (*iṇiya muṛcaṅkattu nūl eṇa*). I think we can agree that the invocation verse is, indeed, rich in aural textures, especially varied and repeated *moṇai* alliteration; and we also have the configured identification of the poem itself with the fresh garland to be offered to Gaṇapati (who may in fact be decked with such a garland already, set in a bed of jasmine). In short: we're off to a good start. Gaṇapati is here, by synecdoche, a full-fledged elephant and, as such, he naturally can be tied to a pole—probably the loving hearts of his devotees, as the anonymous modern commentator suggests.

The second invocation has the standard *ētukai* head-rhyme that, as often in Tamil poems, builds up to a crescendo at the start of the final line:

*ōṅṛāy irucuṭar muttōli' nāṇmaraiy otum aintāy*  
*naṅṛāyav āṛ'an kam yāvukkuṅ kāraṇa nātaṇumāy*  
*niṅṛāy niṅ kalvalaiyantāti pāṭav eṅ nēñcakattup*  
*pōṅṛāv aruḷ purivāy yāṇai mā mukap puṅkavaṇe*

Being one,  
two lights,  
three processes,  
four Vedas,  
the celebrated five,  
six fine Vedic sciences:

being all these, being the lord  
who is the cause of all there is,  
you abide here,  
god with the elephant's head.  
Grant your undying  
goodness  
inside my heart  
so I can sing *your* poem.

He can't help himself: this poet likes puzzles, riddles, and word-games shaped by purely sonic effects. The god of Kalvaḷai is, first, the one and only one; then the sun and the moon; the cosmic processes of creation, maintenance, and destruction; the four Vedas; the five elements; the six Vedāṅgas, and then, since the list has to end somewhere, the source of everything else that exists. Or rather, he continuously *becomes* all of the above. There is a stable quality about him, although he seems to be in constant movement. Being or becoming all this, he stands or abides in his temple. The poet needs his help if he is to complete the *antāti*, so he prays that the god give him *aru!* by entering into his heart; and this *aru!* must never die—*pōṅṛā*, the adjective that starts the final line, condensing into itself all the previous rhyming elements including the immediately preceding one about standing and abiding (*niṅṛāy*). Incidentally, note that Cinnattampi wants the god to know that the poem about to be sung belongs, *a priori*, to him, the god.

So much for the beginning. All the following hundred verses begin with *maṭakku/yamaka* sequences, some limited to the first metrical foot of each line, others (a majority) spilling over to include the second metrical foot as well, and always extending the sonic effect by further *moṇai* alliteration. As a result, each of these poems is at once a riddle waiting to be decoded, a phono-aesthetic *tour de force*, and a complex statement about the nature and aspects of the god at Kalvaḷai and about the poet's own subtle relations with him. In addition, there is something to be said about the overall impression one gets from reading this work and, above all, about the expressive purposes served by the constant play of *maṭakku*, literally a "folding" of sounds and meanings into one another in a dense semantic texture.

The typological grammar of *maṭakku* in Tamil already exists in full in the Chola-period *Taṅṭiyalaṅkāram* and the *Yāpp'aruṅkalam* (the former seminal work has been illumined by Anne Monius and is also the subject of a still unfolding essay by Jennifer Clare and myself). Taṅṭi tells us that *maṭakku* can come in initial, middle, or final position, and that further combinations are possible (first and middle position with final, and so on—or, for that matter, at

any point in the poem). Extreme forms include the *maṭakku* repetition of whole lines in half of the verse or in the verse in its entirety (all four lines phonetically identical, but each distinct in meaning). One also finds verses in which only a single consonant is used throughout; this, too, is “folding.” We thus have folds upon folds and folds within folds, to the very limit of what can be packed into metrical syllabic verse. One could also say that *maṭakku* verses tend to fold back upon or into themselves, “indensifying” almost beyond what language is usually thought capable of expressing.

Taṅṭi offers many exemplary verses, some of them of great beauty. Further elaborations of the typology are found in later poetic grammars such as Vaitṭiyanāta Tecikar’s sixteenth-century *Ilakkaṇa-ṽiḷakkam*. The types and subtypes are of interest, as are the poetic examples, but for present purposes I will limit myself to sampling what we find in a few verses of our text. It should be obvious that *maṭakku* verses are not really amenable to translation except in some more or less mechanical, which is to say hyper-semanticized, way.

Let’s begin at the beginning, with verse 1:

*kaṛpaka nāṭar paṭiṇcatakkāṇṇaṅ ḻṅkāṇṇaṅ rōḷuṅ*  
*kaṛp’aka vañciy iṭakkaṇṇaṅ ranta mukkaṇṇaṅ aṅriṛ-*  
*kaṛ paka vel ḻri ve’ ṭuṅaivaṅ kalvaḷaiṇṇaṅ vāḷ*  
*kaṛpaka naṅ ṇiḷal cerntār karukkarai kaṅṭavare*

He’s the one worshiped by the gods (who live near the wishing trees in heaven), by Indra of the thousand eyes and eight-eyed Brahmā. He’s the three-eyed son of the god with the vine-like lady of virtue in the left side of his body. He’s the companion of the god (*veḷ*) who threw his spear and cleft open Mount Kraunca [= Murukan]. Those who find shelter in the shade of Kalpaka Vināyaka who lives in Kalvaḷai have seen the farther shore of the ocean of births.

I know, it sounds pretty awful, like most Indologese. But suppose we tried to mimic at least a little of the phonic effect. Believe me, it will sound even worse:

The gods serve him.  
 Even Brahmā, even Indra, never swerve  
 from him. Murukan is his friend, who with verve  
 cast his spear at that rocky mountain. Those who come  
 to be with him in Kalvaḷai will surely find  
 the cool freedom  
 they deserve.

Let’s face it, English just can’t do what Tamil can. English rhyme doesn’t allow for the kind of sustained playfulness, repetition, and continuous verbal surgery and reconstitution that lie at the base of any Tamil *maṭakku* verse. But we still can describe and maybe explain in English what is going on in this verse, which may not be among Ciṅṅattampi’s most lyrical but is nonetheless skillfully put together and fun to read.

The “folding” is conspicuously but not exclusively focused on the first metrical foot, with its three syllables—*kaṛ pa ka*. The poet reverts to them at the start of every line, but of course their meaning shifts each time. In line a we have the auspicious opening word *kaṛpaka* < *kalpaka*, the name of the trees that grant every wish. They’re planted in heaven, so the beings who live in that world can be called *kaṛpaka nāṭar*, “*kalpaka*-land people.” Line b starts with Umā, the “vine” (*vañci*) whose innerness (*akam*) is all modesty, restraint, and good sense, the feminine virtue of *kaṛpu*. Between line b and line c there is complex enjambment—the semantic units spilling over the metrical break—and thus we find the rocky mountain, *kal*, named after the *aṅṅil* bird whose Sanskrit name is Krauñca (so we have to translate the Tamil term back into Sanskrit to get the meaning); this mountain cracked open, *paka*, when Murukan threw his spear at it, killing the demon inside it. Finally, line d takes us back to *kaṛpaka* as a single modifier, like in line a, but this time it’s a proper name: Gaṇapati at Kalvaḷai is called Kalpaka Vināyaka, because he, like the *kalpaka* trees in heaven, fulfills all wishes.

You may already be getting tired. Stay with me for another few moments. The verse is beginning to make sense beyond the verbal game the poet is playing. Notice that there is an internal movement carried forward by these *maṭakku* rhymes: we began in the distant heaven of the gods, and by the end, after a very short progression, we find ourselves in Kalvaḷai village at the feet of its god who is at least as good as, but actually much better than, all those other gods. In fact, Kalvaḷai itself is superior to that faraway heaven. Anyone who knows what’s best for him would prefer to be right here near the Jaffna coast than in some theoretically upgraded slot in the sky surrounded by the familiar but not really useful deities who have to live there. The point to notice is that this rather impressive conclusion has been articulated entirely by the linguistic folding, without too much effort, within the confines of a short poem. Syllabic repetition can convey a suggested meaning (or meanings). The verse begins ostensibly at some high external point in the cosmos that turns out by the end to be rather low in relation to our village with its palm trees and paddy fields, so in effect the arc of the utterance is upwards, though this upward movement circles back to bring us home (again) on earth.

That upward-bearing arc contains, however, other vectors such as Lord Śiva’s vertical split into left and right segments and the flight of Murukan’s spear that similarly cleaves the demon’s mountain. We can take this as one stable rule of *maṭakku* poetry. It nearly always seems to be moving in several directions, more or less simultaneously. Or, following the etymology of the term itself, we can say that such a poem folds space into itself like in the models modern astrophysicists love to produce on their computers. Usually, as I have already said, there will be multiple folds, or bulges, or depressions, or tangles, or intersecting parabolas, emerging in the space internal to a single verse, all of them generated by simple linguistic means. Once again: here is a world of folds within folds, possibly an infinite series of continuous compression in all the relevant dimensions, spatial, temporal, cognitive-perceptual, and of course sonic-linguistic.

But now it turns out that we've only traced the most superficial layer of this one slight poem. The verse-initial folds very rapidly open up into further *yamaka*-repetitions, for example the four *kaṇṇaṇ*-s of the first two lines. Three of these are related to eyes that are located where eyes are meant to be, in the head; but the first instance, Indra's thousand eyes, are spread all over his body, as we know from the story of Ahalyā in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and also from a pregnant reference to it in the famous story of Nakkīrar's debate with Śiva—in the guise of a poet—in the Caṅkam academy at Maturai. I won't spell these intertextual references out here, but I can't help but point out that they take us into interesting spins of their own within the wider arc we've already defined. The fourth *kaṇ*, by the way, is not an eye but a locative suffix, a suggestion of interiority, unless we want to read line b as opening with a long phrase describing Śiva's left eye as belonging to the *kaṛp' aka vañci* who is his wife, which I guess would count as naturalistic description, *svabhāvokti*. *Maṭakku* verses are dense, but it's best not to over-interpret them, if possible. Notice, however, the simple counting riddles that we saw in the invocation.

That should be enough for this one verse. I want to read three more with you. Already we can list certain dependable features of the technique. One can produce *maṭakku* segments by re-segmentation, that is, through simple *sandhi* alterations, as Yigal Bronner has shown at length (*kaṛpaka* becomes *kaṛp' aka* and *kaḷ paka*); by complex enjambment, overriding the metrical breaks; by various lexical displacements (Tamil to Sanskrit and vice versa, or the marshaling of arcane lexemes); by *tadbhava* formations that mask the original form of a word or syllable; by subtle encoding, including inventive extensions of grammatical categories (such as *ākupeyar*, transferred meaning); and by other helpful grammatical means (vocatives, archaic morphemes), and so on. Normally, these folds carry some mode of suggestion or oblique reference. Another regular feature, present in verse 1, is what could be called semantic wavering, as when the initial *kaṛpaka* < *kaḷpaka*, a name-tag somewhat eroded by convention, recurs as the proper name of the poem's addressee, thus stemming the erosion. Stated simply, *kaṛpaka* becomes meaningful in a new and more lively way by the time we reach the fourth folding. We'll see another, even stronger example of this feature in a moment.

These building blocks of *maṭakku* are well known and widely distributed in Tamil poetry even in non-*yamaka* verses. A typological list won't tell us what we most want to know—for example, why it is that Tamil poets want to produce such effects, apart from showing off their proficiency and generating lovely sounds. Let's move on.

*taṇan taṇan tanti marupp' aṇṇa mātar tarai virumpu-  
ta' ṇanta nantan tikaḷ taṇṭurai toru' mēṇ caṅcarikan  
taṇantaṇantantimiy eṇ kalvalaiyaṇ caṅkakuḷaikkā-  
ta' ṇantan an tantam oṇṇrāṇ eṇru' nēṅcan taṇil uṇṇume* (6)

To extinguish your desire  
for money, for land, and for women, their breasts  
like an elephant's tusk, think always

in your heart  
of the son of Lord Śiva with his earring of conch,  
think of his single tusk, this lord  
of Kalvaḷai where as you go down to the sea  
rich with shells, bees gently hum,  
you can hear them now:  
*tanantanantantimi.*

The folding has expanded to 6 initial syllables in each line, joining the first metrical foot to at least part of the second. *Tanantanantanti*: we can, of course, decipher these syllables—in line a, we have *tanam* < Skt. *dhana* followed by Skt. *stana*; in line b, the verbal noun *virumputal* connects to the infinitive *nanta*, to perish; in line d there is *kuḷaikkātan*, the god with the earring (of conch, *caṅkam*) and his son, *nantaṅ* < Skt. *nanda*[*na*]. Not only are these solutions a little more difficult than in the previous verse we read; they are also virtually impossible to pronounce as separate words, and even to represent them as word units, as I have, instead of the metrical units that Tamil now prefers to write, is a stretch. In fact, in contrast to a diagnostic feature of classical Tamil poetry in recitation—that is, the regular contrapuntal interplay of meter and syntax (or meter and semantics)—a poem like this can probably *only* be sung according to the metrical units, with “meaning” lagging somewhere behind. The reciter and the listener or reader are actually driven into the music; they will have to scramble to disentangle the bitextual meanings hidden inside the sounds.

And what about line c? Here this sonic sequence means only itself, a straight onomatopoeia meant to call up to ear and mind the buzzing of bees, though it also sounds rather like a series of drum beats heightened or echoed by further dental alliteration in 3 out of the 4 lines.

Like many poems in this *antāti*, including the invocation we have read, this one focuses on singularity or oneness—that one famous tusk. Nonetheless, we have two tusks mentioned in the verse, along with two conch shells. With the help of the lexical resources that Sanskrit provides, Tamil *tanam* can clearly mean quite a few different things. A fortunate set of coincidences? Perhaps not. Complex enjambment twice scrambles the syntax here, as a good folding should. But in a way we don’t need to go so far this time in making sense of what we’ve heard. The most salient feature of the poem is the direct reference to sound itself as the latent meaning of the *maṭakku*.

Can we paraphrase the deeper expressivity of this poem? I suppose we could say something like “Kalvaḷai is throbbing or humming with music, a natural music with its own natural rhythms that one can hear whenever one goes down to the sea, and that is also resonant with the internal rhythms of this deity and the movement that animates his every moment.” Like any paraphrase, this one destroys the actual expressive content that it attempts to represent. One might add, however, that this musical reality is so strong, and probably also so subtle, that it drowns out all our usual obsessions and cravings. So instead of “think” or “think of” in the translation I’ve given, it would undoubtedly be better to say: “Listen. Hear that music. Attune your ears to it, because if you take its rhythm

into your body, it will save your life.” I think we’re getting a little closer to what this verse actually means, if “means” is the word we’re looking for. On another level, it means as it sounds.

I promise that in a few moments we can attempt a wider and more general formulation of what is going on in this book. Since the exercise we are attempting is itself a little demanding, this might be a good place to recall that when, on a fateful day in October, 1880, the young, overly self-assured scholar U. Ve. Caminat’aiyar was asked by Ramacuvami Mutaliyar what important Tamil books he had studied, Caminat’aiyar first began to list short but astonishingly dense and erudite works like our *antāti*. There must be a good reason why they were so beloved—why, in fact, they were considered the acme of Tamil literary production. Here again is the question with which we began. But first, let us enlarge our sample just a little.

*cint’ ā maṇi tēṇṇral aṇṇi’ ṇilāp pakai cēyyav aṇi*  
*cintā maṇi mulai vāṭiṇaḷ eḷu cēkam aḷanta*  
*cint’ ām aṇi tuḷavaṇ reṭu kalvaḷaic cēyyav aruṭ-*  
*cintāmaṇi varak kāṇom payotarac cēll iṇame*

The ocean, a cow’s bell, the southern wind, the *aṇṇil* bird, the moon—  
 all these are her enemies. No wonder our girl  
 of the perfect breasts is fading away, her beauty  
 spoiled. Listen, you clouds heavy with rain:  
 we’ve seen no sign that the bright jewel  
 of Kalvaḷai, the one who fulfills all wishes,  
 the one sought by the Dwarf adorned with *tulasi*  
 who measured the world,  
 will ever come.

As I type out these little texts, I’m wondering if you, like me, are beginning to find something strange and beautiful in them, something compelling in ways that are not so easy to articulate. At some point the business of decoding and re-segmenting falls away, and one’s attention is drawn to some other aspect or quality hidden in the syllables. The decoding also becomes easier with practice. Let me just say, by way of explicating this verse, that the *maṭakku* fold keeps foregrounding the *cintāmaṇi* jewel that gives whatever one asks for. What we hear, four times, is the name of that jewel. Of course, the first three instances need to be re-segmented: *cintu ā maṇi* (ocean, cow’s bell....) in line a; *aṇi cintā maṇi (mulai)*, the jewel-like breasts loosing their loveliness, in line b; *cint’ ām aṇi (tuḷavaṇ)*, the *tulasi*-bearer who is a dwarf (a rare meaning of *cintu*!) in line c. Notice that the folding stretches into the second metrical foot, as in our previous example.

The other element that requires a few words is the nature of the vignette we are seeing, or the conversation we are overhearing. Someone is addressing a line of clouds; but who is speaking? And why speak to clouds? The second question is easy enough to answer. We can’t help but remember a certain cloud that (or rather *who*) was sent on a lover’s mission by a *yakṣa* exiled in South



India. So Kālidāsa lives on in this verse, as, we can assume, does the template of the messenger poem. We don't get to hear the message, but we can imagine what it might say: something like, "Tell him to hurry up already! She's wasting away. Everything makes her very survival precarious—the ringing of a cow's bell, the roaring of the ocean, the wind, the moonlight....She is tortured by all of them, each alone and all together. She may not last much longer." So this must be a love-poem, indeed one set in some remnant of the old *akam* poetic grammar with its landscapes of longing. No single landscape is clearly marked by the old *karu* indicators, but I think it's a safe bet that, given where Kalvaḷai is, this must be something like a *ñeytal* seashore poem of impatient, indeed unbearable and quite hopeless waiting. The modern commentator plausibly tells us that the speakers are the girlfriends of the Caṅkam-style *talaivi* heroine; they're very worried about their friend.

And who is the *talaivaṇ* who gives no sign of coming? Clearly, he must be the Kalvaḷai god, the one who fulfills all wishes. So, even if we do have some recycled *akam* format (and the messenger-poem template overlapping with it), it doesn't fit either the ancient *akattiṇai* poetics or, more to the point, the expanded and refashioned *akam* grammar of the medieval *bhakti* genres such as *kovai*. In the latter, the true subject of the poem, the real *talaivaṇ*, always the god or king or patron, is mentioned only obliquely and thus kept rigorously distinct from the human lover (*kilavit talaivaṇ*) who is internal to the poetic lovers' drama. Only in the very late (Nāyaka-period and after) Short Genres do the two subjects coalesce, as they have here. I won't expand upon the far-reaching consequences of this fusion, which have been discussed elsewhere by several scholars.

There are some curious semantic features of the verse, for example, the apparent redundancy in the final apostrophe to the clouds, which are both *payodhara* (from Sanskrit) and *cēl*, another unusual Tamil lexeme. The clouds apparently speak both Sanskrit and Tamil, as any good cloud should. *Payodhara*, however, also means "breasts," the main attribute of the young girl called up in the second line and, for that matter, in a long set of other verses in our *antāti*. Anyway, these clouds are holding in their rain, just as the god is holding back his love, or his generosity, the attribute implicit in his name both in this verse and in verse 1, examined earlier. I think it is of interest that tiny *akam*-style insets are sprinkled throughout Ciṅṇattampi's work, not in any special sequence, as if the transition from straightforward praise of the deity to his cameo appearance in an old-style love poem were completely natural, indeed axiomatic, no explanations needed. However, a verse like this really makes sense only when we follow through the several radical revisions that the ancient *akam* grammar underwent in the course of, say, a millennium or so of aesthetic experimentation by Tamil poets. Jennifer Clare has discussed some powerful examples from the Chola-period *Yāpp'aruṅkalam* and its commentary as well as the *Taṅṅiyalaṅkāram*.

So there is some dimension of suggestiveness built into this slight verse. But where is the suggestion situated? Very probably, in the syllabic, recurrent musical sounds. These sounds do carry a semantic load, as I've tried to show. That load, however, can be accessed only by the continuous processes of fragmentation and recombination, or ambiguation and repeated disambiguation,

as in all the other verses of our book. Sounds shimmer, break apart, and recombine, momentarily, in the listener’s mind. They resist stable reference, which, given what is at stake here, would be both trivializing and boring. Very remarkably, this business of quivering and teasing culminates in the final *cintāmaṇi*, in line d, a reference to the one who gives no sign of coming. Suddenly, at the point of greatest tension in the poem, this word actually means itself. Of course, even this natural denotation—clearly an achievement in the *maṭakku*-informed world—is in fact a semantic displacement, an instance of *lakṣaṇā* or indirect (transferred) reference. Gaṇapati is not, literally, a wish-giving jewel, or any other kind of jewel. He is a god. You have to clear away the blockage inherent to the operation of any form of *lakṣaṇā* in order to get to the implied, non-literal meaning, as the Sanskrit theoreticians of this kind of utterance have made clear. To understand the specific usage here, or in Tamil generally, one should read E. Annamalai’s brilliant paper on *ākupēyar*. As in the case of the bilingual clouds, a fascinating Tamil-Sanskrit semantic overlapping is unfolding, almost nonchalantly, in this verse.

In a field made up of many folds in which certain sonic sequences appear to be the only stable elements, there will be occasional moments when a word refers, first, to its natural meaning and, second, to itself as a verbal token. Such moments tend to look like fleeting attempts at coalescence, an indensified integration of the various potential meanings that have been tried out, and set aside, on the way. Thus *cintāmaṇi* might actually mean *cintāmaṇi* in the two senses I’ve just mentioned. Hearing the poem read out loud, one feels a certain psychic relief when the fourth line begins. On the other hand, this kind of semantic and phonic self-coincidence may well be the ultimate displacement.

Allow me one final example. It’s hard to choose. The verses tend toward ever greater complexity and ever richer tonality as the *antāti* progresses. Here’s the final verse, 100:

*kaṇa kantara niṛa’ māl cāpan tīrtt’iṭuṅ kāraṇav eṅ  
ka’nakan tara nēñcīr roṅru puṅ mālai kai kōḷvai cēṅ ko-  
kanakan taru malar kovai cēy nāruṅ kavinum aṅṅo  
kanakan taraḷa maṇi māṭak kalvaḷai karṇapakame*

You, the only cause, you who freed Māl,  
dark as a raincloud, from his curse:  
accept from me, take into your hands,  
this poor garland that arose in my heart, hard  
as a rocky mountain. Isn’t it true  
that even the string on which golden lotuses  
are strung has some sort of beauty?  
Can’t it true, Wishing Tree in Kalvaḷai  
with its tall buildings of pearl, sapphire,  
and gold?

I won't say much about this poem. You can see that it takes us back to the wishing tree, *karpakam*, with which we began, thus tying together the entire *antāti* as a single, circular garland. Here, too, as in the previous example, the final line is made up of words with natural reference; no need to decipher, dissolve, recompose. The book has turned to liquid gold, the exact opposite of the stony heart that somehow managed to create it. The *maṭukku* still depends on folding one line into another through enjambment and on various *sandhi* effects; and, like so many others, it binds together the first two metrical feet in each line, even as their verbal components slip and slide apart. (What if "hard" and "heart" where near-homonyms in English, and not by chance?) We have a tremendous crescendo of velar plosives in the final two lines: an avalanche of *k*'s and allophones of *k*, as if meant to wake up the god one last time. But, interestingly, there is nothing bitextual, as far as I can see, in the rhetorical question the poet asks this god or in the implicit but transparent simile (which could be variably classed as an "example," *dṛṣṭānta*, or a compressed riddle-like *samāsokti*). The rhetorical question has an obvious answer. Still, it generates another question just for us. In this text, what exactly equals the flowers, and what is the fiber string that holds them together and thus makes a literary work?

Suppose we want to keep sound and sense relatively distinct, as the poets do. Maybe the sense—the meanings, the ideas, the perceptions articulated, mostly indirectly, throughout a hundred verses—is what constitutes the flowers; and the sounds, in their shifting and recurring patterns, would thus be the string. Lots of people, including respectable linguists, think that meaning rides, so to speak, on sounds, which may or may not be defined as arbitrary. Even Bhartṛhari says that, among other ways he has of speaking about language. Sometimes Plato, too, opts for this view, though the *Cratylus*, perhaps his most penetrating discussion of language, tends toward the opposite pole. To stay with Ciṅṅattampi, it does seem as if he wants the god at Kalvaḷai to understand some verbal message he is offering him, like the silent message entrusted to the clouds in the *akam* verse we looked at. But what if that message is in fact, in the first instance, the sound patterns themselves, which would then be the flowers, and the whole long set of possible discursive meanings, decodable and amenable to paraphrase in one degree or another, would be the string, with its somewhat surprising but far from negligible claims to a certain beauty of its own?

But, you will say, how could that possibly be the case? We spend our whole lives translating and grappling with meaning, specifically the meaning embodied in words.

I'll tell you how. Here are four ways (among others) of understanding the kind of bitextual word-play or syllable-play that we see in any *yamaka/maṭakku* text.

First, we have a strong theory spelled out by Yigal Bronner (it is not, however, by any means the only theory he brings to the study of bitextuality). Bronner shows again and again how *śleṣa*, whether on the level of a single word-token or in an entire, sustained bitextual composition telling two or more stories simultaneously, can establish a latent affinity between the two registers of

meaning brought into the poetic space. The *Rāghava-pāṇḍavīya* tells us, in the exact same sounds, the stories of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. We have bitextual works that, read from the beginning to the end, tell one story and, read from the end to the beginning, tell another. All such works are *tours de force*, at least partly in the sense that you have to force the syllables to mean what you want them to mean. But more often than that, the poets do manage to conjure up the suggestion of an innate, interesting affinity, which may, of course, indeed probably must, include many areas of contrast. The suggestiveness of *śleṣa* works, through re-segmentation, homophony and other linguistic means, tends dependably toward generating this kind of complex double perception.

Second, Jennifer Clare, departing from Daṇḍin/Taṇṭi, the *Vīracolīyam*, and the *Yāpp'aruṅkalam*, has recently given us a powerful formulation of bitextual practices in second-millennium Tamil works. Stated somewhat minimally: “The Tamil tradition, from its earliest engagement with what came to be known as *kāvya* in many South Asian literary cultures, privileged the capacity of sound to invert, undermine and thoroughly make crooked the relationship between words and meaning” (Clare 2017, on *samāsokti*). Polysemic sound, she says, “destabilizes” meaning and casts the reader or listener back on to the surface of the poem, where several distinct cognitive and affective processes can come into play. What I have called natural reference is denaturalized. Meaning itself may be problematized—deliberately ambiguated. Sound assumes a new and decisive role. We have seen something of such operations in the few verses we studied above.

Third, we need to take into account the possibility that language itself can be conceived, particularly in heightened situations of use, as a domain that mostly lacks accidental or coincidental effects. Even if there do exist accidental, arbitrary, or symbolic features within language, we will also find vast stretches of speech seen to be iconic, non-symbolic, and effectual. In South India, already in the *Tōlkāppiyam*, and by no means only in Tamil, such effective, charmed, highly potent linguistic usages are part of the toolbox of an accomplished poet. By medieval times, the poet skilled at the art of combining syllables (based on the principle of *pōruttam*, harmonic consonance, between sound and world) can bless, curse, kill, revive the dead, bring prosperity or its opposite. We see this in the *Pāṭṭ'iyal* handbooks as well as in prevalent praxis by poets such as Kāḷamekappulavar; also in the theoretical and literary works of the Andhra *alaṅkāra* school. “Folding” is driven at least in part by this way of thinking about sounds. There are, however, many potential levels of usage, if “levels” is the word we need. Non-accidental homophony need not be magical. It must, however, be musical. In a recent paper on the Telugu *Vasu-caritramu*, I have tried to show something of what this might mean, in cultural-historical terms, for late-medieval *prabandha* texts from the south.

Fourth, and to my mind the most important. There may be room for a more radical view. Let's go back to the image that emerged from the final verse of the *antāti*—the string and the flowers. Where does beauty lie? What is a beautiful sentence trying to say? Sometimes, as we have seen, it appears to say what it means. Such cases are rare in late pre-modern Tamil. In verse 100, the

final line both says with it means and says, with some measure of surprise, that it is now ready to say what it means. The statement itself is part of the folding and unfolding that goes on without end within the *antāti*'s charmed circularity. As such, it, too, may be undermined or displaced.

“Folding” is serious business, both as a figure of sound and as a more generalized intra-linguistic activity. Through sonic repetition, the verse, with all its sounds, is turned back on itself—not once but over and over. Each fold expands the available space and at the same time makes the poem more dense. As we have seen, indensification of this intensity easily boggles the mind.

The sounds turn in upon themselves and pass through themselves, throwing off, at every fold, potential meanings that have the merit, at the very least, of resonating—literally—with other such meanings that are carried by these same sounds. Cumulating, infolding further, these meanings cannot but suggest one another, though it is possible that such suggestion could be classed as semantic detritus, a by-product of continuous folds in space and time and mind. Folding means, in practice, that unstable quiver that makes sounds separate, dissolve, and re-combine. Among the possibilities inherent in the ongoing quiver is momentary self-coalescence of sonic token with conventional meaning, waiting to unfold. At base, however, all pre-semantic sound, like the inaudible buzz or the bird-song that Bhartr̥hari mentions, goes through the same processes of breaking up into units—we can call them words—that then tend to flow into one another again, with fuzzy edges where they meet. Hence the need for such elaborate *sandhi* rules.

The Tamil grammarians and poetics have not, in so far as I have been able to see, attempted to theorize *maṭakku* or *tiripu* or their allied forms in the terms I'm trying out on you. Nor should we expect them to. However, this vision of language in the world calls out for grammaticalization, given the patterned regularities that we see in every literary example of the figure. What would a reference grammar of *maṭakku* look like?

It would, undoubtedly, leave room for decoding: ground zero of a *maṭakku* text. No reader would forego this ascetic pleasure. You hear the verse, you understand maybe a third of it at first hearing, and the resultant tension in the mind sends you rushing to the commentary or the dictionary or your memory in order to resolve the evident puzzles, the traps put in place by the author. You can't go farther without accomplishing this task. A good reader is programmed, so to speak, for semanticity. Indeed, without intelligible meaning there would be no need for *maṭakku* works in the first place. A mridangam solo would suffice.

But decoding, in such works, goes beyond verbal meanings per se. Something else is always being said. Occasionally, we can paraphrase what this might be, as I've tried to do with one or two of the verses above. One reads the verse as a whole, a few times, before even beginning to think about such a paraphrase; and one knows in advance that the paraphrase cannot exhaust what

the verse is saying to us. That knowledge is part of the grammar and should be stated explicitly in it.

One might say that indeterminate meanings arising out of the endless folding and re-folding comprise an available field of potential suggestion, out of which a selection is made any time a good reader addresses a given verse. Some of these meanings are certain to be weightier than others. Any fold will open up new points of departure arising from juxtaposition, superimposition, or—the notion I would prefer—overlapping. The latter term has the virtue of preserving the relative autonomy of each such point of intersection; there is no mechanical repetition at work in any *maṭakku* poem. Each “repetition” is distinctive, indeed unique. However, some may be more complex, or deeper, more resonant, than others. A *maṭakku* work has sudden dips of density, accessible to observation and analysis.

Now think again of the *akam*-style inset that we saw. In the old grammars, the *tiṇai* landscapes were meant to suggest processes internal to the persons active in a love poem—mostly states of separation, conflict, and longing. But in our *antāti*, when we get an *akam* poem, it is the *tiṇai* system itself, in some reduced and residual form, that is being suggested, not, except in a minor way, the standard contents of the old systemic categories. Sound, repeating, folding inwards, suggests the existence of a now largely redundant grammar, just as many of the folds suggest the residual survival of old lexicalized and grammaticalized tokens (especially obscure meanings of still active words). This is a grammar of potential speech turning back on to the sounds that are themselves its truest referent.

A good *maṭakku* verse “means” how it sounds and sends us back to those sounds. I know this must seem strange. But suppose we were dealing with a musical text that repeatedly folded and unfolded a particular melodic phrase or scalar progression, sometimes overlapping the notes of a dominant *rāga* with those of a latent or hidden *rāga*. This in fact happens all the time in Carnatic music, and it even has a name, *vivāda*. Overlapped (*vivādi*) notes, by the way, can be silent, heard only by their absence. In any case, we’d have no problem at all with the idea that the composition we are hearing refers to that melodic phrase, including its absent or hidden parts. We were already on the edge of such a notion when we discovered the onomatopoeia that was part—actually, the main part—of the *maṭakku* verse with its buzzing bees and elusive, unspecified drums. There are famous *samasyāpūraṇa* poems where just such a musical phrase is the line or half-line thrown out to the poet or poets who must complete the verse [*Bhoja-prabandha*].

Such a string of sounds lives inside the poem, which continually brings it to the surface and charges it with overlapping bits of meaning, old and new, in what looks like an experimental mode. If this description is correct, then our grammar might even have its own version of what the ancient grammarians called *uḷḷurāiy uvamam*, the “simile that lives inside” (though they didn’t mean simile in the sense we usually do). What is meant is not comparison but a potential, unexpected meeting of something known with something unknown,

yet not quite unrelated, to borrow a phrase from T. M. Krishna. There is always an element of surprise. Indeed, *maṭakku* regularly generates surprise—for example, at the discovery that such identical yet differential sound-chunks exist and can combine with one another to produce something beautiful. This is as good a place as any to stop folding and unfolding, for now.