# Doubled Meaning

Swarnavel Eswaran and Constantine V. Nakassis

## Introduction

In the context of the Tamil cinema, and particularly its comedy dialogues, Tamil speakers often speak of *uḷḷarttam*, or the "meaning" (*arttam*) "inside" (*uḷ*), and more specifically, of "double meaning dialogues" or *iraṭṭai arttam* ("double" or "twinned meaning").[1] These phrases denote the situation of one stretch of speech that has two distinct meanings at play at one and the same time. To characterize something as "double meaning," then, is not to comment on homonymy or ambiguity per se but rather of how speakers exploit the multiplicity of interpretations to some end by putting such multiple meanings in relation with each other.

A double, after all, is not the same as two-ness; a double is a copy, a twin, a citational iteration that differs but only because it first makes a claim of (non)identity to what it copies (Nakassis 2013). More than one but less than two, a double meaning dialogue is not simply an utterance that has two interpretations but one that involves a citational, parasitical relationship *between* two distinct denotational texts that, despite (or because of) their distinctness, reflect, refract, and mutually frame each other. "Double meaning,"

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[1] Cre-A dictionary, under its 4th entry for *iraṭṭai* writes: "(வெவ்வேறு மாதிரியான) இரு நிலை அல்லது வகை; dual; double. திரைப்படத்தில் இரட்டை வேடம்/இரட்டை அர்த்தம் தொனிக்கும் வசனம்."

then, is somewhat of a misnomer, for in doubling its meaning it is also one; it is the *relationship* between distinct interpretations that gives such speech its pragmatic force.

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

This discussion recalls another doubling: Bakhtin's (1982) "double voicing." Bakhtin's concern was with the European novel and the way in which narrating and narrated voices come into a virtual dialogue; in particular, where one voice *accents* and thus inhabits the other (Vološinov 1986 [1929]). Bakhtin's larger point was that *all* speech is/stages a contact zone between voices. But whereas Bakhtin focused on the intention of the other in my words (and vice versa), double meaning dialogues enact a different kind of dialogue: not between speaking subjectivities (or their virtual avatars, "voices") vis-à-vis the "word" (Bakhtin's term for any stretch of discourse) but *within* the "word," wherein one "meaning" seems to comment on, or masquerade via and thus dance with, the other.

Or, at least, this is what the ideology of "double meaning" seems to propose in framing such acts as somehow "indirect," "obscured," or "buried." (As we'll see, this ideology itself glosses over the fact that the double meaning is often not obscure at all to viewers, even if not-understanding—and understanding—are pragmatic acts enacted by some viewers, and modelled by the texts in which such double meanings occur.)

Of course, there is nothing peculiar about double meaning acts; puns and word play are ubiquitous phenomena (and a universal possibility of language), though the social value of such phenomena is not universal. "Puns" in the American context, for example, are often figured as a low form of humor; by contrast, Ferro-Luzzi's (1992) survey of Tamil humor indicates the high value and frequency of puns, word play, and other double meanings in both "folk" and "urban" forms of (written) Tamil humor. Which is to say, "word play," while fine as an etic analytic category, risks being so broad as to lose utility in guiding any kind of specific study. There are too many ways to (and purposes in) "play" with language. A second problem is that it isn't clear if "language" is a sufficient enough basis for a study of the problem of double meaning; this is all the more so in multimodal media such as film, where visual signs play a significant part (as they do of course in face-to-face interaction, needless to say).

To explore some of these issues, in this chapter we focus on those moments in the Tamil cinema where for one and the same context (or at least, some aspect of it) two texts are projected from some stretch of signs; that is, where there are multiple mappings of text to context that put the same context (or state of affairs) under a different description. Here, the issue is about the dialogicality and tensions that happen *between* interpretations in one and the same communicative message. While the range of such acts is wide, we focus on two prototypical domains wherein such effects are rife: the sexual and the political. Both, as we'll see, are occasioned by some felt inability or undesirability to speak "plainly" or "directly," or where no "direct" mode of expression is available.[2] Yet, such a functionalist account (e.g., that would argue

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[2] The terms are in scare quotes since it isn't quite clear what it means to speak directly: do we mean semantically or pragmatically? As Ervin-Tripp (1976) long ago pointed out, the most "direct" way, pragmatically, to say/do something may turn out to be "indirect" semantically. A better distinction might be *explicit* versus *implicit* (denotation), if itself necessarily understood in reference to whatever the local language ideologies in question are (often referentialist and privileging of explicit denotation as "direct," "plain," on-record, etc.). Moreover, given that viewers of Tamil films may transparently parse such double meaning dialogues or scenes *as* "vulgar" or "sexual" (and not as indirect per se; indeed, they may be the expectable, conventional form of such dialogues in contexts where there

that doubled meaning is necessary *because* talk about sexuality or politics is taboo), while not without basis, is somewhat reductive, for it obscures the fact that the multiplicity of texts *is a principle on the amplification of the pragmatics of the act.* That is, there are good reasons for circumspection besides taboo. Further, what makes something taboo or vulgar or to-be-avoided isn't reducible to the content of a speech act or image, but involves questions of who enunciates, to whom they enunciate, within whose earshot they enunciate, and so on. Finally, we are interested to ask: what are the peculiarities of cinema as a narrative medium and a technological apparatus vis-à-vis such doubling and what does this say about doubled meaning more generally?

We ask these questions inspired by over a decade of dialogue at the University of Chicago with Professor Annamalai, whose invitation to reflect on the problem and complexity of meaning, in all its multiplicities and shades, in Tamil and otherwise, semantically and pragmatically, forms the basis of this chapter.

## Romance, sexuality, and double meaning

We start with the generic textual form and pragmatics of "double meaning" in the Tamil cinema, which we find in both comedic sequences and song sequences. Such uses of language are highly conventionalized and are primarily characterized, as noted above, by their putatively taboo content (women's sexuality) and by a certain pragmatics: they are considered to be "vulgar." (The term *vulgar* here and throughout is in scare quotes to indicate that it appears not as an analytic characterization but a judgment available to Tamil audiences.) In comedy, "double meaning dialogues" have a particular emic status as a cultural category of what, in English, might be called "dirty jokes." One term for such jokes in Tamil is *kiṭṭipuḷḷu*, a reference to the game gilli, where the *kiṭṭi*(*ppuḷ*) (the wood piece players hit with a cudgel) is readable as a phallus. Similarly, song lyrics may at times have the status of a certain kind of vulgarity linked to their interpretation as denoting erogenous zones, sexual acts, sexual desire, and the like. These shade from love and romance to eroticism.

may not be other ways of expressing such topics), in the rest of the chapter we avoid the language of (in)directness.

*Double meaning in song sequences*

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

| | |
|---|---|
| *Paḷiṅkināl oru māḷikai* | A palace, made of marble |
| *Paruvattāl maṇi maṇṭapam* | A memorial of youth |
| *Uyarattil oru gōpuram* | with a tower at the top |
| *Unnai aḻaikutu vā* | is inviting/calling you! |



**Figure** 1. L. Vijayalalitha/L. R. Eswari sings
". . . *aḻaikutu vā*" in the first (left) and last (right) verse.

This verse projects two denotational texts: on the one hand, it denotes a memorial building and its architectural features; on the other hand, it is a description of a woman's body, imagined from a low angle, which is (sexually) "calling" her addressee. Here, the twinned meaning is motivated by a number of features: first, that there is no such building in the universe of discourse (we see no shots of a building nor is it part of the diegesis); second, it is animated in the visual track by Vijayalalitha, known for her roles as a voluptuous vamp, and sung in the sound-track by L. R. Eswari, similarly known for her husky renditions of sensual songs (Weidman 2021). Further, in the diegesis, it is sung *by* the heroine *to* the hero, Shankar (played by Jaishankar). The early part of the first verse works through tight close-ups of Vijayalalitha's face, tracking

outwards to a bust-shot when she sings "*gōpuram*" (tower) and describes its height; in the last verse, by contrast, the camera cuts to a full-length shot of her body while her dance gestures emphasize the height of her body. (Neither shot is a low-shot.) Similarly, while "*aḻaikkutu vā*" in the first verse invites the hero(-spectator) (to a sexual encounter) through such visual display, with the camera playfully pulling away from him, by the last verse (which closes the song-sequence), the imperative "*aḻaikkutu vā*" co-occurs with Vijayalalitha dancing toward the hero and culminates with their tight embrace, her invitation being taken up with his second-pair part of tactile acceptance.

In this sequence, metaphor does the work of suggesting a sensual encounter; but if the linguistic text is "on-record" as non-sensual (and, we might add, at least to our 21st-century ear, non-vulgar), the total effect of sensuality and romance (bordering on vulgarity for some in its time) is created by the juxtaposition of a number of different para-texts: some visual (the editing strategies; the mis-en-scène of tight dress on the dancing/singing body); some performed (the dance movements—which emphasize the face and body of the dancer—and the music, with its Western jazz marimba style; note how both the dance and the music are recognizably "cinematic," that is, non-"traditional" in style); some diegetic (Vijayalalitha's character is trying to distract Shankar while some henchmen come to attack him); and some non-diegetic (the offscreen personages of Vijayalalitha and of L. R. Eswari).

When romance in the cinema shades into vulgarity, it has often had its roots in *karakāṭṭam*, which unlike other folk art-forms like *villupāṭṭu* or *kaṇiyān kūttu*, does not borrow its narratives from epics, myths, and classical folklore. As a folk form, *karakāṭṭam* features narratives about feuds in the family as well as anecdotes revolving around the buffoon (often depicted as the son-in-law of the house) and bawdy songs. The latter two are often occasions for "vulgar" double meanings. For example, when the buffoon asks the new woman he meets, "Where are you from?" she may respond, "from Medupallam" ("elevation-pit"), rhyming with the neighboring language of Malayalam. (*Mēṭu* and *paḷḷam* standing for the crotch of a woman; and Malayalam for women/actresses from Kerala, who are stereotyped as more sexually open; cf. Nakassis 2015.) *Karakāṭṭam* song lyrics may be more explicit. For example, the heroine might sing

"*Kuttuṟēṉ kuttuṟēṉ kuttāme pōyiṭṭiyĕ*" (You said you'd punch [*kuttu*], but left without punching), to which the hero would respond, "*Kāṭṭuṟēṉ kāṭṭuṟēṉ nnu kāṭṭāme pōyiṭṭiyĕ*" (You promised you'd show [something] but left without showing anything).

Lyrics like these have been recycled in films such as the wildly popular 1989 film, *Karagattakkaran* (dir. Gangai Amaran, music: Ilaiyaraja). In the film, "punching" (*kuttu*) is an allusion to the seal/stamp that encloses a letter in an envelope and "showing" with (not) opening the envelope; this meaning is motivated on the screen through gestures of the heroine to a letter in hand. Its doubled meaning, however, is the act of undressing (showing her body) and sexual intercourse (punching); this is motivated by the film text itself as well as by also the intertext to theatrical *karakāṭṭam* performances. The double text of the exchange, thus, is about the hero and heroine trying to preempt each other, each challenging the other as being not courageous enough when it comes to sex. In a film like *Karagattakkaran*, such gestures and linguistic meanings clothe the desire to make love and thus render *karakāṭṭam*, as an art of the subversive "folk," allowable/performable in public spaces (be they theater halls or temple premises). In this way, such double meanings act as a kind of anti-language (Halliday 1976) for a subaltern society that codes its meanings in the public space of respectability (Seizer 1997).

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

drink alcohol" (lit. "beat water"), and *kai aṭi* "to masturbate" (lit. "beat hand"). Lyricists have played with the idea of *aṭikkarumbu* (the bottom of the sugarcane), which is supposed to be juicy and sweet, in lines like, "*aṭikkarumbai kaṭiccu tiṅga āsai vantāccu*" ("the desire to bite and devour the sugarcane stalk came [to me]") sung by the heroine and her friends in the song "*Kalyāṇa Mēḷa Sattam*" from the film *Thambikku Entha Ooru* (dir Rajasekar, 1984; lyrics: Panchu Arunachalam, music: Ilayairaja, singer: S. Janaki).

Compare the romantic imagery of the heroine-as-*gopuram*-calling-the-hero with the more "vulgar" comparisons of sugarcane-stalk-as-phallus and fellatio. Notice that the former's "double meaning" involves an ellipsis and avoidance, for "calling" itself stands in a relation of denotational vagueness vis-à-vis the sex act just as does its visual realization in the film, the hug (itself a metonymic substitution for copulation); by contrast, the veil in the comparison of biting and devouring sugarcane is relatively diaphanous, as well as narrower in its referential target (of male genitalia and fellatio).

## Double meaning in comedy sequences

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

the back of his head). The sidekick quickly shifts the conversation and inquires after prices. Shortly afterwards, Sivaji looks at Sripriya and says, "*Reṇṭu iṭliyum oru vaṭai koṇṭā reṇṭu pērukkum*" ("Bring both of us two idlis and one vadai").



**Figure 2**. Sivaji asks for two idlis (left)
and one vadai (right) in *Lorry Drive Rajakkannu.*

Here, the food items have the twinned meaning not only of food (which Sivaji is ordering) but also of Sripriya's body parts (the round and soft idli for breasts; the doughnut topology of the vadai for vagina). Sivaji marks this by conspicuously looking up at Sripirya's face and chest area when he says "*iṭli*" (figure 2 – left) and then down at her crotch when he says "*vaṭai*" (right). Notably, with this latter line there is no response from the sidekick, no sound effect, and Sripriya simply looks confused and puzzled as she walks off to get their food. That is, Sripriya models a certain ignorance, opening a position for viewers themselves to enact/feign non-understanding. This is importantly gendered: Sripriya's uptake performs a form of feminine modesty in the mode of a certain kind of (tactful) ignorance/perplexion, in effect *doubling* the dialogue that, for at least some (perhaps most) viewers, would be transparently seen as crudely sexual.[3] Indeed, reviewers of the film at the time noted

[3] There is, thus, a gendering of the epistemic rights to "get" the joke that is enacted by Sripriya's character as a sort of signal, or model for, the viewer. The doubled meaning is not only in the doubled denotational text (i.e., that Sivaji's dialogue could be about sexuality or food) but in the distribution of uptake within the scene itself, between Sivaji and his sidekick (and the enunciative

the vulgarity of this dialogue and criticized the thespian, Sivaji Ganesan, for mouthing such words. Again, notice the importance of the offscreen status of the actor (as a "class" actor) informing the double meaning; in this case, working *against* its playful, humorous pragmatics and, arguably, *amplifying* its vulgarity.

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

As the above discussion indicates, vulgarity is partly a function of *who* says what *and* in what intertextual series of cinematic texts, on and off the screen. To take another example, consider the popular duo, Goundamani and Senthil's extended comedy track in *Neram Nalla Neram* (dir. N. Sambandam, 1984), which also takes place in a tea shop where idli and vadai are sold. In this track, the character played by the actress Deepa works as a cook in Senthil's shop, where she grinds flour for idli and vadai. Instead of focusing on the food or tea, which often keeps burning their tongues, the customers—like the camera, which consistently frames her to expose her cleavage, midrift, and ankles—simply come to ogle her working. Here, what

gestures of the soundtrack), on the one hand, and Sripriya, on the other. This itself models the distribution and meaningfulness of getting the joke, of who, in the context of theatrical exhibition, has to act like they don't quite get it.

is important for our discussion is how the "double meaning" of the various scenes that make up this comedy track (where talk about vadai, and everything else, becomes talk about something sexual) is anchored by the *actress*, Deepa's presence. This creates a deep multilayeredness to the comedy track: on the one hand, the diegetic character of the laboring woman is erased, reducing her to a so-called pleasure doll (which we can read as an allegory for the fate of non-diegetic actresses like Deepa, on which more below); and on the other hand, this very doubling of onscreen and offscreen enables a Mulveyean (1975) scene of scopic pleasure (or *sight aṭikkiṟatu*, to use the Tamil phrase) where both Goundamani, and by extension, the audience, can ogle a woman (the actress), seated on the floor as she grinds away.[4] (Though in this sequence, the joke is ultimately on Goundamani, who gets the *māvu* [idli batter, a slang term for semen] on his face and is humiliated.)

This doubling, as noted above, is linked to Deepa's onscreen and offscreen paratexts. Unni Mary in real life, a Christian from Kerala, Deepa's onscreen para-text was as a vamp or the third woman, an extension of the supposedly lustful Anglo-Indian who entices men. Echoing this was offscreen gossip about her as a licentious starlet. Even popular, mainstream magazines like *Kumudam* and *Ananda Vikatan* had their gossip columns revolve around Deepa. She occupied the in-between space of Malayalam and Tamil, both because of her background and because she acted in both industries. This made it convenient to target her and take advantage of the misogyny-driven stereotype of the morally loose Malayali actress. And not coincidentally, the first (unverified) rumor of an actress in a pornographic film was also about Deepa with the arrival of the VHS tapes.

Such sequences interpellate a(n imagined to be) mostly male audience. But we would be remiss to suppose that double meaning comedy dialogues only work in this way. An actress like Kovai Sarala,

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[4] This scenario itself has a resonance specific to the feudal romance characteristic of Indian cinemas, where the comfortably seated landlord (here, the spectator; but also, Goundamani, who refers to himself in the film as the feudal landlord of the village) exploits his female laborers. It is also an instance of double entendre framed visually—grinding (*āttaṟatu*) and kneading (*pisaiyaṟatu*) having long been used as sexual innuendos in Tamil—and aurally.

for example, navigated vulgarity through her spontaneous retorts and provided space for women to enjoy such scenes beyond their misogynistic confines, even in films where she was sandwiched between the typically "vulgar" duo Goundamani and Senthil. Consider again *Karakattakkaran*. Kovai Sarala plays a dancer in a *karakāṭṭam* troupe that also includes Senthil (as the nadhaswaram player) and Goundamani (as the tavil player). Senthil and Kovai Sarala have a romance, which they have hidden from Goundamani, who would oppose it for disturbing the troupe dynamic. In a scene that takes places after the above context has been established, Senthil and Kovai Saral are sitting at the feet of the haystack, alone. Senthil says:

> *Enna, anta tavilkkārar romba tuḷḷuṟān*!
> What the hell, that tavil guy is so arrogant.
>
> *Anta tavil illāme āṭamuṭiyātā?*
> Can't you dance without that tavil (drumbeat)?

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

> *Aṭā nīṅka oṇṇu! Oru tagara(pēṭṭi) taṭṭinā kūṭa nān āṭuvēn!*
> Oh, you're crazy! I could dance even if (someone) tapped (a rhythm) on tin box!
>
> *Anta tavil ennattukku?*
> Who needs that tavil?

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

> *Uṅka nātacuvaram tān vē:::ṇum.*
> I only need/want your nadhaswaram.

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

While in the previous examples the masculine actor alternately makes fun of the characters of prominent actresses like Vijayalalitha and Sripriya or subjects them to an objectifying gaze (as with secondary stars like Deepa), in this example Kovai Sarala inverts things. Here, the reference to nadhaswaram—at one level, an instrument, itself a metonym for its player (Senthil); at its doubled level, a reference to the phallus, also a metonym for its possessor (Senthil)—is a sign of affection, intimacy, and love. It bears no trace of the misogyny that characterizes what is otherwise readable in the typical double meaning dialogue as a castration anxiety (cf. the male-authority-driven order of vadai, which hides a male anxiety in the presence of a sexualized women or which triggers a sadistic punishment of her). Notice how Senthil responds with an affectionate hug, with no trace of eroticism or shock (and non-diegetically, there is no comedy sound-effect). If Sripriya's confused uptake above split the dialogue to produce its doubledness (by recognizing its vulgarity by feigning non-understanding of it), here Senthil's response validates Kovai Sarala's transformation of the vulgar into the romantic. We can further note that in her castigation of Goundamani, she stands up for Senthil, who is the typical target of Goundamani's aggression, and thus substitutes for his compromised masculinity, not in the mode of castration but of fierce domestic affection.

At the same time, as a double meaning dialogue, Kovai Sarala's dialogue is nevertheless an expression of her sexuality and desire. Here, one wonders if for female audiences at the time the nadhaswaram also signified an aspiration for marriage as, in the context of the narrative, it does for her character (and perhaps also the actress, who never married). Finally, we should again emphasize that this female agency—a kind of structural inversion of patriarchal cruelty and objectification—is not simply a feature of the filmic text but reaches beyond it; after films like *Karakattakkaran*, it became a feature of Kovai Sarala's own parallel star text. Consider, for instance, her many roles with the comedian Vadivelu, where she hounds him and even physically beats him to pulp.

In short, through the doubling of meaning vulgarity is itself doubled and transformed, and a certain kind of upper-caste patriarchal regime of comedy is inverted, if only temporarily and partially, into a subaltern, folk order of agency, intimacy, and legitimate (female) desire.

**Double meaning and the participant framework of cinema (i.e., watching with family)**

Above, we suggested that the vulgarity of double meaning dialogues has something to do with the way in which such dialogues talk about that which should not or cannot be talked about explicitly: women's bodies, sex acts, sexual desire. This is also a folk ideology about what makes such jokes vulgar and thus has to be taken account of; yet such a discourse erases much of the phenomenon it rationalizes by focusing on the referential *content* of such speech/depiction as a justification for its pragmatic effects (and metapragmatic typification). That is, such an ideology—while not untrue per se—problematically narrows our analytic gaze.

Beyond a focus on the content of such representations, the vulgarity of double meaning dialogues is also a problem of *who else is around*, that is, of what Erving Goffman (1981) called the participation framework: in the case of double meaning dialogues, that one is constituted as part of an audience among co-present, overhearing others. And this, in turn, is a question of *who* those others are (and oneself is) sociologically speaking, which is to say, what kinds of social identities and relations are consequentially in play in the vicinity of "vulgarity"?

In Nakassis's ethnographic fieldnotes, double meaning dialogues pop up in various places. Talking with an assistant film director, S——, one day outside a tea stall, Nakassis queried him about the moral reputation of actresses. The assistant director opined that heroines are like dolls, they are there to be "sighted." To be crass, he said, in Tamil Nadu for most (unmarried) men, there are no relationships with women that are not as a sister or a mother. The fieldnotes continue to describe S—— observing a division between "our women" and all other women; the others are barely even human as far as most guys are concerned, he said; that is, one can look at them however one wants. From this sexist set of statements, the conversation found its way to this assistant director's mother's own reception practices; paraphrased from the fieldnotes: "when his mother was young, she went to see a Sivaji Ganesan film. She was so sad when Sivaji's character died at the end, so she went back to see the film again, hoping that the second time he wouldn't die at the end." The fieldnotes continue

with Nakassis and S—— shifting topics to the status of kissing and glamour in film. What is problematic about them, the assistant director opined, has nothing to do with the acts per se; it is, he says, *that you can't watch such scenes with your family.* It's embarrassing, he says, and to many inappropriate and *hence* vulgar. That is, the vulgarity is an effect of the participation framework, the co-presence of family.[5] This is why, he then noted, double meaning dialogues in film are okay but not kissing scenes. It is because you *can* watch the former with your family under the cover of the dialogue's non-sexual meaning. The double meaning, as a kind of public secret, is a way to manage the fact that there are multiple audiences in the room, all of whom may understand both meanings but are too uncomfortable to openly experience sexual representations together. (Here, again, recall Sripriya's perplexion at Sivaji's crass innuendo discussed above as an internal filmic model of this pragmatic fact of the cinematic reception of double meanings.)

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[5] This is not to say that families do not end up sitting through such scenes together, either in the theater or at home. In many cases in our experience, however, the station might be changed or the television shut off—by or at the behest of senior members of the family—when objectionable content comes on. (This censorship might itself be anticipated by the film text; e.g, Nakassis's pirated VCD version of the youth hit film *7/G Rainbow Colony* edited out a particular sequence that featured explicit depictions and discussions of premarital sexuality. Such VCD versions are often made for at-home consumption by families.) But even where the film is allowed to continue playing, we can detect this blockage, as when certain members of the family move out of the room or avert their gazes (Nakassis 2023, 66–110). Eswaran reports, for example, such a situation from the household of his uncle's daughter. Some 25 years back, when his nieces were approximately 13 and 15, Swarnavel noticed that when watching a film on the television during a typical family social, if there were any vulgar dialogues, jokes, or erotic songs, the girls would turn their eyes down to the ground and their father affect a stern gaze. But the volume was not altered or muted, nor the image turned off or otherwise blocked. In this distribution of the sensible, the visual is marked as the site of taboo (and explicitness) while sound continues on as fine to be experienced. Such practices presume that one is supposed to imagine the morally right thing through sound, whereas the visual forecloses the ability to avoid or feign experiencing the sexual or vulgar, constituting a doubleness of the double meaning that allows the film to continue while some (the young women) attenuate their presence to the screen and to others in the room, who continue to watch. Here, again, kinship relationality and particular kinship roles (of father and daughter) are enacted through a mode of cinematic reception in relationship to the double meaning.

Note the associative chain of topics in this assistant director's rationalization (itself guided by Nakassis's own research interests) and how it lends a kind of conceptual coherence to the conversation: meandering from scopically consuming heroines on the screen to the blockage of sexuality *by* consanguineal (cross-sexual) kinship relations, to the figuration of older generations of kin as cinematic rubes (believing the film would change the next time around), and then back to the problem of kinship and watching and hearing sexuality. Here, we interpret the interregnum of the mother's credulous spectatorship (otherwise, a non sequitur) as an implicit comment that such prudishness—in watching sex with family members—while completely natural and self-evident, is somehow illiberal, unmodern, and anachronistic. And this sets up the assistant director's point that in the place of the explicit appears the veiled— the double meaning dialogue which is "okay" when around (overly credulous and prudish older) kin.

Or is it? In 2010, Nakassis was chatting online with an unmarried, female friend, V——, who had recently finished her post-graduate degree. After proffering that she just saw *Aayirathil Oruvan* (2010, dir. Selvaraghavan), Nakassis asked her how the film was. She replied as follows (original in the left-hand column; English translation in the right-hand column):

12:45 AM **V——**: 1000il oruvan one time paarkalam avalo thaan..
 II half Scenes romba vulgara irundadu..
 **me**: eppadi
 sex rithiyaa?
 ille, violence-aa?
12:46 AM **V——**: Familyoda paarka mudiyaaada padam..
 Violence ila...
 Sex, double meaning dialogues..
 **me**: double meanings?
12:47 AM aaah
 so, nee yaarooda paarthe?
 **V——**: Nan en friendsoda paarthen..

**V——**: You can watch *Aayirathil Oruvan* one time, that's enough. The scenes in the 2nd half were really vulgar.
**CVN**: how's so?
In terms of sex?
Or, violence?
**V——**: It's a film that one can't watch with family.
It's not the violence.
(It's the) sex, double meaning dialogues.
**CVN**: double meanings?
Aaah
So, who'd you watch with?
**V——**: I saw it with my friends.

At issue here is not simply the question of, for V——, transparently vulgar content, nor even the question of who is watching with you

(though it is both, too). It is also that a certain kind of cinema is itself defined in terms of these questions. A refrain Nakassis heard over and over again from college students in his ethnographic research was that a "neat" or "decent" film—tellingly called a *kuṭumpa paṭam* ("family film")—is one that you can watch with your family; such a film, stereotypically at least, has no double meaning dialogues, no "item numbers" or "rape scenes," and has lots of family "sentiment," moral messages, and the like. By contrast, cinema that is *for* youth was defined as cinema that you cannot watch with family (but with friends); and why? Self-evidently for these youth, because of the presence of item numbers, sexy scenes, and "double meaning dialogues," all of which *make* for a type of cinema by circumscribing the pragmatics of the participation framework for encountering it.

**Youthfulness of double meaning dialogues**

As we have been arguing, double meaning dialogues do their work through a doubling of their possible interpretations (their denotational texts) *and*, correlatively, through the multiplication of the kinds of uptake of them. The claim, then, is that the doubleness of the interpretability of such denotational texts implicates multiple interactional texts of uptake, including, importantly, acts of not-getting it, not-seeing (or hearing) it, or of only attending to one of the double meanings (the "literal," on-record one). This fact is itself folded into the textuality of double meaning dialogues, as we saw with Sripriya's character in *Lorry Drive Rajakkannu*. Such double meaning dialogues model a singularity of ("literal") meaning for some spectator *who does not get the joke* (for a spectator who does) or feigns not getting it (for a spectator who need not disavow understanding). This is itself part of its effect.

Consider an example provided by Dr. N. Govindarajan (personal communication, 23 March 2022), from *Polladhavan* (2007, dir. Vetrimaran). In the scene in question, the hero Dhanush is narrating, over a flashback, his getting up the courage on the bus to talk to a "figure" (beautiful young woman) with whom he has fallen in love. He walks over, only to look down at her feet. In the visual-track, the camera cuts to her high-heel shoes and then back to Dhanush telling the story to his friends. He says,

narrating his intimidation and loss of courage: "*Avḷō periya* heels! Ten steps back-*u*" ("Her heels were so big! I took ten steps back"). The comedian Santhanam retorts to Dhanush: "*Kai uṭu maccā(n). Kuṭuttu veccevan ṭā nī!* Hee:::ls-*ē avvaḷavu perisunnā . . .* " ("Shake my hand, bro. You're so lucky! If her heels are that big . . . ").

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

Because the joke turns on the spectator supplying the second clause of the hypothetical (if her heels are that big . . .) its "vulgarity" is also, ultimately, a function of the spectator's own uptake. This, of course, is the point with all double meaning dialogues; but what this particular example points to is how the spectator's own habits of interpretation and imagination are at issue within the joke itself. And this is itself construable along generational and gender lines. Dr. Govindarajan offers an account:

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

Not only do such double meaning dialogues work, then, to sketch out zones of appropriate consumption by imagining a kind of kinship chronotope of reception (watching with friends vs. watching with family), they are also taken up as ascribing a certain set of qualities of personhood to their viewers (older vs. younger). Here, (enacting) understanding (of) the joke is an index of spectators' own identities, generationally and by gender. Not simply reflecting the (male) youth identity of a spectator (the one who gets the joke; who can appreciate vulgarity as humor; who has their sexual urges satisfied in the cinema), such humor presupposes the entailment of male youthfulness (of the spectator, of the space of interaction) in the uptake of the joke itself.

**Doubling doubled meaning beyond the cinema hall**

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

During Nakassis's fieldwork, it was not uncommon for filmic texts to be citationally reanimated by young men to "tease" or flirt with young women. One female friend, for example, reported the nuisance of college boys sitting nearby their "top" (area on campus where they hung out) and singing film songs with "double meanings"; here, note the participation framework of the college student singing a song for his proximal peers—as ratified bystanders—to young women—as unratified addressees who are non-proximal but within hearing range. Similarly, upon an excursion to the Eco Park in Madurai with a group of hostel mates, Nakassis et alia passed by a group of young women sitting under a tree (Nakassis 2016, 174). One of the boys, P. J., broke into song, singing with a sideways glance to the girls: "*Maccāṉai pāttīṅkaḷā malai vāḻai tōppukkuḷḷē?*" ("In the mountain banana grove, did you see *maccāṉ*?"). *Maccāṉ* refers, in female-to-male usage, to a marriageable cross-cousin, here a euphemism for lover or future husband (Nakassis 2014). Reanimating a lyric

from the classic film *Annakili* (1976, dir. Devaraj–Mohan), here P. J. took the filmic sequence, a romantic song in a mountain banana grove, and projected it onto our own arboreal mise-en-scène, in effect flirting with the young women by using the alignment of filmic hero with heroine as his opening gambit to initiate a "line," or romantic relationship, while casting himself as a "college hero." His friends laughed as we strolled on, and the young women giggled in embarrassment. Again, the romantic double meaning—drawing on presupposed cultural knowledge about kin term relationality, the arboreal (onscreen/offscreen) chronotope of romance, and of the cited film in question—is itself doubled in its citation. In both cases, the twinned meanings of the cinematic sequence are projected *onto* the interactional framework that is enacted by the fact of singing the song, recruiting bystanding men as an audience for an act of flirtation with the young women (forced into the role of the desirous heroine). The doubleness of the film song affords the doubleness of its reanimation.

### Political allegory, the doubleness of the hero-star

In this penultimate section, we pivot to the use of narrative Tamil cinema by the Dravidian Movement to enact allegorical political commentary. While not emically considered double meaning dialogues, such allegorical commentaries do draw on a number of similar semiotic relations: both double meaning while keeping both texts (or meanings) in play at once. Further, both stand in tension with a certain liberal understanding of re-presentation (in both the political and semiotic sense) because both are emblematic of the "massness" of Tamil cinema. And finally, both draw on cinema's narrative and technological capacity to entangle onscreen and offscreen such that what is narratively depicted is interactionally enacted. In short, while political allegorical uses of film should not be conflated with double meaning dialogues (they differ in key ways), the comparison is useful to highlight what is of interest to the process of doubling in the Tamil cinema independent of the question of "(vulgar) content" per se.

As various authors have shown (Sivathambi 1981; Pandian 1991; Eswaran 2021), the Dravidian Movement, and the the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party in particular, heavily used cinema in the mid-20th-century to mobilize the masses and, eventually, dominate state politics. While the early films penned by C. N. Annadurai, Mu. Karunanidhi, and other Dravidianist writers in the 1950s and 1960s, however, worked—through their use of well-placed monologues, song lyrics, symbolism (of the red and black, the rising sun), and narrative arcs (that echoed offscreen political realities)—to propagate the DMK party vision and image (eventually becoming known through the genre label, the "DMK film"), through the 1960s the DMK film increasingly revolved around the stardom of the most charismatic of the DMK's matinee idols, M. G. Ramachandran (or MGR). From the 1950s onward, MGR's persona was carefully constructed by a team of writers, directors, and producers who borrowed the swashbuckler action-hero stereotype from Hollywood (especially from the films of Errol Flynn and Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.). Such filmmakers effectively intercalated this swashbuckling hero into a variety of local textual forms (Prasad 2014), such as the melodrama of indigenous folklore or the mythos of an Oedipal son who balances excessive attachment for his mother with the taming of the shrew while freeing the downtrodden. If, before, the doubled meaning of the DMK film's political allegory implied the need for the DMK to rise to power to reverse the evils of the Indian National Congress's rule (and casteist-Brahminical-Aryan-Northern-Hindi domination of an otherwise egalitarian-non-Brahmin-Dravidian-Southern-Tamil community), with the MGR film, the doubled meaning was MGR himself, that is, his transtextual and offscreen paratext as the hero of the masses who had come to save them.

The emergence of the MGR film from the DMK film led to numerous tensions within the DMK party through the 1960s. By the early 1970s, MGR's persona fully subsumed the narrative of his films even as he was being increasingly marginalized within the DMK. Such offscreen drama found its way into MGR's films. This is exemplified in MGR's *Nam Naadu* ("Our country," dir. Jambulingam), released in November 1969. The film's narrative capitalized on the growing resentment of the masses over

corruption within the DMK government, especially following C. N. Annadurai's demise in 1969 and Karunanidhi assuming party leadership. In the film, MGR plays an honest clerk in the mayor's office who is forced to contest the elections due to rampant corruption. MGR utilized the film to critique his own party, the DMK, and its allegory—the need for MGR to contest elections—anticipated and became a reality in 1972 when MGR left/was ejected from the DMK and formed his own party, Annadurai DMK (ADMK), eventually contesting (and winning) elections.

A central element to the film's allegorical critique is its use of the "philosophical (or propaganda) song" (*tattuva pāṭṭu*), a staple of MGR's films. Consider the song-sequence "*Nalla Perai*," which comes about 46 minutes into the film. The song-sequence emerges out of a narrative scene of MGR's character chastising and advising his niece and nephew to listen their parents: "Don't you know that those who appreciate their parents receive praise from others?" he asks. He then affectionately hugs the children (figure 3 – left), who frame him on either side, his gaze turning to the camera as the camera tracks-in to a tighter, centered composition of him (figure 3 – right) as he breaks into song: "*Nalla pērai vāṅka vēṇṭum piḷḷaikaḷē, nam nāṭu ennum tōṭṭattilē, nāḷai malarum mullaikaḷē*" ("Kids, you have to get a good name, in the garden that is our country, tomorrow thorns will blossom [into flowers]").



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

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

| | |
|---|---|
| MGR: | *Viḻi pōla enni nam moḻi kākka vēṇṭum* |
| Children: | *Viḻi pōla enni nam moḻi kākka vēṇṭum* |
| | Like the eyes we must protect our language |

| | |
|---|---|
| MGR: | *Tavarāna pērkku nēr vaḻikkāṭṭa vēṇṭum* |
| Children: | *Tavarāna pērkku nēr vaḻikkāṭṭa vēṇṭum* |
| | We must show the right path to the misguided ones |

| | |
|---|---|
| MGR: | *Jana nāyagattil nām ellōrum mannar* |
| Children: | *Jana nāyagattil nām ellōrum mannar* |
| | In democracy we are all kings |

| | |
|---|---|
| | <tilt-up to shot of MGR pointing to Annadurai portrait> |
| MGR: | *Tennāṭṭu Gandhi annālil sonnār* |
| | <pan-right to shot of Annadurai portrait> |
| Children | *Tennāṭṭu Gandhi annālil sonnār* |
| & MGR: | The southern Gandhi said so on that day. |

In the last couplet, the camera tilts down to a low-angle (figure 4 – top-left) and then upward, following MGR's pointing index finger as it points "up" to Annadurai's image (figure 4 – top-right; cf. Nakassis 2017, 204, 231). The image cuts back to the children (middle-left), who put their hands together in worshiping supplication as they and MGR sing together; as they sing, the camera then pans right, past MGR to Annadurai's illuminated image (middle-right). Pausing on Annadurai, who substitutes for MGR and his pointing gesture, the song continues, cutting back to a long-shot of the family and MGR, who is at its center of the shot, standing where Annadurai just was onscreen.

MGR: *Tennāṭṭu Gandhi  annālil sonnār.* (The southern Gandhi said so on that day.)

Children & MGR: *Tennāṭṭu Gandhi  annālil sonnār.* (The southern Gandhi said so on that day.)

**Figure 4.** Annadurai, citationally invoked
by his children (MGR and his children)

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

After MGR founded the ADMK in 1972, his party's candidate, Maayathevar, won the 1973 by-election in Dindigul. *Nam Naadu* was re-released to capitalize on the euphoria. In the 1973 version, stock shots of MGR and Maayathevar celebrating the electoral victory were inserted into the film when MGR's character celebrates his own success in the film's mayoral elections. In addition, the black and red colors of the DMK flag depicted within the film at the mayor's office were changed to the tricolored—black, white, and red—of the ADMK flag.

In sum, note how the rupturing within the narrative of the national (Gandhi) through the regional (Annadurai as "southern Gandhi" of "our country") opens a space within the text—and its exhibition space—for the later juxtaposition and super-imposition of both mayoral (diegetic, onscreen) and district (nondiegetic, offscreen) electoral successes, equating one with the other in anticipation, arguably, of MGR's eventual offscreen ascent to the chief ministership of the state (Eswaran 2012, 81–82; also Prasad 2014; cf. Nakassis 2016, 2023). The semiotics of scaling, enabled through the doubling of the text, is dizzying. And through this doubling, causality is bent all the way around, with the 1969 *Nam Naadu* anticipating and (arguably) leading to a 1973 victory, which is itself registered within an updated version of the film to celebrate what it led to. In both the original and the updated film, what is narratively depicted is politically enacted (proleptically and then in celebration), and the text and its lyrics, dialogues, colors, mis-en-scène, and even photographic indexicalities are all doubled, twinned, twice. Here, it is not that the offscreen world is represented by the onscreen text, but that the onscreen text doubles itself so as to hold in play two interpretations and two references which it then smears into one. As with our previous examples of double meaning dialogues, swatches of filmic discourse draw on the possibilities of ambiguating semiosis *and* of the cinema's capacity to enact what it represents through the twinned bodies of the character/actor. That MGR's political charisma is immanent in his characters operates exactly parallel to Deepa's sexual charisma in that both serve to make possible a range of double meanings that such films exploit, on and off the screen.

**Conclusion**

Our point in the above discussion is not that political allegory and sexual innuendo are the same. Their social values are different and their uptakes distinct. Moreover, in double meaning dialogues a kind of ambiguity or incongruity between the twinned meanings is *modeled* by the text and its uptakes (hence their metaphoric quality, even if no one necessarily understands such dialogues *as* ambiguous or incongruous) while in political allegories (such as in the MGR film) the doubled meanings are *collapsed* into each other (with, for the spectator-fan, a near-total congruence; hence their allegorical quality).

In both cases, however, we find similar semiotic processes and relations. Indeed, we see with clear contours how the cinema, as narrative form and indexical technology, already pre-doubles its discourse, a discourse that in its doubling pre-figures its citational uptake beyond itself, which is to say, its further doubling, whether this is MGR songs at election rallies (or election rally footage in MGR films) or double meaning dialogues or lyrics used by youth to woo or tease each other.

Such processes of doubled meaning, however, are not unique to the cinema. The pragmatics of discourse are always anticipating this kind of uptake and recontextualization; yet these examples brightly highlight this aspect of the pragmatics of discourse *as* the pregnant potential of meaning to being doubled, not simply repeated or copied but put into a dialogue of twins: doubled meaning.

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