A public backstage: The pleasures and possibilities of roadside shop talk in Tamil Nadu, India

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Abstract

In contrast to talk in more central parts of the city, and even in domestic space, interactions surrounding roadside grocery shops in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu entail a body of possible overhearsers that is both limited and indefinite. Drawing on conversations recorded in roadside shops, I describe interactions in which the characterization of these spaces as principally concerned with routine provisioning allowed responsibility for participation in potentially disreputable talk to be plausibly denied. I suggest that petty traders seek to classify interactions surrounding shops as unremarkable because doing so supports the validity of commercial transactions. At the same time, customers exploit talk in grocery shops, and similar provisioning spaces, as a means by which to engage with a public while remaining “backstage”.

1. Introduction

One evening in February 2007, roughly sixty people who lived on the western edge of Thanjavur, India gathered to watch a drum performance. They sat and stood in rows surrounding the awning of a small roadside grocery shop (known as a maḷi kaṭa in Tamil). As they watched the drummers, members of the crowd, most of who knew each other from passing interactions in the shop and its surroundings, shared whispered details about the drum program. They noted the names of the program's sponsors, their political ambitions and, with particular relish, the fact that the performance had cost 250,000 rupees – more than many local households earned in a year. They spoke quietly, as if eager to drink in every rupee's worth of action, even while declaring the expenditure a waste. The performance's principal sponsors, a wealthy cilantro wholesaler and his friends, observed both the drummers and the other spectators from a cluster of plastic chairs that had been placed at the entrance of a nearby marriage hall. Enjoying a good view of the action, these men repeatedly invited members of the audience to come and join them in the empty seats. Yet, even as people standing in front of the grocery shop pushed and jostled for position, the chairs around the official sponsors remained empty.

Although their actions resembled those of people watching a staged event, such as a “special drama” street theater performance (see Seizer, 2005), people who joined the crowd in front of the shop were quick to distinguish themselves from a ratified audience. They explained that they were not watching a real event but a rehearsal (āṭukkuppārkkku) for part of a political rally that would welcome Tamil Nadu's newly elected chief minister at the city-center on the following day. They stressed that they were enjoying the drummers then because they could not or would not attend the official rally. While several people explained their decision as a matter of convenience, there seemed to be a general consensus that watching the drum program from the center of the city, where it would be assigned the status of official
event, would require participation in a larger, less familiar crowd of people, and constitute a sign of political support. Even watching the performance from the comfort of chairs in front of the marriage hall, which was owned by the same family that had sponsored the program, might be viewed as a political statement, albeit a minor one.

Standing in front of the shop, which usually had only two or three customers in it at any given time, members of the crowd were clearly engaged in a departure from ordinary routine. Earlier that day, the grocery shop’s clerk had told me that I should be sure to stop by later and to bring my recorder, because something special was going to happen. Other neighborhood residents had received similar informal invitations or had come out from their houses to watch after hearing the music. Yet, individually, each member of the crowd could use proximity to the roadside grocery shop, and the possibility of a necessary purchase, as an alibi for enjoyment of the drum program. When I asked a young woman I knew, who seemed to be delighted by the drummers, if she would join me the next day to watch the full program in the center of the city, she quickly explained that she was not there to watch even now, and the she had simply come to the shop to purchase a peanut-sweet for her nephew. She then moved closer to the counter of the shop, in a half-hearted pantomime of preparation for a purchase, before she resumed watching the drummers.

2. Unremarkable space as semiotic ideology

In this article, I examine the spaces surrounding roadside grocery shops and their place in the social, commercial, and political life of South Indian cities. Roadside shops are critical conduits for the flow of goods and gossip that set the pace of neighborhood life. They could easily be studied as institutions in their own right. Yet customers rarely acknowledged these shops as places where things happened. It was not uncommon for female customers, some of whom visited roadside shops two or three times a week, to do so while claiming that they had never left the house. I argue that interpretation of space, and the speech that occurs within it, as unavailable for overt comment or scrutiny constitutes a semiotic ideology (Keane, 2007) – an interpretive framework that objectifies possibilities for interaction and makes them inhabitable.

Drawing on observations carried out in and around three roadside grocery shops in Thanjavur, India between 2006 and 2008, I outline the expectations that shape interpretations of speech and action in so-called petty commercial space. I suggest that customers’ characterizations of visits to roadside shops as unremarkable should be understood as a significant interactional achievement. Dismissal of talk that occurs near such shops as accidental and ordinary is a means by which possible ruptures in routines and relationships may be neutralized or reabsorbed into the rhythms of everyday life. Deferral of responsibility for potentially disruptive speech and action serves both to support continued participation in commercial transactions, and to create a space in which customers can covertly engage in activities that are depicted as if they occur elsewhere. The assumption that interactions in roadside grocery shops are principally concerned with necessary routine provisioning allowed other forms of talk and action that occur within these spaces to be passed-off as accidental. Although participants in grocery shop interactions occasionally acknowledged that the purported insignificance of their speech was itself a kind of theater (nōtākam); dismissal of grocery shop encounters as mundane and unremarkable produced a space in which attributions of responsibility for potentially disruptive speech and action might be muted or deferred.

My argument rests on the observation that spaces may work as metapragmatic frames – as implicit or explicit classifications of contexts that govern signs and their meanings (see Sidnell, 1998). The spaces that surround shops are not simply geographic locations but domains that are reflexively characterized in interactions. I begin by examining the forms of speech and action that distinguished roadside grocery shops from other kinds of space in the city. I then examine how shop owners and customers colluded to characterize their encounters as routine and unremarkable. As grocery shops owners themselves explained to me, framing relationships as familiar and interactions as predictable was critically important to the conduct of credit transactions in places where written records were rarely kept and outside authorities – such as supervisors, police, or legal institutions – could not be relied upon to guarantee the quality of goods or the repayment of debts. In conclusion, I propose that the characterization of roadside shops as unremarkable spaces enabled petty provisioning interactions to offer covert and strategically exploitable means of intervention in events and relationships that were depicted as spatially and temporally removed from the shop.

The significance of roadside grocery shops is shaped by assumptions and interactions that link geographic spaces to forms of potential oversight and reporting. Anthropological and sociolinguistic accounts abound with discussions about the ways ideological oppositions between public and private organize spaces, moralities, linguistic practices, and possibilities for action (Bourdieu, 1979; Fraser, 1992; Graber, 2012; Goffman, 1959; Jackson, 2008; Schilke, 2008). These accounts make it clear that public and private are not universally applicable categories for analysis, but socially and historically specific frames for interpretation that are produced through interaction and that inhabit distinctive representational economies. It can, for example, be argued that characterization of space as “public” depends on a particular kind of relationship between a state and its subjects – one that requires careful attention to the significance of being seen by unknown persons (see Kaviraj, 1997; Keane, 2002). Similarly, the coherence of divisions between public and private is enmeshed with assumptions that also inform the operation of markets (Plattner, 1982), forms of property (Inoue, 2006), and modes of exchange. As Gal observes, “the opposition of public/private is invariably implicated in language ideologies—practices and discourses that are socially positioned as partial engagements with a sociolinguistic world (2005:23).” Gal’s analysis draws on the observation that
space is not merely a material object, but a set of meanings that are produced by and implicated in social interactions. Strolling into the space surrounding a small grocery shop while engaged in conversation, as area residents occasionally did, could be understood as a commentary on both the nature of what was being said and what others might later say about it.

People living near the roadside shops I observed classified police stations, government offices, buses, main roads, and shops that they rarely frequented as public, using the English word, or potu itam, a Tamil calque that has roughly the same meaning. Though they were often delimited with reference to geography, characterizations of space were produced and maintained through interaction. The boundaries of spaces that counted as “public” shifted depending on the time of day and the particular habits of the person asked. Even so, most people agreed on the ways movement through public space ought to shape dress, speech, and self-monitoring, particularly on the part of young women. When entering a potu itam, people were expected to wear shoes (if they had them), to attend to their appearance, and to present a version of themselves that was suitable for all audiences – to behave as if they might be photographed or their speech would be reported on.

Assessments of the “public-ness” of shops and similar spaces were based on more than physical distance. When I asked Kannama, a university student, why members of her household shopped at a particular roadside grocery shop her immediate response was to shrug and explain that it was located close by. Yet I noted that there were two very similar shops located just across the main road, an even shorter walk from the house in which she was staying. Kannama explained that although they were not very far away, these shops were not really the closest because walking to them would require her to cross a busy main road, where she might see or be seen by a variety of unknown people. Because they knew most people on the relatively low-traffic side street where their regularly frequented shop was located, Kannama and other women in her family felt that they could go there in a manner in which they would not appear in public – alone, with wet hair, or in nighties. Like many other women who gave similar responses, Kannama’s concern was not how she would be seen by people she did not know, but how her behavior in front of unknown people would be observed and potentially reported on by those who knew her.

Although they were never described as “public” many shoppers described speech and dress in domestic space as also being subject to careful scrutiny. When I asked people where they felt the need to speak most carefully and respectfully, the most common response was “at home” (vētu-le) when entertaining guests or relatives. Although houses were sites where careful presentation of self might be required, most dwellings were further divided by spatial and temporal distinctions that differentiated the activities participants expected to be scrutinized from the “back-stage” moments of grooming, sleeping, and preparation. For residents of one-room houses the divide between what was audible and visible and what was overtly recognized as seen and heard relied more on social artifice than material architecture. Many area residents were accustomed to bathing and performing other kinds of bodily maintenance in spaces that might be visible or audible to neighbors. Separation of these actions from moments that were overtly scrutinized for presentations of self depended on the framing of interactions and their consequences. Neighbors might watch as Pushpa, a local shopkeeper, combed her hair standing just outside of her family’s shop each evening and still accept her as the sort of person who would not appear in public, or entertain visitors at home, unless her hair had been neatly tied back.

### 3. Provisioning spaces

Regularly visited roadside grocery shops were often granted the same sort of relief from overt scrutiny that applied to grooming in visible space. Indeed, as sites where customers acquired the goods and information needed to stage social life both at home and in public, roadside grocery shops often worked as a sort of “back-stage” or provisioning space. Such characterizations were, of course, neither perfect nor absolute. In practice, small roadside shops, like most other spaces, were home to a variety of kinds of interaction. Yet provisioning, and the speech it entailed, was often represented as a prelude to speech and action that would later occur elsewhere. Talk at sites of provisioning can easily fill a role similar to that which Levinson (1983:357) assigns to “pre-sequences” – segments of conversation that allow speakers to avoid potential face-loss by testing the waters before performing more overt moves, such as direct requests or refusals. In his analysis of café conversation, Laurier (2008) observes that the very necessity which may be potentially assigned to the act of drinking has consequences for responsibility in interactions. Consumption serves as an alibi for conviviality because, at any moment, speakers may pretend that they are simply at café to drink coffee rather than to engage in directed conversation. The act of drinking lubricates interactions by allowing awkward pauses and other potential missteps to be excused as mere preparation for a different form of action. On a much broader scale, the act of shopping for groceries offers a similar ready justification for speech and action that might otherwise be disruptive.

Depictions of speech as subservient to bodily necessity may partially absolve participants of responsibility for their roles in interaction. In a discussion of the hunger strike as a political statement, Wee (2007:72) suggests that bodily needs and processes may be partially exempt from attributions of responsibility. In contrast to actors who self immolate, participants in hunger strikes are usually described as acting with intention yet absolved of responsibility for the physiological effects of

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1 All names used in this article are pseudonyms.
2 Nightie was the word that many local women used to describe lose dresses that they frequently wore to sleep and perform household chores. Although they were usually changed after bathing in the morning they were not seen as appropriate dress outside of dwelling spaces.
their action. Although they rarely explained their presence as a result of personal bodily demands, many participants in roadside grocery shop transactions depict their actions as motivated by the hunger of others. Speakers such as the young woman who excused her presence at the drum program as an attempt to appease her nephew’s demand for sweets, thereby present their actions as doubly removed from the locus of intention.

Talk that occurs in provisioning spaces is open to convenient reclassification. Interactions that appear to take the form of free flowing conversations which occur in the relative absence of institutional hierarchy or constraint may, at any moment, be assigned the excuses that apply to necessity. The possible applicability of a “non-conversational” framework, in which participants may be dismissed as doing little more than carrying out actions that have been determined elsewhere, diffuses potential assignments of responsibility for speech and action. It is not accidental that acts of routine provisioning, which can be understood as preparation for roles that will be carried out elsewhere, have frequently been described as offering distinctive forms of interaction. Pubs (Lindquist, 2002; Vasey, 1990), coffee houses (Ellis, 2008; Venkatalalapathy, 2006), tea shops (Cody, 2011) water coolers (Kaplan, 2012) and salons (Jacobs-Huey, 2006) are emblematically associated with talk that makes and negotiates relationships. In a study of small business owners in Cairo, Elachar (2010) notes that the “phatic labor” of conversations that mark and maintain relationships is frequently associated with drinking tea. Provisioning spaces are not simply sites where goods can be acquired, but spaces where everyday routines and expectations may be established and maintained.

Ellis draws on writing about London coffee houses in the second half of the seventeenth century to argue that these spaces were governed by an “unstated set of relational group dynamics (2008:161),” which enabled a distinctive mode of sociability. As well as governing who might participate in coffee-house conversations and which topics might be appropriate, these expectations that were assumed to be shared by other customers shaped both the forms of coffee-house talk and the ways it might be evaluated, quoted, and used to inform interactions in other domains. The social life of coffee houses has, of course, been used as an emblematic site for the monitoring and enactment of broader social and political transformations (see Calhoun, 1992; Fraser, 1992; Habermas, 1992; Stallybrass and White, 1985). Yet Ellis suggests that exclusion from or participation in coffee-shop talk was also a way participants enacted and encountered boundaries to social participation that they reflexively acknowledged. Participation in talk in seemingly open spaces presents offers an opportunity to experience and observe the ways groups regulate themselves.

A growing body of work examines sites that offer a “third-space”, or interpretive possibility, that mediates between overtly public and private domains. As Shryock observes, the production of public identities demands the creation of an “off-stage” area in which the explicitly public is made, even staged, before it is shown (2004:3). “Off-stage” or “backstage” areas (see Goffman, 1959) provide the raw material from which performances that are understood as occurring elsewhere may be assembled. Although they are implicated in the production of public selves, provisioning spaces simultaneously give form to entities and activities that are generally understood as private or interior. Purchasing cigarettes for friends, food for family members, or vapor rub to be used in care for a sick child are acts through which care, closeness and domestic relationships are produced (see DeVault, 1991). I do not mean to imply that interactions have a single definable function, or that backstage activities are free from artifice. Indeed, as in the anecdote with which I began this article, classification of interactions as backstage, preparatory, or otherwise unremarkable may represent a conscious and strategic deployment of metapragmatic frames. The backstage activities that are enabled by this framing, even in cases where it is partial, accidental or implicit, may in many cases be more efficacious or significant than the events for which they purportedly prepare. Backstage work may also be implicated in the staging of larger more complicated events and entities. For example, Sewell (1996) suggests that the boundaries of overtly political events, such as revolutions, are shaped not by shifts in social action, but by how these shifts are understood by participants and onlookers. Possibilities for transformation are delimited, in part, by understandings of what constitutes everyday life and interactions.

4. Indirect speech as commercial strategy

Shoppers and passers-by described much of what happened in and around roadside grocery shops as cummā – as “just because” or “without any particular meaning.” In contrast to other domains, such as schools, busy streets, and domestic spaces, where patterns of speech and action were likely to be more explicitly scrutinized, actions in roadside grocery shops that were not directly concerned with the immediate work of purchasing and payment were often treated as un-reportable. In her study of warfare, childhood, and play in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka, Trawick (2007) observes the implications of declaring talk to be cummā. She describes a common form of narration in which children describe terrifying situations and then refuse responsibility for their report by declaring it to be cummā – just a joke. Although Trawick notes that words and acts described as cummā were sometimes simply stories, the description was also applied to real events and feelings whose truth might threaten the course of everyday life. By describing speech as cummā; participants in Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict suggested that their talk was “a form of play, bearing no moral weight (2007:199) even when what was said might be recognized as true and significant”. In situations where speaking the truth directly was dangerous and telling lies (poy) was frowned upon, characterizing speech as cummā allowed speakers to chart a middle course.

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3 I have transcribed all Tamil words, with the exception of proper names, according to the transcription system established by the Madras Tamil Lexicon. Trawick, who uses a slightly different transcription system, writes the word as summa.
Deployment of cummā, or insignificance, as a metapragmatic frame closely resembles Bateson’s (1955) descriptions of actions marked as play or fantasy. Like play, cummā provides a respite from ordinary associations between actions and consequences – it offers a space in which it is possible to speak while denying full commitment to what is being said. Yet unremarkable interactions, such as those that occur in roadside grocery shops, differ from Bateson’s description of play in that they are defined not by marked removal from ordinary relations but by embracing them in a way that avoids overt characterization. Forms of speech and action are categorized as cummā through the suggestion that they are little more than accidental byproducts of, or pre-sequences to, other forms of speech and action. Indeed, because they are principally concerned with routine provisionings, interactions in roadside grocery shops are ripe with talk that reports on or imagines conversations that will take place elsewhere. It is routine for transactions that occur in roadside grocery shops to be reflexively characterized as occurring between actors other than people who are engaged in face-to-face talk.

For example, when engaged in the sale of household supplies, Pushpa, a worker in a roadside grocery shop owned by her husband, and Venmani, a customer of about Pushpa’s age, represent their interaction as addressing people and problems that are somehow outside of their present interaction. When Venmani requests betel leaves Pushpa is quick to establish that Venmani is buying them in the place of her mother-in-law, who is currently out of town, and that Venmani’s father-in-law is the intended recipient. Playing on the multiple meanings of poiyiruccu (has gone + completive aspect), Pushpa teasingly suggests that Venmani is saying she wishes her mother in law were dead.4

1. Venmani: vettale oru ropā
2. Pushpa: ēru māmakā
3. Pushpa: For whom? For your father-in-law?
4. Venmani: m, māmakku-tā(ŋ) appuṟum yārukku vānkuvānku? attai poiyiruccu
5. Venmani: Yeah, for father-in-law only, after all who else would (I) go buying (them) for? His wife has gone.5
6. Pushpa: vāṟṟutam nā, collippuṭen poiyiruccu-ṇu conṇaṇ-ṇu (,) collavā
7. Pushpa: When (she) comes, shall I say that you said that she died? (pause) shall I tell it like that?
8. Venmani: Mother-in-law isn’t here now is she, so she’s gone away, isn’t it?
9. Pushpa: Oh dear [exclamation in appreciation of the joke.]
10. Pushpa: aiyō

Venmani responds by taking up the joke and voicing an imaginary conversation in which she tells her mother-in-law, who often complains of ill health, to hurry up and die.

5. Venmani: pēcu poṟkapoṟmaṭiri pēcuv ellām
6. Venmani: say it! “you’re always speaking as if you’re going to die and all that”

Venmani laments her mother-in-law’s refusal to die, while Pushpa continues, teasingly, to threaten to tell Venmani’s mother-in-law that she has described her as dead. Despite Pushpa’s playful threat that she will report Venmani’s speech to her mother-in-law, both the shopkeeper and her customer share an assumption that their conversation will not be reported or interpreted as a serious “onstage” interaction. Although parts of their conversation take the form of overt joking, these jokes, and the more serious frustrations to which they refer, would have more severe consequences if they were addressed directly in other environments. The space of the shop, and associated expectations about the nature of interactions between shopkeepers and regular customers, serve as a metapragmatic frame that buffers against interpretations that would hold either woman responsible for participation in mean-spirited talk.

4 I offer a transcript of the conversation in transliterated Tamil that is interspersed with English glosses. Rather than providing a precise morpheme by morpheme translation, I have attempted to convey the idiomatic meaning of what is said. I offer punctuation in the translated portions of the conversation in an attempt to make it easier to interpret. For the sake of clarity I translate māmā – a kin term that may be used to describe a husband, a father-in-law, maternal uncle, or other older man and attai – a term used to refer to an elder brother’s wife and other older women as more direct references to a particular person. I also supply references to specific persons in several places where only pronouns are used. I do this in order to capture meaning that is available in the full transcript of the conversation that cannot easily be represented here.

5 Poiyiruccu can be translated as “has gone” plus the completive aspect, with a slightly disrespectful neutered pronoun ending, but it can also be idiomatically interpreted as “has died”. It’s clear from the line that follows that Pushpa understands what Venmani means: that her mother in law is away for a bit.
11. Venmani: maṭṭatule māmātāṅ irukkirāṟu, poiṟucci
12. Pushpa: appa jolly-tāṅ māmākkku, attai ille-pu
12. Pushpa: So your father-in-law must be happy that you're mother-in-law isn't there?

From the moment of Venmani's arrival at the shop, Pushpa establishes she is there on behalf of others, buying on their credit and meeting needs that have emerged elsewhere. From the standpoint of the commercial transaction, which is cast as the primary business at hand, Venmani is merely animating the needs of others. She is not, to borrow Goffman's (1979) framework, the principal or even the author of the portions of the conversation that enact the purchase. Similarly, Pushpa, who regularly described herself as simply minding a shop that was owned and operated by her husband, frequently insisted that she was not fully responsible for the content of commercial transactions. Whether or not Venmani's frustrations with her mother-in-law were real, her words could have been problematic had they been uttered or recorded in other contexts.

Although power struggles between daughters and mothers-in-law are cliché and a staple of Tamil humor, direct on-record complaints about one's own family were usually treated as socially risky. During 21 months spent observing interactions in the neighborhoods surrounding Pushpa's shop, the only recordings I was asked to delete were those that incidentally captured women complaining about in-laws when visiting friends' houses. In contrast to speakers in other settings who were often aghast when they discovered that such talk had been recorded, Pushpa and Venmani's conversation reveals shared confidence that they will not be held responsible for the potentially hurtful content of their complaints. Indeed, participation in this kind of joking highlights the metacommunicative frames that distinguish conversations between shopkeepers and customers from talk in other settings. When Pushpa teases that she will tell Venmani's mother-in-law that Venmani wishes her dead, hinting at the disastrous consequences that might befall her if this conversation were to occur in other circumstances, Venmani responds by brazenly ordering Pushpa to go ahead and say it! When doing so, she implicitly acknowledges a shared understanding of their conversations doubly removed from responsibility both by its status as an acknowledged joke, and by its presence in a setting where it can be excused as occurring almost by accident, while in the midst of doing something else.

Interpretations of the degree to which speakers are understood to intend or take responsibility for their utterances depend on audiences' understandings of the contexts in which they occur (Hill and Irvine, 1992). As Morgan (1991:411) makes clear, the interpretation of speech as indirect relies on local beliefs that inform interpretation. Mutual agreement that talk in roadside shops may be understood as aimless or idle serves to support the flow of potentially risky commercial transactions. As Cheng and Warren (2003) argue, indirect language use, which avoids specifying topic or addressee, may play a particularly important role in enabling text to be built as a conversation unfolds. Chatter that delays the progress of interactions, particularly those that involve purchases on credit, helps to allow transactions to unfold over multiple interactions.

Ironically, the shop's acknowledged permeability to overhearers and to transactions that entailed others provided a better cover for potentially disruptive speech than the concrete walls of houses. To adapt Silverstein's (2003) framework, participants in roadside grocery shop conversations like this one could present themselves as “second-order” addressees, whose speech and action were guided by parties located outside the frame of the present interaction. Shopkeepers and their regular customers routinely characterized their interactions as mere asides or pre-sequences, which should be interpreted in relation to other kinds of exchange, both at home and in public. Participants in roadside shop transactions, particularly those that occurred on credit, generally presented their speech and action as if they occurred in response to persons and parties who were located elsewhere. Although it might, at times, have reflected participants' understandings of the talk in which they were engaged, the “backstage” status of shopping encounters was often strategically exploited and often veered closer to permissible artifice than a sincere characterization of events.

In an ethnography of life in a single apartment building in Karachi, Pakistan, Ring (2006) described relationships as governed by a logic of “maintenance” in which the preservation of relationships is preferred to overtly disruptive interaction. For this reason, neighbors are critiqued for returning plates of food and other gifts too quickly. A similar ethic of maintenance is also evident in the way pushaṭṭus were located elsewhere. Although it might, at times, have reflected participants' understandings of the talk in which they were engaged, the “backstage” status of shopping encounters was often strategically exploited and often veered closer to permissible artifice than a sincere characterization of events.

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6 This would be translated more literally as “hanging out in the village square”. maṭṭatu – refers to a paved meeting place, usually in a village, where panchayat meetings are held and people emblematically gather to pass the time. Venmani’s suggestion that her father-in-law is at the maṭṭatu, is a joking way to suggest that he’s carelessly passing time.

7 Throughout this part of the conversation Venmani uses non-honorific forms to refer to her in-laws, for example irukkuṟu as opposed to irukkuṟkkū. It is unlikely that they would refer to them this way if they were present, if they were in a space marked as fully public, or some other space in which she expected her speech to be reported as an example of serious “on stage” behavior.

8 Although it is usually translated as a describing an elder-brother’s, or male-parallel cousin’s wife “attai” is a form of respectful reference that might be used for any older woman. This line might be more directly translated as “So then your father-in-law (same term as maternal uncle) is very happy, without attai. I have translated it as mother-in-law here because her relationship to Venmani, rather than to her husband, is critical to this conversation. As one reviewer helpfully noted “it is not for nothing that the slang term for jail in Tamil is māṇiyar vidu (mother-in-law's house)”.

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participating in a commercial transaction that can be justified as guided by material necessity and by institutional and market forces occurring outside of the control of participants, speakers need not take the same kind of responsibility for what they say.

Most scholarly writing on talk and trade focuses on bargaining and other forms of explicit negotiation. In the routine interactions at the roadside grocery shops I studied, however, haggling is the exception rather than the rule. Shopping for rarely purchased goods from unfamiliar persons in distant places is a frequent topic of conversation in Thanjavur, but purchases from small grocery shops are generally dismissed as unremarkable. Despite its importance in everyday life, provision shopping as such is rarely treated as interesting, either by shoppers themselves or by scholars of trade (Miller, 1998). Careful evaluation of prices, artful talk about the quality of goods, and explicit negotiation were described as important only in the relatively rare cases in which purchases were made from strangers. In provision shopping encounters, both shopkeepers and customers described themselves as striving to build the sorts of knowledge and familiarity needed to minimize risk. Indeed, successful customers and those whom shopkeepers valued most, were those who conducted transactions without commenting on them directly.

Yet this does not mean that talk was irrelevant to the conduct of roadside grocery shop transactions. Because, like other petty traders, shopkeepers and customers did business in an environment where the quality of goods, the validity of prices, and the repayment of debt was not guaranteed by external authorities, conversations between shopkeepers and customers were geared towards the maintenance of relationships. In one-on-one interviews, both shopkeepers and customers stressed the importance of carrying out friendly banter as a means to maintain relationships and guarantee good future treatment. I do not mean to argue that exchanges between shopkeepers and customers should be assigned a single or definite function. Indeed, Pushpa and Venmani seemed to derive pleasure from the opportunity to tease and talk with one another. Yet I want to draw attention to the ways in which seemingly unrelated stretches of talk work to guide and comment on the transaction in which they are engaged.

15. Venmani: māmākku vettala oru ruvakk oru kāl liter pāl koṭunkā
16. Pushpa: yēṅ tā pāṭavā māṭukku engacca
17. Venmani: Yes give that please, why haven't (1) milked the cow? There's still some time to milk the cow. If we sell the milk it will be alright. Please give (me) one packet of tea powder and one rupee's worth of betel leaves.9
18. Pushpa: pāḷ māṭu karakkalaye (.) pāṭa pāṭyappattuṟiyā
19. Pushpa: So even though you’re milking the cow, you’re careful when making tea?10

Through teasing, Pushpa affirms knowledge of Venmani’s household and its resources. Venmani responds by offering a wide array of domestic details and thereby inviting Pushpa to collaborate with her in the work of provisioning. When Pushpa switches to a more intimate form of address and playfully scolds Venmani for buying packet milk for tea, even though her family owns a milk-producing cow, she is acting as if she values Venmani’s interests above those of the shop. Pushpa’s teasing acknowledgment that Venmani probably assumes the milk sold in the shop to be of lower quality than that which comes from her cow further highlights this role reversal. At the same time, by commenting on the fact that Venmani’s family chooses to keep the cow’s milk to sell while using lower quality milk purchased from the shop for tea, Pushpa locates her shop as part of the strategies of thrift that are known to others in the neighborhood.

Through joking, depiction of their talk as insignificant, and representing the needs and desires that motivate their actions as if they are external to their present conversation, Pushpa and Venmani mitigate the social and financial risks of the transaction in which they are engaged. Plastic milk packets sold in roadside grocery shops moved through wholesale chains in which refrigeration was unstable and uncertain. Like other shopkeepers, Pushpa occasionally acquired milk packets that had been partially spoiled through exposure to the sun, which could be disguised through cooling in the shop’s refrigerator. While such packets were occasionally sold to people who were merely passing through, shopkeepers usually offered warnings before selling spoiled goods to regular customers. Venmani implicitly relied on her status as a regular to ensure that Pushpa would not cheat her by passing on spoiled milk. Similarly, Pushpa, who gives Venmani the betel leaves and milk packet on credit, interpreted signs of relationship status as guarantees of good behavior.

Direct questions about the quality of goods and explicit reminders of the need for payment were rare between shopkeepers and their regular customers. Such overt statements of the stakes of interactions, which were commonplace in other kinds of commercial transactions, were likely to be viewed as threatening. Instead, teasing discussions of events elsewhere, combined with the absence of overt comment on potential troubles, marks participants in conversations as adequately credulous trading partners. I say ‘adequately credulous’ rather than confident and dependable because both shopkeepers and

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9 A local friend who knew Venmani’s family explained that they could probably make more money by selling their cow’s milk than by using it at home for tea. Venmani doesn’t say this directly, but Pushpa hints at her understanding of it in her response.
10 In this line, which might be more precisely glossed as “milking a milk cow are you cautious when making tea?” Pushpa has shifted from addressing Venmani with the respectful second person pronoun ningkõl (as in lines 6 and 8) to addressing her more intimately as ni.
customers explicitly described their interactions as a form of theater (naṭakam). I recorded several instances in which customers who had just been addressed with casual pleasantries were talked about with bitterness and anger as soon as they left the shop.

5. Addressing overhearers

Although shopkeepers most often depicted it as a commercial strategy, the seeming insignificance of talk surrounding grocery shops offered a form of indirectness that could be exploited by others as well. In a discussion of a collection of regional humor books that purport to carry anecdotes and conversation that are “overheard in Dublin,” Moore (2011) observes that the staging of speech as overheard has the effect of altering ways the ‘paratextual’ apparatus of location is used to interpret associations between purported principals and animated speech. Moore suggests that the figure of overhearer as reporter is a popular fixture in regional humor because it helps to insulate the teller and the reader from the potentially damaging indexicalities of speech. Cody (2011) describes “Teashop Bench” – a regularly appearing column in a daily Tamil-language newspaper that was subscribed to by residents of Thanjavur and surrounding areas, as making similar use of overhearing as a framing device. In contrast to other sections of the paper, which represent directly reported news in flowery, written Tamil, “Teashop Bench” reports arguments and ribald humor as if they were overheard conversations between men passing time at a roadside teashop. The column draws on popular understandings of teashops as sites where spirited debate may be expected. The device of purported overhearing creates a stance towards the content of text that is different from the one found elsewhere in the paper. Ventriloquizing overheard conversations allows the writer of the column to offer reports and speculations that could not be voiced or printed directly.

The strategic use of overhearers, or of address to un-ratified participants may also be found is face-to-face conversations. In a discussion of verbal disputes in Barbados, Fisher (1976) describes an overtly recognized use of talk directed at overhearers. He describes “dropping remarks” in which speakers soliloquize talk to no one in particular with the knowledge that their words will be heard by, but not overtly interpretable as directed to, a person whom they hope to insult. If a dropped remark is successful the intended (but un-ratified) recipient will receive a message to which they cannot directly respond. By staging speech in the space of roadside grocery shops, where talk could be excused as occurring to no one in particular, it becomes more difficult to avoid and significantly less face-threatening than it would have been if he had visited them at their houses. While it is likely that both Dayaakar and his customers recognized such meetings as the result of conscious artifice, they preserved the possibility that he trusted that payments would be returned without reminders.

Such accessibility to other area residents and permeability to overhearing endowed the spaces surrounding shops with possibilities that were unavailable in other “backstage” areas. Although Dayaakar’s remarks were usually addressed to a particular person, roadside grocery shops also offered a space in which a larger group of known but indefinite listeners might be addressed. People who sought to secure support in domestic quarrels without seeming to take them out of the house used this possibility most frequently. For example, in August 2008 Nirupama, an elderly woman who lived up the street from Pushpa’s shop, spent the better part of one week going to and from the shop complaining to neighbors that her son-in-law was refusing to make any financial contribution towards the support of his wife or children, all of whom were currently living with her. She claimed to have recently learned that he was putting money towards the education of his sister’s children and threatened that she would rally other family members and go to the police station if he did not soon start sending payments to his own children as well. She explained that she was reluctant to go to the police, but if things did not change, she saw no option but to do so.

I think it unlikely that Nirupama ever intended to take her son-in-law to the police station. Yet her speech, which took the form of an extended pre-sequence to more overtly threatening action, seems to have succeeded in reaching her son-in-law while gathering some degree of support from people outside of her family. Some observers denigrated this sort of overtly overbearable complaining. After listening to an argument that one neighborhood woman had blatantly staged for overhearing – going so far as to walk up to the shop and speak directly into my tape recorder, a male customer scornfully explained to me that men would never fight like that. Pushpa’s husband, who was standing behind the shop’s counter, quickly agreed. Yet this sort of backstage lament was one of the few means possible by which women could address concerns that could not be raised directly in spaces that were marked as home, or in areas that were overtly public, without even greater loss of face.

As Nirupama’s case vividly illustrates, speech in roadside grocery shops may be intended to be talked about. Yet its ability to be presented as incidental to provisioning, commerce, and activities that will take place elsewhere absolves speakers from direct accusations of intention. At the same time, listeners, who can claim that they are virtuously engaged in meeting the
needs of hungry family members or procuring the items needed to be presentable in public, are absolved of responsibility for listening. In this way, the bodies of possible overhearers that gather around roadside shops are different from the publics that Warner (2002) and others (Calhoun, 1992; Greenberg, 2012 Kunreuther, 2010; Pardue, 2011) have described as animated by space and media forms. Whereas publics are explicitly addressed and addressable the possibilities of speech surrounding roadside grocery shops escape overt characterization.

6. The purchase of backstage publics

As Ellis (2008) notes in a description of the rules of conduct in British coffee houses during the seventeenth century, constraints established by commercial trade may shape the boundaries of political participation. Although roadside grocery shops were generally dismissed as a-political, would-be politicians occasionally exploited their possibilities. Ramnath, an owner of a roadside grocery shop who successfully ran for election in a local Pancayat (an institution roughly equivalent to a city council) during the period of my research, described shopkeeping as a sort of covert campaign strategy. He noted that, by keeping a shop, he was able to get to know most of the families who lived in the area, to chat with them about politics from time to time, and to become a known and liked person. Keeping the shop allowed him access to people who were unlikely to attend formal political rallies, who despised politics, and who might otherwise ignore elections. He also noted with a wry smile, that ‘it doesn’t hurt that everyone here owes me money either.’ Although Ramnath claimed that he kept his shop free of overtly political signs, despite having used part of an old DMK political poster to build his shop’s awning, he was keenly aware that commercial extensions of credit might produce a sense of indebtedness that could be exploited in other domains.

As Chatterjee (2011) has observed, the work of organizing and managing so-called informal or petty trade is as much a political activity as it is an economic one (see also Anjaria, 2011). The same strategies of management that allow roadside grocery shops to seamlessly merge with the households of their customers, and permit the potential ruptures threatened by unpaid debts to pass as mere chance delays provide an interpretive framework that enables forms of action with implications on a much wider scale. The strategic possibilities of overhearing and circulation resulting from shops’ location on the edge of more overtly public space could be overtly exploited. In much the same way that Ramnath half-jokingly equated operating a shop that sold goods on credit with a means of purchasing votes from his constituency, the sponsors of the politicized drum program that I described as the beginning of this paper were keenly aware of the possibilities presented by provisioning space.

Although viewers in the space of the roadside grocery shop were eager to characterize the performance that they watched as a rehearsal, it was likely to be more efficacious than the purported real event. In contrast to the later performance in public space, the rehearsal was staged in front of a known and knowing audience, which was made keenly aware of the cost and its association with ambitious area residents. While such displays of political devotion are a means by which aspiring politicians can signal their prominence within a chosen political party (Bate, 2002), they are also a means by which to signal one’s status and importance to potential supporters outside of the party. Although none of the programs sponsors admitted that the staging of a “rehearsal” reflected an explicit political strategy, the care with which they observed this performance and its audience suggests that they understood the significance of actions that occurred in actions that were denied the status of an overt event which can be reported as reflecting the serious self-presentation of participants.

7. Conclusion

Although facilitated by spatial location and the practical need for household provisions, the “backstage” aspect of interactions in roadside grocery shops is one that participants work to produce. Grocery shopkeepers, like other As Gagné (2011) notes in a study of farmers markets in the urban US the opportunity to inhabit a space free from the constraints of domestic or institutional governance is one that customers may pay to enjoy. She describes customers who are willing to pay a premium for lettuce that has been purchased directly from farmers because it allows them to imagine the possibility of trade and interaction that is relatively free from institutional control. Even if the removal from scrutiny by the state and other institutions is a fantasy, it is one in which shoppers may pay to indulge. Similarly, Gaudio (2003:677) suggests that Starbucks draws a profit from its explicitly designed status as a “third place” between public and private domains. While it offers customers the possibilities of speech in a space that is neither home nor the office, this position is one that customers must pay to occupy.

Customers who frequented roadside grocery shops in Thanjavur occasionally admitted that they had come to make a particular purchase because they were eager simply to leave the house, to stop other work, or to exchange a particular piece of news. A retired civil servant spent nearly half an hour conversing with neighbors at his regularly visited roadside shop each morning, with little more pretext than the purchase of a single cough drop. Shopkeepers agreed that such people could be tiring but, as long as they occasionally purchased something, they could not be turned away. Grocery shops offered excellent cover for university students engaged in illicit love affairs who sought seemingly innocent locations at which to meet and linger. Domestic servants, newly married women, and others who were subject to rigorous scrutiny in other domains sought refuge in roadside shops with the pretext of purchasing. Opportunities for care and commiseration added to the pleasures of roadside grocery shopping; however, shopkeepers who held back their anger were offering more than service with a smile.
Jokes, gossip, and other forms of seemingly idle phatic talk were part of the process of trade in an environment that was relatively free from overt regulation. Speaking as if one's talk is inconsequential and the interaction at hand is unimportant is part of a broader semiotics of indirectness that enables the conduct of commercial transactions. In contrast to actions that overtly seek to ensure good behavior and thereby signal mistrust – such as the demand for explicit receipts or resort to legal enforcement of contracts – the passing off of an interaction as unremarkable sustains the assumption that all parties involved may be relied upon to behave predictably. While it may not always have been strategic or intentional, shopkeepers occasionally admitted that participation in unremarkable interactions required overt effort. After conversations with customers that had been jovial, pleasant, or seemingly unremarkable, shopkeepers occasionally whispered to me that they were, in fact, quite frustrated or that it had taken effort not to get angry.

While most studies of sellers' talk have emphasized the skill required to make purchasing exciting or attractive (Kapchan, 1996; Seligmann, 2004) rendering commercial transactions dull and unworthy of comment may require equal skill. By framing immediate interactions as inconsequential, and locating authority, responsibility, and the status of overtly reportable events elsewhere, shopkeepers, customers, and even bystanders in roadside grocery shops implicitly secured the relationships that enabled commercial transactions to occur. Everyday spaces and mundane conversations are not a space of refuge from publics, politics, and markets, but rather sites that may play critical roles in their enactment. The performances of predictability, unremarkability, and overhearing that surround roadside grocery shops help to enact potentially tense and exciting forms of commercial exchange.

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References


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