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## Mememes, Emojis, and Text: The Semiotics of Differentiation in Sri Lankan Tamil Digital Publics

*This article draws on Judith T. Irvine's theorizing of the semiotic processes of differentiation to investigate how Sri Lankan Tamils and Muslims configure similarity and difference in multimodal social media interactions. I analyze Facebook discussions around memes of Tamil-language blunders in trilingual public signs, which are widely taken to represent the incomplete implementation of Tamil as a co-official language. Insider status in groups is not contingent on code use, but on expressing particular alignments toward the memes as tokens of a type. By virtue of their metapragmatic ambiguity, emojis are powerful in enabling participants to create shared affective stances around the memes, but they are also useful in demarcating difference between Tamil speakers and Sinhalese. I contribute to studies of social media communication by examining how different linguistic and non-linguistic forms of expression are used to delineate transnational Tamil digital publics. [multimodality, semiotics, social media, Sri Lanka, Tamil]*

Judith T. Irvine's theorizing of the semiotic processes of differentiation in communication provides an ideal framework for analyzing multimodal social media interactions (Irvine 2001; see Gal and Irvine 2019). Sri Lanka is a postcolonial nation recovering from a protracted civil war (1983–2009) between the Sinhala-majority government and a northern Tamil insurgency group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). All public signs are required by law to be in Sinhala, Tamil, and English, but in the south they are sometimes in Sinhala only or contain errors in the Tamil or English. Tamils and Muslims living in-country and abroad widely circulate and discuss photographs of Tamil signage errors on social media. I refer to the Tamil blunder images as "ready-made" memes because, in contrast to conventional memes (typically multimodal signs that are altered by users and rapidly spread online) (Shifman 2011), they already combine images and text.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I incorporate Irvine's (2001) conceptualization of linguistic and non-linguistic signs in relation to a system of distinction to investigate how Tamil, Muslim, and Sinhala participants configure commonality and difference in Facebook discussions around these memes. I contribute to studies of social media communication by examining how different forms of expression (memes, emojis, and text) are used to delineate transnational digital publics.

Social media is so integrated into our everyday lives that it is often difficult to separate online and offline worlds (Varis 2015). But it is nevertheless important to understand how social media platforms shape interactions by supporting various

means and modes of expression, participant frameworks (interactional roles played by different participants), and what is seen or unseen (Prentice 2019; see Blommaert 2018a, boyd 2014; Gershon 2010a, b; Miller 2018). Online communication, which has “outspokenly multimodal default characteristics” (Blommaert 2018b, 113), has brought our encounters with images to an unprecedented ubiquity (Wang 2016). Participation in online activities, from browsing Facebook to watching a YouTube video, involves making sense of and revaluing pieces of text in relation to images and sound (Keane 2018).

Varis and Blommaert (2015) complement studies of social media interactions focused on discord by exploring the ways people maintain relations of conviviality with those in their social media networks. They argue that the ‘like’ and ‘share’ functions on Facebook do valuable social structuring work that prevents differences from leading to contention. This function is largely phatic (concerned with the channel of communication) in Roman Jakobson’s (1960) sense since “‘meaning’ as an outcome of denotational-textual decoding is not at stake” (Varis and Blommaert 2015, 35; see Miller 2008). In contrast to pragmatic content, which is dependent on context, textual-denotational content refers to linguistic signs that have referential and predicative values that contribute to a message (Silverstein 1993; Wortham 2003). Varis and Blommaert (2015, 35) discuss how people use ‘liking’ to perform membership in relation to their community of Facebook friends; it expresses a “judgment that they themselves belong to the intended audiences of a message or sign” (Varis and Blommaert 2015, 35; see Lange 2009). Facebook introduced the ‘like’ button in 2009 to enable users to express positive evaluations of the content of posts, photos, and comments, but it has developed many functions in practice (Gerlitz and Helmond 2013). In posts or over Messenger it can be used to get involved in new exchanges, bring interactions to an end, or even manage contradictory expectations (Eranti and Lonkila 2015).<sup>2</sup> ‘Sharing’, which was introduced in 2006 (Gerlitz and Helmond 2013), “recontextualizes and directly reorients” content from another user toward one’s own Facebook network, “triggering another phase in a process of viral circulation, part of which can—but must not—involve real ‘reading’ of the text” (Varis and Blommaert 2015, 35).

Building on Varis and Blommaert (2015) and other studies of digitally mediated communication, what can we say about the role of pragmatic and textual-denotational functions in both relatively congenial and discordant online interactions? And, inspired by recent work in the linguistic anthropology of images, how are pieces of textual-denotational content taken up and utilized in relation to images?<sup>3</sup> While the textual-denotational content often does not “prevail as criteria for sharing” an image, meme, or video in online posts (2015, 34), the text that accompanies these posts is important to their contextualization and recontextualization. A simple hashtag on Twitter, for example, does important work to frame an image for its intended audience (Blommaert 2018b; Bonilla and Rosa 2015; Fine 2019). In 2016 Facebook extended the ‘like’ function by adding five emoji (pictorial symbols) reactions meant to represent common emotions (‘Love,’ ‘Haha,’ ‘Wow,’ ‘Sad,’ and ‘Angry’).<sup>4</sup> The reactions allowed users to make a range of affective alignments with Facebook posts and comments. Facebook and other platform users also express themselves through an ever-expanding inventory of emojis. While they have set meanings that are delineated in Unicode, they sometimes have multiple meanings, are not used as intended, and can develop their own meanings within particular groups. Scholars initially saw emoticons (pictorial representations of facial expressions made from characters) and emojis as providing non-verbal cues similar to gestures, but they are now recognized to be highly multifunctional. They are used to express emotion, manage tone and illocutionary force, provide punctuation and structural markers, add aesthetic content, and convey propositional content (Schneebeli 2017; see Dresner and Herring 2010; Herring and Dainas 2017).<sup>5</sup> Thus, emojis are multifaceted expressive tools that, when used alone or in

combination with text, fulfill many of the functions associated with language (Ge and Herring 2018).

Irvine (2001) laid the groundwork for thinking about the configuration of similarity and difference in online interactions in her work on the semiotics of “style” as distinctiveness. Incorporating a Peircian understanding of a system of signs, she places style’s linguistic and non-linguistic aspects in the same semiotic framework. She observes that rather than simply recognizing individual styles in isolation, we need to analyze them in relation to a “system of distinction” (2001, 22). She discusses how social indexicality, the process by which people relate speech or other features to real or imagined social personas, is ideologically mediated. She reminds readers of Charles Sanders Peirce’s (1839–1914) insight that indexes (sign/object relations grounded in spatiotemporal contiguity) can only inform social action if they function as signs. All signs require an interpretant, which represents some “further action or mental representation” (Peirce, cited in Parmentier 1994, 5). She writes that the relationship among styles “must be meaningful to, and at some level understood by, some persons whose action are informed by it” (Irvine 2001, 22). Her observations highlight the inherent sociality of Peircian semiotics, while drawing our attention to the positioned and culturally variable nature of participants’ understanding of their social world and the stylistic resources available in it. Important to Irvine and Susan Gal’s approach to language and ideology across their significant body of work is their focus on differentiation as a semiotic process (Gal and Irvine 2019, 1; Irvine and Gal 2000). They take a semiotic approach to language and social life while foregrounding within the larger frame, “the particularities of linguistic forms and its special place in social life” (Gal and Irvine 2019, 15). As they discuss, “For Peirce, the continuous chains of abduction that constitute both communication and knowledge do not distinguish linguistic signs from any other types of signs” (15). Related to their focus on the sociality of signs, they emphasize how ideologies or regimes of value “organize and direct even the simplest noticing of any phenomenon as a sign” (16). They identify typification, the process (accomplished by conjecture) through which real-time experiences are taken up as *tokens* (“instantiations or embodiments”) of *types* (generalizations or cultural categories), as crucial to semiosis (281; see Peirce 1906).

I examine public Facebook posts between 2017 and 2019 to look at how participants in discussions around memes of Tamil blunders delineate insider or outsider status in relation transnational Sri Lankan Tamil publics, and how they take up and employ memes to emojis in relation to textual-denotational content. The participants in the interactions drew on “rapidly solidified” global norms of social media etiquette (Blommaert 2018a, 26), and more emergent norms specific to different groups. Although the Tamil language is important to a transnational Tamil identity, I discuss how insider status in these groups is not contingent on code use, but on expressing particular alignments toward Tamil blunder memes as *tokens* of *types*, which, in turn, reflect a common regime of value (Gal and Irvine 2019). While participants risk getting called out or questioned when they leave comments with textual-denotational content, the indeterminate nature of emojis make them a powerful tool for producing shared affective alignments that create a sense of a common experience among Tamils and Muslims from different sociolinguistic, national, regional, class, and gender backgrounds. But emojis are also used to demarcate difference between Tamil speakers and Sinhalese.

This study grew out of an ethnographic project on language politics and digital media in postwar Sri Lanka. From 2015 to 2020 I followed online content pertaining to Tamil blunder memes and other related topics and interviewed some of the participants about their interpretations of this content over Facebook Messenger and in person (Davis 2020b). My analysis of the Facebook interactions was aided by the fact that I know some of the participants from my long-term research in Sri Lanka (2007–2008, 2011) and from Tamil studies networks in the United States. I learned about other participants’ ethno-religious affiliations and places of residence from their public Facebook profiles.

### Sri Lanka's Trilingual Policies and Digital Publics

Sinhala (Buddhist or Christian) make up 74.9 percent of Sri Lanka's population. They speak Sinhala, an Indo-Aryan language related to the languages of North India. There are several Tamil-speaking ethnic minority groups. North and East Tamils (11.2 percent) have lived on the island for centuries, primarily in the north and east, but also in the south. Up-Country Tamils (4.2 percent) are descendants of migrants who arrived from South India during the British colonial period (1815–1948) to work as plantation laborers in the central highlands (Daniel 1996). Members of both Tamil groups are predominately Hindu, with a significant Christian minority. Muslims make up 9.2 percent of the population. They can be traced back to the pre-Islamic seafaring trade between South and Southeast Asia and the Middle East and Arab Muslim mercantile trade in the first part of the seventh century. Most Muslims speak Tamil as a first language, but the government classifies them as an ethnic minority group on the basis of their religion (McGilvray and Raheem 2007; Thiranagama 2011).

Postindependence language and education policies were part of the complex causes of the Sri Lankan civil war (Spencer 1990; Thiranagama 2011). Following independence, the Sinhala-Buddhist majority government instituted discriminatory policies against Tamils and Muslims. One of the most significant of these policies was the Sinhala-Only Act of 1956, which declared Sinhala to be the sole official language of the nation. Education policies were successful in improving educational access for all Sri Lankan youth, but the separation of students on the basis of language of instruction (Sinhala or Tamil) heightened feelings of interethnic difference and mistrust (Tambiah 1986). In 1987 the thirteenth amendment to the constitution established Tamil as a co-official language and English an interethnic "link language." However, Tamil's new status remained mostly on paper, and English was not heavily promoted because it was seen as foreign (Devotta 2004). While the government has taken measure to fully implement Tamil as a co-official language, in the south hospitals and police stations still often lack Tamil interpreters and public signs and government documents are sometimes in Sinhala only or contain errors in the Tamil content (Davis 2020a, b).

The war ended in May 2009 when the Sri Lankan army declared victory over the LTTE, but Tamil-speaking minorities remain in a precarious position because a political solution is yet to be reached. Many Tamils living in-country and abroad consider the full implementation of the Official Languages Policy to be vital to the postwar reconciliation process (Davis 2020b).<sup>6</sup> Sri Lankan Muslims ground their ethnic identity in religion rather than language (McGilvray and Raheem 2007). As a reflection of their diversity as a community, they vary with respect to their identification with Tamil. Muslims in the majority Tamil-speaking north and east often consider Tamil to be their "mother tongue," but southern Muslims, who tend to be bilingual in Tamil and Sinhala, sometimes claim that Arabic is their mother tongue or that they do not have one at all (Davis 2022). Still, many Sri Lankan Muslims are invested in the achievement of Tamil language rights.

Since 1983, hundreds of thousands of North and East Tamils have migrated to Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and other countries, forming diaspora communities. New virtual spaces (i.e., websites and blogs) had begun to influence Tamil politics and culture inside Sri Lanka and among the diaspora by the late 1990s and early 2000s (Sriskandarajah 2005), but social media has created new possibilities for transnational Tamil socio-cultural and political engagement. Sri Lankans began using Facebook widely in 2008 and now it is the most popular social media network in the country. Social media platforms allow resident and diasporic Sri Lankan Tamils and Muslims to regularly interact with one another in Tamil (usually in Tamil script), English, or both.

During my research in Colombo and Kandy, a city in central Sri Lanka, Tamil and Muslim friends frequently drew my attention to the absence of Tamil on public signs

or errors in the Tamil content. Later, I learned of the practice of circulating memes of Tamil signage blunders on websites and on social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr, which began around 2010. The types of errors on the public signs differ, but many involve the distortion or misuse of Tamil words or phrases in ways that are taken to be offensive, derogatory, or humorous. While Tamil errors in multilingual public signs are also common in India, Singapore, Malaysia, and Canada, these issues are particularly sensitive in the fragile postwar Sri Lankan context (Davis 2020b). In the following, I analyze discussion around the most widely circulating Tamil blunder meme.

**Example One: “Reserved for Pregnant Dogs”**



Figure 1. Reserved for Pregnant Dogs.

1. A (Tamil woman in Texas): *cirippum, varuttamum kalanta uñārvai indap paṭam enakkud tanda kāraṇaattināl etai aḷuttuvadu enṟṟiyātu.....*

Because of the feeling of sadness and laughter this picture gave me, I do not know which one to emphasize.....

2. B (Tamil woman in Canada): *ennaṭā naṭakkutu inka ippaṭiyē tamilaik kolai paṇṇurātu mātṭiramillai karppiṇit tāyaiyyum allavā kolai paṇṇurānka. inta reeṭṭula enka tān pōy muṭiyappokuto????*

What’s happening here? You guys are not only murdering the Tamil language but also pregnant women. I don’t know where all this will end at this rate?????

3. C (Muslim man in Akurana [Central Province]): Really. Our country is full of fools?

4. D (Muslim man in Kandy): Isn’t there an authority to oversee and regulate all these under ministry of Mano Ganesan or any other, which is supposed to act for integration of all communities in Sri Lanka?

5. E (Muslim man in Saudi Arabia): (He pasted a link to a sign for the University of Visual and Performance Arts in which “visual and performing arts” in the Tamil portion was written in transliterated Sinhala [*selandarya kalā* (aesthetic arts)].)

(Reply) 5.1. F (Tamil man in Jaffna): “*selandarya*” *molip pirayōkam!* 🙄  
 “aesthetics” language application! 🙄

6. E: (He pasted a link to a sign in which the Tamil portion says “Ministry of National Robbery” [*koḷḷaika!*] instead of “Ministry of Policies.”)

7. G (Tamil woman in Kandy): Those who make the boards are often Sinhala (and I have heard that Sinhala boards in Jaffna also carry a lot of mistakes). And also, because the font changes in transfer, the letters can change. That often happens when we write something and send them off to the printers. The font changes without our knowing, if we don’t use unicode. I don’t know the real reason, but it is also because boards are made by Sinhala persons, who merely follow the sign; and then they follow it wrong.

8. H (Tamil man in Tamil Nadu, India): Is it accidental or intentional?

8.1. I (Nafisa): Ignorance, what else?

9. J (Muslim man in Saudi Arabia): *nāṭṭukku nāṭu... #stēṭṭukkē oppi yūṇiṭṭi vācappaṭi.*  
 Country for the country... #Step to unity in unison with the state.<sup>7</sup>

10. K (Tamil man in Germany): *ciriccuc ciriccuk kuṭal valikiṛatu. “karppiṇi nāymārukku”; tēciyak kollai. . . 😊 aiyo ilankaiyiṇ katai ituvāccu!*

The gut hurts from so much laughing. “Pregnant dog”; National robbery/pillage. . . 😊 Oh my, this has become the story of Sri Lanka!

11. L (Muslim man in Kandy): They’re not intentional, bcos the ones who make these boards are not proficient in the language in which it’s written. However there’s another reason. Most of these are not written by professional translators but by Tamil speaking employees attached to a particular office or department. Further the murder of a language is not confined to Tamil language only. There are umpteen number of name boards, where even English language too is given the same treatment. So it’s not intentional but unprofessionalism, laziness and ignorance of the responsible officials.

12. M (Sinhala man in Tissamaharama [Southern Province]): *dakuṇē bohō sthānavala daknaṭa lābena podu dānvīm puvaruvala tattoaya tamayi eya. demaḷa akuru vērādiyaṭa yedīma nisā vikāra arthayak tamayi lābennē.*

This is the condition of the public ad board seen in many places in the South. By using Tamil letters incorrectly, you get a nonsense meaning.

In February 2014 the investigative news website, the *Colombo Telegraph*, reported a Tamil error in a trilingual sign that had been displayed in several government buses in Colombo. As a result of a single letter substitution, **ந** (*na*) for **த** (*ta*), the Tamil portion reads “reserved for pregnant dogs” (*nāymārkaḷukkāka*) instead of “reserved for pregnant mothers” (*tāymārkaḷukkāka*) (see Figure 1).<sup>8</sup> *Nāy* (dog) is a severe Tamil pejorative term used for both women and men. The substitution of “dog” for “mother” would be offensive in many languages, but this error is particularly disturbing for Tamils because of the deep historical and socio-cultural association of the Tamil language and a mother (Bate 2009; Davis 2020b; Ramaswamy 1997). The blunder was covered by dozens of Tamil, English, and Sinhala news websites and blogs, and it has been widely circulated and discussed on social media.

Nafisa is a female Muslim lecturer at a university in southern Sri Lanka who holds a PhD in Tamil studies. She posted the “reserved for pregnant dogs” meme on her Facebook timeline in 2017. While many gear their posts on Tamil blunder memes to fellow Tamils or Muslims, she used English to inclusively frame the meme in the text accompanying it for those who cannot read Tamil. She translated the Tamil portion of the sign into Sinhala and then wrote what the sign “should have said” in Tamil (*tāymārkaḷukkāka*). Most responses to Nafisa’s post were ‘likes’ (29) and emoji reactions (34 [23 ‘Sad,’ 10 ‘Haha,’ 1 ‘Angry’]). Several Tamils mentioned to me that they find Tamil blunder memes to be both funny *and* sad, but in this case most people chose ‘Sad’ (Davis 2020b). The mirroring of an emoji reaction or emoji used by a poster or an early responder allows participants to create shared affective alignments with one another in real time that can create a feeling of participation in a shared community (Djenar, Ewing, and Manns 2018). In comparison with other posts on Tamil blunder memes on Facebook and Twitter, this one received a lot of comments with textual-denotational content (12). Likely influenced by Nafisa’s inclusive framing of the meme, these comments were left by Tamils, Muslims, and Sinhala who wrote in English (6), Tamil in Tamil script (5), and Sinhala in Sinhala script (1). Most of these people were middle-aged Sri Lankans who knew Nafisa from Sri Lankan academic networks. While some seemed to write their comments without reading the prior comments, as is common on Facebook, several people directly responded to each other’s comments, making the discussion quite interactive.

In the first part of the thread Tamil and Muslim participants from different sociolinguistic, national, and regional backgrounds articulated their reactions toward and opinions about the meme in Tamil and English. In line 1, Person A (see above), a Tamil woman in the United States, discussed in Tamil how she had difficulty deciding whether she felt it was sad or funny. The topic shifted to the production of the blunder in line 7 when Person G, a northern Tamil lecturer in Kandy, wrote in English that signage errors are made in the digital typesetting of the letters, a point

she elaborated on when we spoke at a conference in the United States in 2019. The final comment (line 12) is the only one written in Sinhala.

This discussion was congenial relative to Facebook norms because the participants did not question or call each other out on any comments. While they did not share the use of Tamil as a code (English, in fact, is the main language in the post and comments), they all recognized the “reserved for pregnant dogs” meme as a *token of a type*—Tamil blunder memes. This typification, “making experiences into instances of types” (Gal and Irvine 2019, 95), was substantiated when Person E (lines 5 and 6) pasted links to two other signboard memes of Tamil blunders. And although the participants’ comments reflect quite varied reactions to the meme, most aligned with it as representative of a systemic issue, the incomplete or flawed implementation of Tamil as a co-official language (see the comments in lines 4, 7, 8.1, and 10–12). The view that Tamil blunder memes circulated online are emblematic of a larger issue to which they comprise a part is entextualized in Sri Lankan Tamil digital communities, meaning that it is a discourse that can be lifted out of an interactional settings and function as a “coherent, effective, and meaningful” text (Bauman and Briggs 1990, 73–74). As discussed above, when a meme is shared and discussed on social media it is recontextualized, allowing the possibility for new entextualizations as signs are metapragmatically reframed and reinterpreted (Briggs and Bauman 1992). As an example of the entextualized view, most of the posts in the Tamil language Facebook group, “*tamiḷ moliyai amulpaṭuttu*” (Tamil Language Implementation) include Tamil blunder memes, even when the textual-denotational content of the posts address other related issues. But these memes help the post get higher engagement by emblematically drawing attention to the dearth of Tamil language rights (Davis 2020b).

The intentionality of Tamil signboard errors is a topic that often comes up in posts on Tamil blunders. Here there is partial consensus in lines 7–12 that Tamil blunders are the result of unintentional errors, whether in translation or typesetting. While some Tamils (often from the north and east) consider them to be malicious acts committed by the government against the Tamil language and culture, this is the less common view (see Davis 2020b). Two of the participants (lines 2 and 11) likened the blunder to the murdering of the Tamil language, but these comments are not necessarily to be taken literally because Tamil errors are widely referred to as *tamiḷ kolai* (Tamil murder) (E. Annamalai, personal communication, March 10, 2020).

The participants’ shared alignment with the meme as a *token of a type* indicates their common regime of value (Gal and Irvine 2019), which is not surprising given they are Facebook friends with Nafisa and some clearly know each other from scholarly networks. Thus, while they may all have different views, they share a frame of reference, a reflection of their knowledge, experiences, and assumptions (2019, 16).<sup>9</sup> Almost all of the participants were Tamils and Muslims who likely have some Tamil proficiency, but the heavy use of English indexes the participants’ status as educated and middle class. The following Facebook interaction around a Tamil blunder meme was less congenial because Sinhala participants were positioned as outsiders in relation to the emerging group.

### Example Two: The Ampara–Kandy Bus Sign

6. Person A (Sinhala female in Colombo): I’m.sorry i didn’t get it?what is it that i missed?<sup>10</sup>  
 (Reply) 6.1. Person B (Sinhala man in Colombo): Yeha me too. Picture is not clear  
 6.2. Person C (Tamil man in Colombo): better not to get  
 it :v (Pac Man face)  
 6.3. Person A: why?  
 6.4. Person A: oh okay 😊 pic is not clear enough to read  
 6.5. Person D (Tamil man in Colombo): (tagged Person E and three others) 🤔  
 6.6. Person E (Tamil man in Colombo): Lol 😂😂😂



Figure 2. Ampara–Kandy Bus Sign.

13. Person F (Sinhala man in Colombo): (tagged Person G) translate it for us :3  
 13.1. Person G (Tamil woman in Finland): It's written as 'Ass' instead of kandy.
16. Person H (Tamil man in Colombo): (tagged persons I and J) hope you two are familiar with this Tamil word 🤔  
 16.1. Person I (Sinhala woman in Colombo): Okay now 🤔  
 16.2. Person J (Sinhala woman in Colombo): its not clear 😐
17. Person K (Sinhala man from Colombo, living in California): (tagged Person L) what does it say  
 17.1. Person L (Muslim man in Colombo): No clue bro. Ask someone who reads tamil.  
 17.2. Person K: (tagged Person M [a Tamil man in Toronto] and Person N)  
 17.3. Person L: (tagged Person N)  
 17.4. Person O (Tamil man in Canada): (tagged Person N)  
 17.5. Person N (woman in Colombo): 🤔grow up  
 17.6. Person K: This has nothing to do with growing up. just tell us what it says on the bus gdi (goddamn it)  
 17.7. Person N: You are so lame.  
 17.8. Person L: I thought the thing on the bus is posed to be funny.  
 17.9. Person K: Yeah but it just says "You are so lame"? SMH (shaking my head) people be overreacting  
 17.10. Person L: Ffs (for fuck's sake). The meme industry is dipping. I blame trump  
 17.11. Person P (Tamil man in Kandy): குண்டி (*kunṭi*) means – ass in Tamil 🤔

On May 12, 2017, an administrator of the Facebook page, Sri Lankan Spelling Mistakes (SLSM), posted a blurry image of the front of an Ampara–Kandy government bus (see Figure 2). The word for Kandy (*kaṇṭi*) in the Tamil portion of the sign was misspelled as *kunṭi* ("ass" or "butt"). SLSM was created in 2013 to share memes of funny spelling mistakes on Sri Lankan signs and advertisements (the name was recently changed to Typos and Humour and it now includes memes from around the world). Its administrators were a group of young middle-class Sinhala males living in Colombo, who studied in English-medium private schools. The majority of the memes featured English mistakes, but there were a few Tamil ones as well. While young adults living in Sri Lanka or abroad of all ethnic and religious backgrounds 'liked' the page, it was mainly Tamils and Muslims who engaged with posts on Tamil blunders, forming sub-groups within the page.



The administrator framed the post on the bus meme with the comment, "I'm told the Tamil is quite funny." The comment situates him as someone unfamiliar with Tamil (and likely Sinhala). This statement is also cheeky because it identifies the error as being in the Tamil portion but does not say what it is. The post received 29 'likes' and 49 emoji reactions, almost entirely from Tamils and Muslims. Almost all of those who used emoji reactions chose 'Haha' (47 'Haha,' 1 'Wow,' and 1 'Angry'). In contrast to Example One, most of the comments left by Tamils and Muslims did not involve textual-denotational content, but consisted of tags, acronyms such as Lol (laugh out loud), and emojis indicating laughter or embarrassment, including the 'face with tears of joy'—the Oxford English Dictionary's Word of the Year in 2015—which indicates that someone is laughing so hard tears are streaming. Through these choices, the participants aligned with the meme (a *token* of the *type*, Tamil blunder memes) as something funny or embarrassingly funny as an affective stance. Getting the joke in this context is not contingent on being proficient in Tamil, but on recognizing the word in question or having a friend who knows Tamil available to translate it. Sinhalas, by contrast, left textual-denotational comments inquiring about the meaning of the blunder, which seemed to signal them as relative outsiders.

In the 6<sup>th</sup> comment (see above) a Sinhala woman in Colombo asked what she had missed. A Tamil man (Person C) answered in line 6.2, "Better not to get it" with a 'Pac Man face' emoticon, which represents sarcasm or something funny. She asked "Why?" in line 6.3. When he did not respond, the woman left another comment that the blurry signboard was not clear enough to read, which seemed like an attempt to save face after not getting a reply. In line 6.5 a Tamil man (Person D) responded to the Sinhala woman's question with a 'face with tears of joy' emoji while another (Person E) responded with Lol and three 'face with tears of joy' emojis. Later in the thread a Sinhala man (Person F) tagged a Tamil friend (Person G) in line 13 to ask for a translation of the blunder and she provided it, but the subsequent participants seemed to have responded without seeing this exchange (it is unclear when Person G replied).

In line 16, a Tamil man in Colombo explicitly pointed to his Sinhala friends' inability to get the blunder because of their presumed lack of access to Tamil. He (Person H) tagged two Sinhala women (persons I and J) and wrote, "Hope you two are familiar with this Tamil word" along with the 'face with tears of joy' emoji. While Person I mirrored Person H's emoji usage, which seems to indicate that she knows she is being teased, Person J's "it's not clear," next to an 'expressionless face emoji,' shows frustration. The Tamil man might have explained the meaning of the word to his friends in private communication, but he did not supply it in the comments.

Sinhalas inquired again about the meaning of the blunder in a series of exchanges among a group in their early 20s. They all grew up in Colombo and are friends with each other on Facebook. It begins in line 17 when a Sinhala man (Person K) tagged a Muslim man (Person L), a former classmate, to ask what the sign says. He responded in line 17.1 by saying that he does not read Tamil (he likely studied in English). The Sinhala man, the Muslim man, and a Tamil man then tagged a woman in Colombo, Person N. She responded in line 17.5 by including a 'face with rolling eyes' emoji along with the comment "Grow up." This woman has a common Sinhala name, but her ethnic identity is not clear. It is likely that her friends tagged her because she has some knowledge of Tamil. Her response indicates that she thinks the young men were asking her the question to tease her. When the Sinhala man (Person K) commented in line 17.6 that he just wanted to know what it says on the bus, she wrote that he is lame. The Muslim man and the Sinhala man pointed to the humorous nature of the meme in lines 17.8–17.10, perhaps to diffuse the tension. Finally, Person P, a Tamil man in Kandy, provided a transliteration and glossing of the word along with a 'face with tears of joy' emoji (line 17.11). While this exchange concerned the Tamil blunder, the youths' fluent use of English, internet acronyms, and a comfortable use of emojis indexes their status as both middle class and cosmopolitan.

I got the sense in following posts on Tamil blunder memes that it is a *faux pas* to ask clarification questions about an error. Consistent with the cheeky way the SLSM administrator framed the post, this and other Tamil blunder memes were positioned as something you are supposed to get but not state. But even if a Sinhala person had caught the meaning, it may not have been appropriate for them to use a ‘face with tears of joy’ emoji or a similar reaction in the comments (Person I uses this emoji in line 16.1, but it is in a reply to her Tamil friend). Cross-cultural research shows that humor plays a vital role in delineating group boundaries and marking outsiders from insiders (Said 2016; Swinkels and de Konin 2016). And it is well known that it is often only socially acceptable to tell and laugh at jokes that target one’s own racial, ethnic, religious, or sociolinguistic group.

The Sinhala participants immediately signaled themselves as relative outsiders by asking for the meaning of the Tamil blunder. But what substantiated their outsider status was not their lack of proficiency in Tamil (some Sri Lankan Tamils and Muslims cannot read Tamil, particularly if they studied in English or Sinhala or grew up abroad), but their ethnicity, which, in turn, indexes their linguistic competencies.<sup>11</sup> In the south many Tamils and Muslims can speak and read Sinhala, but the inverse is not the case, despite the recent trilingual education initiatives (see Davis 2020a). Thus, it is widely assumed that Sinhalas do not have full access to Tamil online content (Person H played on this assumption in line 16 when he teased the Sinhala women about their inability to catch the blunder).

While Tamils and Muslims risk getting called out or questioned if they leave textual-denotational comments, the mirroring of an earlier responders’ emoji reaction or emoji provides a safe way to position oneself as an insider or member of the intended audience for a post (Judy Pine, personal communication, November 20, 2019). This technique allows users to feel united in a shared experience, even when they come from diverse social and linguistic backgrounds and have different ideas about the meaning and significance of the memes (see Example One). But the important work done by emojis, and particularly the ‘face with tears of joy’ emoji, in the creation of commonality needs to be further unpacked. Arshad is a young Muslim man I met in 2007 through an international NGO in Kandy. He engaged with the Facebook post on the Ampara–Kandy bus sign by tagging a fellow Muslim friend from the NGO. He frequently responds to Tamil blunder posts with the ‘face with tears of joy’ emoji. In our conversations at the NGO, either one-on-one or in the company of the other volunteers, he would react to news of injustices toward Muslims and Tamils with laughter. His response seemed to convey the absurdity of government practices without having to take an explicit stance to which he might be held accountable (he says he is careful to stay out of politics, both offline and online) (Davis 2020b). When I asked him over Facebook Messenger in 2020 what his use of the ‘face with tears of joy’ emoji means in the context of Tamil blunder memes (a difficult question), he said he does not spend much time thinking about emojis. But then he added that using them is simple and easy. I asked why and he responded with the ‘face with tears of joy’ emoji, which seemed to metapragmatically indicate their useful ambiguity. Although I would not exactly equate Arshad’s emoji usage with his fraught laughter in the interactions I observed, the ‘face with tears of joy’ emoji is particular well suited to Tamil blunder memes because it can indicate sadness or laughter. Indeed, the memes are comical, but they also remind Tamils and Muslims of their unequal status.

Emoji and emoticons not only created space for commonality in this interaction, but they also heightened difference. When a Sinhala woman asked what the bus sign says in line 6, one Tamil man supplied the ‘Pac Man face’ emoticon along with “better not to get it” in line 6.2, while two others left ‘face with tears of joy’ emojis in lines 6.5 and 6.6 (one combined the emoji with Lol).<sup>12</sup> Here, emoticons and emojis designated Sinhalas as ineligible to receive the full story. Sinhalas’ inability to get the Tamil blunder and some users’ refusal to explain it reinforced the divide between Tamil speakers and Sinhalas. In fact, I observed in Kandy that Tamil and Muslim youth did not discuss

Tamil pejorative terms or profanities with Sinhala and vice versa to avoid positioning their respective first languages in derogatory ways. But although emojis were used in exclusionary ways in this interaction, direct discord was avoided, perhaps because it was unclear if Sinhala were included or excluded in the laughter or embarrassed laughter. This same meme got different types of responses when a white American journalist tweeted it in 2019 with the statement, “Starting to wonder if these are actually mistakes or if someone is having a bit of fun” and three ‘see no evil’ monkey emojis, which indicate the refusal to see something. While two Tamils asked if she knew Tamil (her statement implies that she gets the blunder), others addressed her comment about the tweet’s intentionality. Several of the comments reflected their recognition of the meme as representing the incomplete implementation of Tamil as a co-official language, in the highly entextualized view (see above). But similar to the example discussed here, a Tamil man responded to a Sinhala person’s comment, “Can someone translate please,” with a ‘face with tears of joy’ emoji.

Scholars have long discussed indeterminacy as “both a defining feature of sociolinguistic data and as a baseline for our understanding of social action through language” (Jaffe 2009, 230–1). The meaning of utterances is dependent on their uptake in the moment, but it is also subjected to “retroactive revision and reinterpretation” (214; see Wortham 2005). One way in which Facebook interactions are different from face-to-face interactions is that conversations persist online for people to view and comment on at different moments in time (boyd 2014; Hillewaert 2015). But while this aspect of Facebook interactions is asynchronous, posts and comments follow each other in a linear sequence.<sup>13</sup> Thus, “even if the immediateness of a situation is taken away, the temporality and its effect on participants remain” (Eranti and Lonkila 2015, 5). By analyzing multimodal online interactions one can get a partial view into how particular interpretations are negotiated, interrupted, or solidified. While all communication is subject to indeterminacy, emojis are particularly opaque because it is often hard to explain exactly how they, with their often variable and shifting meanings, articulate with other linguistic and non-linguistic signs and participant frameworks (e.g., the issue of who is included in their use) in an online interaction. In addition, emojis that have multiple meanings, like the ‘face with tears of joy,’ can be particularly slippery. The relative indeterminacy of emojis enable them to be useful tools for both creating common affective alignments among diverse groups and for subtly demarcating difference. The final example examines the relationship between text and memes by discussing an instance in which a post on a Tamil blunder meme was initially misunderstood.

### Example Three: Public Toilet Sign

Yesterday, I went to Colombo to finish [the work of getting a] passport to go to Haj. In that office, I got an uncontrollable bowel movement and was holding on [to my stomach]. I looked for the place [the toilet] and squatted [there]. There was a noise of knocking on the door. I asked, “Who is it?” It seemed as if a woman ran off screaming. “What, she peeped in and saw me and got scared?” I was thinking as I came out. There were people all around the [door to the] toilet. They said something in Sinhala [*tēnikoṭa*]. I thought, “[They must have] more urgency than me,” and said, “You go,” and returned [to the office]. All the people were there to get passports.

In January 2018, an Up-country Tamil Christian friend named Enid ‘shared’ a Sri Lankan Muslim man’s post on her personal timeline. I met her in 2007 when she was a Bachelor of Arts student in the Tamil medium at the University of Peradeniya near Kandy. The man’s post included an image of a trilingual toilet sign. In the sign the Sinhala and English reads “Public Toilet (Ladies)” while the Tamil reads “Public Toilet (Gents [*āṇ*])” (see Figure 3). The meme, which had been circulating on Facebook for a few months, likely caught people’s attention because the Tamil error



Figure 3. Toilet Sign.

has a direct consequence in the physical world (walking into the wrong gender bathroom) (Davis 2020b). The man accompanied the meme with a story, written in a variety of colloquial Muslim Tamil spoken in the far south of the island that detailed a woman catching him using the ladies' toilet at the Colombo passport office (see above). In the narrative he refers to the Sinhala language as the South Indian savory, *tēnkuḷal* (spelled *tēnkoṭal*), presumably because of the curly appearance of its letters.

Enid framed her post with the statement that there is no place for Tamils in Sri Lanka. Vijay is an Up-country Tamil Christian living in the United States who studied with Enid at the University of Peradeniya. He wrote a comment on Enid's post saying that the toilet blunder was an example of "failed reconciliation and the government's disregard for Tamil people." Chandrika, a Sinhala Buddhist NGO worker, who knows Vijay from the university, added a lengthy comment that challenged Vijay for relating "some careless language mistake" to the reconciliation process. After questioning where the sign had actually hung, he wrote that Enid was misinformed in thinking that "a language mistake implies [that there's] no place for Tamils." He cannot read Tamil, so he was just responding to the meme, Enid's framing of it, and Vijay's comments.

When I saw this discussion on Enid's timeline, I messaged Vijay to ask about his interpretation of the Muslim man's post. He replied hours later that he had commented on it without thoroughly reading the narrative that accompanied it, which he described as written in a Tamil "only God can understand." He said the image of the toilet sign is probably real, but it was never up at the Department of Emigration and Immigration, which employs many Tamil speakers. He added that the Muslim man's narrative was intended as a joke. The passport office is an interesting imagined location for a botched signboard. Susan Seizer (2005) analyzed a

Tamil joke about a young man's attempt to get a passport (to be like a friend who had returned home from abroad with property and money) as an identity quest and confrontation with deferred desire. The Muslim man's satirical story can be understood as pointing to the state's neglect of Tamil language rights as they apply to the desire for spatial mobility (for religious purposes).

When I messaged Enid to ask if she thought the signboard was really up at the passport office, she insisted that it was, but later that day she deleted the post from her timeline. A few weeks later she discussed the toilet meme and the Muslim man's narrative, although she did not mention the passport office. She said that Sinhala make errors on Tamil signs and documents because they simply do not care (Person L [line 11] makes a similar point in Example One). She related this view to her experience working in a government office, saying that Sinhala do not even bother to make documents available in Tamil because of Sinhala dominance. The government claims it wants to make a trilingual Sri Lanka, she added, "but it's not true." Enid thus related Tamil blunders to systemic inequities between the Sinhala majority and Tamil-speaking minorities. Vijay, who I have spoken to at length about these issues, shares her general views.

Uptake of online posts is contingent on picking up on linguistic and non-linguistic signs in different combinations or layers (e.g., memes often embed text and are framed with text). Enid's quick and emotional reaction to the toilet meme prompted her to 'share' it without thoroughly reading (in the denotational-semantic sense) the narrative that framed it (Varis and Blommaert 2015). Her and Vijay's comments show their alignment with the toilet meme as representative of the incomplete implementation of Tamil as a co-official language (the entextualized view), which they further related to the failed reconciliation process and the precarious position of Tamils. The Muslim man's narrative points to similar inequalities and injustices, but it is satire.

Chandrika elaborated on his comment on Enid's timeline when I messaged him. He noted that signboard errors result from translation errors, which he attributed to "institutional inefficiency." He also pointed out that "stupid" or "funny" errors are also common on Sinhala signboards, particularly in the north and east, but nobody considers them deliberate (neither Enid nor Vijay think Tamil errors are deliberate but their comments on this post could have been taken that way). Thus, Chandrika, like Enid and Vijay, recognized the toilet meme as a *token of a type*, Tamil blunder memes, but he, operating within a different regime of value, expressed a disparate alignment with it (Gal and Irvine 2019). By arguing that Sinhala errors are also common, and that they are both the result of administrative incompetency, he sought to interrupt the idea that the Tamil signboard errors depict the government's neglect of Tamil language rights. He thus rejected the dominant way that Tamil blunder memes are politicized in Sri Lankan Tamil digital publics.

The textual-denotational content of the post was not what was primarily at stake in Enid's decision to 'share' it, but it became relevant again after it was clear that Enid and Vijay had misinterpreted it (only Vijay acknowledged this fact). While Enid and Vijay initially treated the meme and the post as a *token of a type* (Tamil blunder memes or posts of them), when Chandrika and I questioned various aspects of their alignment with the post, the meme, as a photograph, was discussed as separate from both the narrative and the post. As this example demonstrates, when a person reacts to or 'shares' a post, they often conflate images and multiple layers of text. But when an aspect of a person's post or the interpretation of that post is questioned, it can prompt them to consider the relationship of different kinds of signs to each other and to the physical world, relationships mediated by ideologies or regimes of value (Gal and Irvine 2019). This conversation is strikingly different from Example Two because Tamils did not simply deny Sinhala access to the social space formed around the meme, but they, in their public and private comments, explicitly debated the significance of Tamil signboard blunders in relation to the implementation of the nation's trilingual policies.

## Conclusion

This article has focused on interactions around Tamil blunder memes to investigate the ways text, emojis, and memes are used in the negotiation of similarity and difference among transnational Tamil digital publics. My discussion has highlighted the importance of analyzing linguistic and non-linguistic signs in the same framework and in relation to their different contexts of use, while attending to the unique communicative potential of different kinds of signs (Gal and Irvine 2019; Irvine 2001). Rather than making hard-and-fast distinctions between different modes of communication (e.g., public Facebook posts, private messages, and face-to-face interactions), I have examined the processes by which signs are taken up and utilized at particular moments in relation to different regimes of value (Gal and Irvine 2019). Indeed, while Tamil blunder memes represent a failure of exclusion for some, for others they signal (ethnically neutral) ineptitude.

Phatic engagement through ‘liking’ and ‘sharing’ does valuable work in maintaining relations of conviviality (Varis and Blommaert 2015), even if much of what we do online involves taking up and utilizing posts and comments with textual-denotational content, though these engagements may be cursory or partial. By virtue of their potential for metapragmatic ambiguity, emojis are particularly useful resources for creating a sense of a shared experience among people from diverse social and linguistic backgrounds. But emojis can do subtle work to heighten differences, even sometimes under the guise of conviviality.

Although my study has not been confined to the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, R. Cheran’s (2007) characterization of it as a community formed around shared sentiment and experience is relevant here. He states that Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora communities “cannot be traced to a simple origin or place, rather what creates the diaspora here is a particular kind of imaginary that derives sustenance from nostalgia, pain and loss” (2007, 157). When a Sri Lankan Tamil or Muslim responds to a Tamil blunder post with a ‘face with tears of joy’ emoji they show others that they identify with a shared sentiment, the exact nature of which does not have to be specified. Irvine’s (2001) work on differentiation as a semiotic process helps forefront the creative ways participants in digital interactions draw on multimodal signs to both establish commonality and deal with difference within a semiotic system that is always in flux. Articulating one’s position in online discourse relies on the potential of different kinds of linguistic and non-linguistic signs for both ambiguity and precision.

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## Notes

1. Tamil blunder memes are sometimes altered (e.g., errors are circled).
2. The accumulation of ‘likes’ on Facebook, Instagram, and other platforms is often seen as a gauge of the attention and engagement of one’s ‘friends’ or followers in what is referred to as the ‘like’ economy (Gerlitz and Helmond 2013; Ross 2019).
3. See Barker and Nakassis (2020), Das (2020), Hoffmann-Dilloway (2021), LaDousa (2011), Nakassis (2019, 2021), and Padgett (2021).
4. An additional reaction for ‘care’ was introduced in 2020.

5. An example of an emoji being used to convey an idea is when a person leaves a single heart emoji in the comments instead of writing, "I love this post" (Schneebeli 2017).

6. See <https://www.economist.com/asia/2017/03/02/linguistic-slights-spur-ethnic-division-in-sri-lanka>

7. This might be an imitation of the Tamil proverb, *vīṭṭukku vīṭu vācalpaṭi* (every house has doorsteps), which means "every house has problems" (E. Annamalai, personal communication, March 10, 2020).

8. The Sinhala is correct but "reserved" is misspelled in the Tamil and English portions.

9. See LaDousa (2011) for an account of how college students' entextualized interpretations of the meaning of house signs work to distinguish those groups familiar with or knowledgeable about them from other groups.

10. Selected comments on the post are presented in chronological order. The replies to the individual comments are sorted chronologically.

11. In line 17.1, Person L, a Muslim, admits that he does not read Tamil.

12. When a Tamil man gave the gloss for another Sinhala man in line 17.11, he accompanied it with a 'face with tears of joy' emoji, which could indicate his awkwardness over the act of translating the word for a non-Tamil speaker.

13. Comments on page posts may later be sorted by relevance as a default view.

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