Part Two

The Unfolding of the Affair
Chapter 3

The Denial of Language

Several men came into Nayiniyappa’s prison cell, in the fort on Pondichéry’s waterfront, and without a word of explanation took him away.¹ It was March 13, 1716, exactly one month after his arrest, and he still did not know the charges against him. He was taken to an office where three men were waiting for him: Governor Hébert, the governor’s secretary, and the Tamil interpreter Manuel Geganis. The sight of the interpreter must have made a puzzling situation all the more confusing: Nayiniyappa’s position, wealth, and success as the chief commercial broker of the Compagnie des Indes in Pondichéry stemmed from his ability to mediate and interpret, from his facility in crossing linguistic, commercial, and cultural boundaries. For years he had conversed fluently with French traders but not in French; rather, he used the lingua franca of the region, Portuguese. Yet from the moment of his arrest to his death in prison in 1717, French officials insisted on speaking French to him. The reliance on an interpreter, an intimate of the town’s Jesuits and a man one of Nayiniyappa’s appeals would later describe as “a bad interpreter of the truth,” was galling to Nayiniyappa and his allies.²

Even after more than forty years as a resident of the French-ruled colony and a subject of the French Crown, Nayiniyappa did not speak French because he had never needed it, relying on Portuguese in his exchanges with Europeans.³ Hébert, like other French administrators, needed to be fluent in
Portuguese to do his job, and Nayiniyappa described Portuguese as “a language known to both the accused and the judge equally.” The French were by no means the only Europeans to rely on Portuguese to communicate with South Asian employees and subjects. For example, after the Dutch conquered Sri Lanka, they also used Portuguese to communicate with local inhabitants; as late as 1757, during the Battle of Plassy, Robert Clive spoke with his native troops in Portuguese. This policy changed over the course of the eighteenth century; the presiding chief broker, Pedro, still testified before the Pondichéry Council in Portuguese in 1729, but later in the eighteenth century professional intermediaries regularly spoke French.

Despite the long use of Portuguese between Nayiniyappa and his French employers, throughout the interrogation the questioners addressed Nayiniyappa in French, Manuel repeated the questions in Tamil, and the interrogators made Nayiniyappa respond in Tamil. Forced to use a language that no one in the room but Manuel understood, he answered very briefly in Tamil, often responding to lengthy questions with an unelaborated yes or no. Nayiniyappa’s appeals described the use of French in the interrogation room as a travesty: “They all had a common language, which is Portuguese. . . . The accused clearly cried out that he had a natural right to use a language intelligible to both the judge and the accused, and to the secretary, but they did not want to listen to him. They decided to violate all rights. The investigation continued as it had begun: the interpreter, a devotee of the accused’s enemies [the Jesuits], interpreted as he wished, and the accused [Nayiniyappa] was forced to sign that which he had neither heard, nor understood.”

Reliance on linguistic mediation performed by local employees had been the norm in Pondichéry from its earliest days as a French colony in the late seventeenth century and had by no means abated even after several decades of French rule. By contrast with the policy of Francophonie of nineteenth- and twentieth-century French empire, neither French traders nor missionaries in India early in the eighteenth century pursued the goal of making French the language most commonly spoken by the local inhabitants of Pondichéry. Like many Indian locales, large swathes of metropolitan France, and virtually all colonies, Pondichéry was a polyglot city with a diverse and complex linguistic economy, with linguistic registers of various value, purchase, and potential for exchange. However, traders and missionaries had different responses to this linguistic diversity: French officials adopted Portuguese, while French missionaries sought to master Indian languages.

Frenchmen of the Old Regime, accustomed to a polyglot homeland rich in languages and regional dialects, from Breton to Occitan, would have felt right at home in India’s multilingual environment. French traders and missionaries
alike relied, respectively, on local brokers and native catechists, but these parties used categorically different linguistic strategies. French traders and their employees in South India regularly used Portuguese as their common language, following a norm common to merchant maritime communities across the Indian Ocean, from China to Goa to Africa, and stemming from the former importance of Portuguese ships in the region. Even as Portuguese power in India declined in the seventeenth century, the Portuguese language remained essential for French traders in doing business. The unstable political context in Pondichéry late in the seventeenth century and early in the eighteenth century also contributed to the continued use of Portuguese. When the Dutch took control of Pondichéry in the late seventeenth century, the colony’s new rulers, themselves fluent in Portuguese, could communicate with the town’s Portuguese-speaking population. When a treaty signed in Europe restored control of the colony to the French in 1699, the linguistic transition was just as smooth.

French Jesuits and other missionaries in Pondichéry highly valued the use of indigenous languages and sought to acquire new languages as they moved between different mission fields. Therefore, they relied on catechists but sought to learn their languages and ultimately render the catechists unnecessary. A French missionary reflected on the Portuguese linguistic legacy in a letter sent to France. He described the lingua franca as “corrupted Portuguese which the Portuguese have left behind in all the parts of India from which they have been driven out.” He lamented, “This jargon is perpetuated among the Indians, so that the other nations of Europe are forced to learn it.” However, he likely sought to speak local languages, as many missionaries did. All three of the orders active in Pondichéry—Jesuits, Capuchins, and the MEP missionaries—prioritized learning South Indian languages.

This chapter considers the import of polylingualism in Pondichéry—the mixture of French, Tamil, and Portuguese in both commercial and religious settings and in the course of the Nayiniyappa Affair. The problems of communication and interpretation in the affair were epistemological, revolving around the proper and just conditions for actionable knowledge. In the early, unstable days of the colony, French colons sought to obtain reliable information upon which to act and to communicate with the colony’s population in the most effective way. Nayiniyappa’s appeals emphasized language and communication precisely because, as a professional go-between, he had devoted his whole career to solving this problem. Religious catechists (“native” religious interpreters employed by Catholic missionaries) and linguistic interpreters also addressed the communicative gap, and like commercial brokers they could selectively dispense information to further both their own agendas and
those of their employers. Yet after Nayiniyappa had addressed the communication problem for years, French officials deployed this communicative gap against him in the course of the affair. The deployment of language to prevent understanding in the Nayiniyappa Affair—the choice of French and the denial of Portuguese—was therefore a departure from long-standing practice in the colony. The insistence that Frenchmen would speak and understand French alone in Nayiniyappa’s case prefigured the diminishing role of local intermediaries in the later decades of the eighteenth century.

Writing of communication in colonial regimes, Johannes Fabian noted that exchanges such as those that made it possible for the company to function in Pondichéry depended on “a shared communicative praxis providing the common ground on which unilateral claims could be imposed.” But the Nayiniyappa Affair was an event that changed the rules of the game, and therefore Tamil and French supporters of the jailed broker alike considered it a scandal. In other words, the affair hinged on communicative exchanges that left little or no room for previously established bilateral claims or agreements rooted in shared language.

Up to the time of the broker’s arrest, when Nayiniyappa and all the French trader-administrators he worked with used Portuguese, both sides had to adapt to mastering, remaking, and manipulating their cultural and linguistic position in a language that was not native to them. By making French the official language of the affair, Nayiniyappa’s adversaries made a new claim for their jurisdiction and authority over him. Language became a means of denying communication. Nayiniyappa and his allies recognized the turn away from Portuguese as a violent act, an attempt to replace a colonial regime based on mutual understanding with one based on subordination.

**Saving Language: Catechists and Missionaries**

For the Jesuits, language acquisition was a global project, since they believed direct communication with potential converts was crucial to conversion. Accommodation, the conversion practice developed by Roberto di Nobili in India and Matteo Ricci in China, which relied on the comprehension and affinity a joint language can engender, contributed to this belief. Therefore, Jesuits prized the skill of learning new languages, and Jesuits in India who were sent to difficult inland missions, away from the more Christianized coastal areas like Pondichéry and Goa, were handpicked on the basis of their demonstrated academic prowess and linguistic faculty.

The life of the Jesuit Pierre Martin embodied this belief in linguistic agility. A missionary who moved between the Indian-ruled city of Madurai and...
French Pondichéry, Martin could speak and read Turkish, Persian, and Arabic, which he was convinced saved him from death when he was captured by Muslims at sea on his way to India. Upon his arrival in India, he sought to learn Bengali and Tamil.\(^{17}\) Not all Jesuits were so eager to learn new languages. Father Guy Tachard was reluctant to move from Pondichéry to Chandernagore in Bengal because he could, he wrote, “confess, catechize, as well as read and understand the books of the area” in Tamil, while in Bengal he would have to undertake the study of a new language, “not an easy task when one is sixty years old.”\(^{18}\)

Other Catholic orders also pursued proficiency in Indian languages. When the Jesuit superior Tachard argued that the Jesuits should have the right to minister to the Malabar Christian parish in Pondichéry because none of their rivals, the Capuchin missionaries, spoke Tamil, the Capuchin father Paul Vendôme was outraged. He wrote in 1703 that the Jesuit Tachard was a liar and attached testimonies to his letter attesting that the Capuchin Father Esprit, “who has been living in Pondichéry ever since the town was given to the Royal Company, both preaches and catechizes in the Malabar language [Tamil].”\(^ {19}\) The seminary of the MEP, the third French missionary order active in Pondichéry, also wanted to employ missionaries who were fluent in native languages, but they sought to address the problem by developing a native clergy. In a statement made in Paris in 1700, the directors of the seminary declared that “it will be difficult for Europe to go on forever supplying priests, who take a long time to learn the language.”\(^ {20}\)

Both Jesuits and Capuchins admitted that they found the study of Tamil extremely taxing. A Capuchin writer described Tamil as “harsh, crudely fashioned, unpleasant, and repelling, especially in its pronunciation. It is only a zeal for the propagation of faith which makes it possible to learn this language.”\(^ {21}\) Fluency in Tamil was neither universal nor complete among European missionaries, and local catechists constantly served at the missionaries’ side, preaching sermons, catechizing new converts, even on occasion listening to confessions. One Jesuit missionary admitted that “one can do almost nothing in this country without the help of the catechists.”\(^ {22}\) Another missionary writer blamed the intemperate weather in South India for making missionaries lethargic, rendering them the equivalent of convalescents in Europe. The only task the newly arrived missionaries still took on, despite their sorry state, was the study of languages—a priority that could not be forsaken, regardless of one’s health.

The catechists could enthrall the locals in a way that eluded the foreign missionaries. Jesuit Father Jean-Venant Bouchet described how this worked before a crowd: “The catechists, seeing this multitude of people, profited
from the occasion in order to announce [to the crowd] the truths of Christianity, and each one of them made a touching speech. They spoke with such force... Most of the audience seemed moved.”

The Jesuit Martin was frank on the topic of his failures of communication and felt his inadequacy: “Confessions exhaust me exceedingly because of the difficulty I have in understanding them. These people speak with extraordinary quickness, or perhaps it just seems to me so, because I do not yet have a good ear for their language. Tears often come to my eyes when I am at last able to understand what they are saying to me, which they must start over again three or four times.” He went on to say, “And these good people do so with marvelous patience, searching for easier words or styles of expression... Nevertheless, when I make numerous mistakes, whether in the style of the language or in pronunciation, which is very difficult, they do not seem to discourage me, saying that they would rather listen to four words from the mouths of the Fathers, even mispronounced and badly arranged, than the grand speeches that their catechists can make.”

It is impossible to know whether Martin actually received such assurances that the catechists’ speeches did not measure up to the Jesuits’ efforts, or whether his flock meant them sincerely, but he clearly hoped they were true. His description of the procession of the Passion he oversaw in Madurai in 1700 suggests his dependence on the catechists for linguistic mediation. When a big crowd of Christians gathered in front of the church, the catechist told the “story of the Passion of our Lord” loudly and at length, while Martin himself made what he described as a “little speech.” Elsewhere he admitted that he had to commit his Tamil speeches to memory, which likely took out the spontaneity that would have given the speech force and emotion.

A French officer stationed in India in the 1720s, Chevalier de La Farelle, reflected on the relationship between the Jesuits and the Indian men who taught them local languages: “The reverend fathers of the missions in India must know Tamoul [Tamil], which is the language spoken on the Coromandel Coast, and Telugu, which is the language of the Malabar Coast.” He noted a fundamental tension: “What is most curious, and seems to prove the indifference of the Brahamans in regard to the religion they represent, is that it is the Brahamans who teach the Jesuits the languages spoken in India and thus provide them [the Jesuits] with the means to propagate the cult of the only true religion [Christianity].” By making the Brahamans the teachers, in La Farelle’s point of view, the Jesuits reinforced the spiritual and intellectual superiority of the local gurus. Even as their language teachers provided the Jesuits with the tools crucial for conversion, the positioning of these same
teachers as leaders and superiors of the Jesuits might have undermined their mission. The Jesuits’ linguistic difficulties only underscored the instability of their spiritual authority.

**Exchanging Language: Commercial Brokers and French Traders**

French traders were, like the missionaries, frank about the importance of the linguistic services provided by their intermediaries. While they relied on commercial brokers first and foremost for their extensive networks of trade relationships, they also sought brokers who could serve as linguistic interpreters and were able to speak Portuguese with their French employers and Tamil, Telugu, and Persian with their local connections. Inability to speak French was common among commercial brokers in Pondichéry in the first decades of the eighteenth century and was not considered a liability by French employers. It is important to note that the focus here is on professionally employed intermediaries, who were all men. But important unofficial intermediaries were the locally born women, usually Christian women from a Luso-Indian background, who married or lived with French arrivals and provided entry into local cultural practices and linguistic expertise. The most famous example was Jeanne Dupleix, who on occasion served as a translator for her husband, the mid-eighteenth-century governor Joseph Dupleix, interpreting for him from Tamil to French.²⁹

In the text of one of the appeals to overturn Nayiniyappa’s 1716 conviction, Nayiniyappa described himself as facilitating “communication between the Frenchman and the Indian.” In these exchanges, explained Nayiniyappa, “the French general [i.e., governor] . . . speaks only to [the broker], and he [the broker] alone is known by the Indians.” The broker relayed the French authority’s orders “as they were given to him, and the Indians accept [these orders] as he conveys them.”³⁰ Nayiniyappa here fashioned his relationship with the French governor as an exclusive one based on communication. He acknowledged his power while suggesting he never abused it by conveying orders differently than directed. Writing to the French authorities seeking his release from prison, of course Nayiniyappa had a vested interest in presenting himself as passing on the information provided by the French exactly as he received it. It seems more likely that he took certain freedoms in reshaping information as it came into his hands, rendering it more comprehensible as it made the leap between social contexts and languages. The crucial point, however, is that Nayiniyappa presented his key task as enabling communication between mutually unintelligible parties.
The French trading company in Pondichéry also employed translators in the Chaudrie court, a jurisdiction where French judges mediated disputes between native actors and where linguistic interpreters played an important part. In the Chaudrie, French traders acted as judges, dispensing justice in accordance with local custom—or, rather, what they could gather to be local custom by relying on local interpreters and clerks. Three members of Pondichéry’s Superior Council, all French traders, heard civil cases involving local residents in the Chaudrie. The French judges did not speak Tamil, and many witnesses did not speak Portuguese or French. Nayiniyappa was employed as a Chaudrie interpreter prior to his appointment as Pondichéry’s chief broker.31 As a well-established merchant, he probably took on the work in the Chaudrie in order to seek a more powerful and prestigious position as a broker. The intimate connection he could have forged with French traders as he whispered into their ears in Portuguese would have cemented his position as a man to be trusted. Working in the Chaudrie as an interpreter would also have fortified his place among the town’s Tamil population, as a man directly involved in the settlement of disputes. When he left the Chaudrie, Nayiniyappa attempted to maintain his connection to this center of power by arranging for a friend of his to be appointed to the post.32 Nayiniyappa’s sons claimed Governor Hébert bestowed the position as a reward on a man who had testified against their father.33

The Chaudrie interpreters appear to have been quite powerful. Bertrand-François Mahé, a high-ranking French official who served in India in the 1720s, ascribed more power to them than to the French judges ostensibly making the decisions. He noted that the interpreters “provide their explanations in such a way that affairs will take the turn they desire, so that often without intending it, the judge is responsible for injustices.”34 This comment, though pejorative, is nevertheless rare in that it acknowledges the power of interpreters to direct events. More often than not, reliance on local interpreters in the collection and creation of political, commercial, or religious knowledge by Europeans was elided.

Linguistic interpreters could also influence the written record of the French colony in the archives of the Superior Council. The majority of texts inscribed in the archives of the French trading company in India underwent a double process of transformation: between modes of transmission—oral to written—and between languages—Portuguese or Tamil to French. When a local resident appeared before the council, he usually spoke in Tamil, an interpreter translated the response aloud into Portuguese for the benefit of the French audience and officials, and a French (but Portuguese-speaking) secretary then wrote down the response in French. A translator read this
inscribed version out to the witness in Tamil for verification, thereby repeating the same double circuit of transformation. Hébert introduced an interpreter into Nayiniyappa’s interrogations, but normally a Portuguese speaker like Nayiniyappa would not have required a translator in dealings with French officials because the French secretary was fluent in Portuguese. Testimony given in Portuguese would be written in French and read back in Portuguese for verification. The insistence on French in Nayiniyappa’s case thus flew in the face of established practice.

Languages less commonly used in the Tamil region also made their way into the French archive. A 1720 case brought before the Superior Council occasioned the attachment of a note in Persian to the dossier after a sworn interpreter of the language verified its content. In another case with global reach involving the English governor of St. George and Madras and merchants in Canton, the council admitted documents in translation from Chinese documents into evidence. The Chinese documents, in fact, were translated and archived in French, English, and Portuguese.

**Interpreting the Nayiniyappa Affair**

The linguistic aspects of the Nayiniyappa Affair once again make visible the explicit and implicit conflicts woven through the fabric of the young colony. Nayiniyappa and various French and Tamil allies understood incompetent and vicious interpretation to be the central wrongdoing of the investigation against the broker. The appeals claimed that the denial of Portuguese stole from the broker the tools to communicate his own demands and desires, since the use of French made it impossible for him to understand the proceedings against him. The reversal in his fortunes was accompanied and facilitated by reversals in languages and communicative practices. Nayiniyappa again and again presented the denial of language as an act of violence, one that stripped him of his humanity. In one especially vivid section of his appeal he accused his adversaries of “stealing his language, his ears, his eyes, until he didn’t speak at all, could understand nothing of what was said to him, and could not see what was written against him.” This very physical description calls attention to the somatic nature of interpretation, as a physical experience involving intimacy and understanding that draws on the skills of the body. The theft of his eyes, ears, and tongue calls to mind torture by dismemberment. Rendered mute, deaf, and blind, this state of enforced noncommunication was as much a part of Nayiniyappa’s punishment as the public flogging, the confiscation of wealth, or the long imprisonment.
In calling Portuguese “his language,” Nayiniyappa claimed the language of business, exchange, and mediation over his native tongue, Tamil. Portuguese had earned him his position in the colony. The affair therefore offers an important corrective to the notion that political struggles about linguistic usage are limited to binary battles between the “authentic” and the “imposed” language. For Nayiniyappa and the men of his cohort, issues of language mastery and belonging in language were spread against a broader canvas, with intimacy in multiple languages being the norm.

The Interpreter: Manuel Geganis and the Denial of Portuguese

Hébert questioned Nayiniyappa on seven different occasions during the course of his 1716 investigation of the alleged crimes of tyranny and sedition. Manuel Geganis served as interpreter for five of those sessions. Manuel’s position in the colony as an employee at different times of both the Jesuits and the French trading company, as well as the son of the Jesuits’ head catechist, highlights the complex relationship between these two groups. His actions in the course of the investigation shed light on the powerful role interpreters could fill, as well as the densely populated field of Tamil agendas and ambitions that affected the Nayiniyappa Affair. In a departure from the practice of limiting the interpreter’s role, the prosecution gave Manuel an active role in making its case, which Nayiniyappa’s appeals argued was inappropriate, given Manuel’s affiliation with the Jesuits.

Nayiniyappa and his supporters argued that Manuel’s position as an intimate of the Jesuits rendered him absolutely unsuitable as an objective interpreter. They emphasized this through repeated reference to him in the appeals as the “son of the Jesuits’ catechist.” The fact that he had traveled to France, spoke French fluently, was employed by Pondichéry’s government as an interpreter, and had close, familial ties to the Jesuit mission through his father, put Manuel Geganis in a special position at the intersection of different streams of knowledge and information in the colony, and Nayiniyappa’s appeals emphasized this position.

Manuel gave lengthy testimony on his involvement in the affair in both French and Tamil, in response to questioning by a commission appointed by the king in 1718 to reinvestigate Nayiniyappa’s conviction. By his own account, Manuel’s official involvement in the affair dates to the very first moments after Nayiniyappa’s imprisonment. On February 13, 1716, when Nayiniyappa was first taken to the fort as a prisoner, Manuel was already on the spot—perhaps by mere chance, or perhaps the Jesuits had sent him there,
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having agitated for Nayiniyappa’s arrest. He described how Governor Hébert had summoned him and sent him to tell the Jesuits “that he had put his plan into execution.” Finding the Jesuits assembled in their compound, Manuel conveyed Hébert’s message. After speaking among themselves for a quarter of an hour, they told Manuel that Governor Hébert “was a great man who had a lot of spirit, and knew what he was doing, and he could therefore do no better than to consult his own opinion in the present affair.”

A few days later Hébert summoned Manuel again and gave him three palm leaf manuscripts (olles in the French text, olai in Tamil), which had been taken from Nayiniyappa’s house. Manuel translated them from Tamil into French. Given the fact that he by his own admission could not read or write French, he must have dictated his translations to a French scribe, who would likely have been a Jesuit. Manuel recalled that Hébert’s son stated upon receipt of the texts, “These translations are no good.” Since Hébert fils could not read the original Tamil, this judgment could not have been a critique of the translation itself. Taking a more pragmatic view of translation, Hébert’s son ordered Manuel to take the olles to the Jesuit Father Turpin, who was proficient in Tamil, and have him translate the documents again to provide the desired content. According to Manuel’s testimony, the Héberts employed Turpin, not Manuel, to translate other Tamil documents germane to the case.

Thus a veritable translation factory was put into place, its workings revealed in the interpreter’s testimony. Nayiniyappa’s official investigation took place in Fort St. Louis, in broad daylight. Under cover of darkness, in the Malabar neighborhoods, a parallel shadow process was taking place. Manuel explained its workings: “I know that at night, Pedro [the Christian who would replace Nayiniyappa as chief broker] brought Malabars to his house to testify [against Nayiniyappa]. . . . Xaveri Moutou and other scribes wrote these depositions on olles, which in the morning were sent to me, along with the witnesses who had made these declarations.” The interpreter took the testimonies, inscribed in Tamil, to Father Turpin for French translation. Manuel noted, “I am not sure the translation was accurate, because I never read it, and I don’t read French.”

Nayiniyappa’s appeals painted Manuel as both incompetent and devious, a symptom of a problem simultaneously procedural, linguistic, and moral. According to the appeals, Manuel should not have been there in the first place, he used the wrong language to mediate exchanges, and his entanglement with the Jesuits disqualified him from acting in the proceeding at all. One appeal cited the important French Criminal Ordinance of 1670, which, among many other procedural prescriptions, ordered that any trial that did not use a shared language of the accused, the judge, and the witnesses, if
such a language existed, would be declared invalid. Indeed, the records of the Pondichéry Superior Council repeatedly show that non-French litigants provided their testimony directly to the members of the council in Portuguese, their shared language.

Manuel himself lent support to the charge that his role in the investigation was suspicious. In his 1718 testimony, during the inquiry into Nayiniyappa’s conviction, he claimed that Governor Hébert had told him that if he ever spoke to anyone of the details of what had transpired in Nayiniyappa’s interrogations, he would be punished. As a result, Manuel explained, he had chosen to pay little attention to the witness testimonies to ensure he would not have any sensitive information to divulge. In other words, he claimed to have deliberately sought not to listen to the testimony he himself interpreted. Suggesting the complicated position of the interpreter who may have acted on behalf of an official whose power was now waning, he undercut this description of interpreting without listening by completing his 1718 testimony with the following statement: “Here is everything that I remember, if I am interrogated on other matters, perhaps memory will come back to me.”

Manuel Geganis was the central interpreter in the case, with a role that extended far beyond the interrogation room, but he was not the only interpreter. On two of the seven interrogations, Hébert used the services of a French lieutenant in the Pondichéry garrison named Cordier. Cordier, the son of a councillor on Pondichéry’s Superior Council, had been born in India, but he was not fluent in Tamil. Questioned in 1718 as part of the same proceedings that provided Manuel’s recollections, Cordier testified, “Hébert held a paper in his hand, and told [Cordier] what he must say to Nayiniyappa. Hébert used the Portuguese language, and [Cordier] also spoke Portuguese to Nayiniyappa, who responded in the same language, and [Cordier] then repeated Nayiniyappa’s response to Hébert [in French].”

As this depiction of an almost surreal interrogation reveals, Cordier was not so much an interpreter as a buffer: he did little more than repeat Hébert’s words, which were already understood by the Portuguese-speaking Nayiniyappa, and then translated into French Nayiniyappa’s Portuguese response—merely transmitting through another voice what had already been heard by the Portuguese-speaking Hébert. This evidence therefore bolstered Nayiniyappa’s claim that the sole purpose of using an interpreter was to engender willful miscomprehension and abuse the broker by making him mute. Hébert’s use of an interpreter served to erase the long history of understanding between the two men.

Governor Hébert did not articulate in any extant document why he chose to deny Nayiniyappa the opportunity to speak to him directly in Portuguese.
Nayiniyappa’s sons mentioned in their narrative of the affair only one occasion on which Hébert spoke to Nayiniyappa directly in Portuguese in the course of his incarceration. They claimed that one day, Hébert and his son, who were in debt, came to Nayiniyappa’s cell. They made the broker a stark offer, in Portuguese, to restore his freedom for a payment of two thousand pagodas. The joint language that had been conveniently forgotten in an attempt to assert the “Frenchness” of Hébert’s regime was suddenly restored, and the path of direct communication tantalizingly—albeit briefly—reopened. If this clandestine visit did take place, the Héberts would have employed Portuguese to avoid having an interpreter witness the offer. An interpreter leaves a trace and, as Manuel’s testimony demonstrates, can act as a damaging witness.

The Signature: A Perverted Sign

Signatures played an important role in the Nayiniyappa Affair, most often discussed as signs of questionable and deceptive authority. The confounding use of signatures was an issue not only for Nayiniyappa, who centered many of his appeals on untrustworthy acts of signing, but also for Tamil witnesses and the French judges who had signed his conviction. The discussion of signatures and acts of signing in the affair reveals the semiotic instability of an interpreted world.

Hébert required Nayiniyappa to sign his name in Tamil to each of the council secretary Le Roux’s French-language transcripts of his seven interrogations. The practice of putting Tamil signatures to French documents was very much the norm in Pondichéry. Whenever literate Tamil witnesses or defendants were heard in cases brought before the Superior Council (also known as the Sovereign Council), they signed the French documents recording their hearing. The French records scrupulously documented this stage in the proceedings, stating that the interpreter in each case had carefully explained the contents of the text before the witness signed it. Nayiniyappa’s appeals and Manuel’s testimony alike described Nayiniyappa asking for a full explanation of the documents before he signed them. Manuel admitted Nayiniyappa had asked for a “word by word” explanation but that the only answer he was given was that the documents contained nothing but his own responses.

Manuel testified that Nayiniyappa “denied almost everything we asked him about, and gave very good reasons as his justification. The interrogations complete, the General had sieur Le Roux [the secretary] write what he wanted written, without reading these texts to me; therefore, I could not tell Nanyapa anything that Le Roux had written.” The secretary of the council, Joseph
François Le Roux, was a third actor, apart from Manuel and Cordier, whose role affected the linguistic exchanges in the interrogation room. He was present at each of Nayiniyappa’s interrogations and at the witness testimonies. He signed every transcription of these encounters. Other company records reveal that Le Roux, a native of Amiens, had become secretary less than six months earlier. In this role he served as Pondichéry’s notary. The council had unanimously appointed Le Roux, who had worked for several Parisian notaries and in various offices in France before arriving in India. The post came with generous wages, and his position as a new appointee may have made him eager to please Governor Hébert. Le Roux would leave Pondichéry for Bengal in 1718 and die there in 1719. In a letter written in 1719, Nayiniyappa’s ally, the French official La Morandière, claimed that Le Roux had actually fled Pondichéry because witness testimony suggested he had stolen money from Nayiniyappa’s business associates. The official accused Le Roux of engaging with Hébert in commerce using illicitly minted money. Le Roux had gone to Bengal to avoid the investigation, he claimed.

According to Manuel, struggles over the signing of these documents recurred throughout the interrogations. “Every time [Nayiniyappa] was questioned, the General told him to sign the documents written by sieur Le Roux, and every time he refused to sign, saying he didn’t know what it was they wanted him to sign. He asked that we explain to him what it said, word by word, but we would only tell him that only his own responses were written down, and nothing else. And so he always signed, despite himself. I also signed the papers without knowing what they contained.” The official record makes no mention of these interactions; rather, each interrogation record concludes with the statement that the prisoner heard a word-by-word explanation by the interpreter of the contents and that he acknowledged the veracity of the record and signed his name to it. Nayiniyappa’s complaint was a procedural one; it stemmed not from the semiotic discrepancy between the French source and the Tamil authorization but from the demand that he sign an unexplained text. Nayiniyappa’s signature to the documents thus carried two potential and contradictory meanings: a mark of authentication or evidence of intimidation and coercion.

Why did Nayiniyappa sign the interrogation records if he didn’t know their contents? His appeals supply two different explanations of this act. First, he claimed that he was intimidated by the enraged response to his qualms—in one appeal he describes Governor Hébert “roaring in French and slandering and confronting him”, in another he describes Hébert, his son and the interpreter Manuel falling “into a furious rage” when he objected. “He was presented with a paper written in the French language; he knew well that it
was his own condemnation,” described an appeal, but he knew it was futile to resist, “with the Governor so passionate and driven by his ambition.”

Second, Nayiniyappa explained that he acquiesced because it never occurred to him that Hébert would try to frame him by using his own signature. The idea that “a Catholic and Christian judge” such as Hébert would ask him to sign a false document was inconceivable, the broker wrote. He also described Manuel and Hébert’s son reassuring him that he had nothing to fear in signing, although of course Manuel could not himself read the documents. Resigned to his fate, Nayiniyappa had despaired of finding justice on earth when he signed, saying he did so by “lifting his eyes to the heavens asking for justice.”

The MEP missionary father Jean-Jacques Tessier de Queralay, Nayiniyappa’s ally and the Jesuits’ rival, also used dramatic language in relation to the reports of this incident and highlighted the manipulation of Nayiniyappa’s signature. He cast the Héberts as villains and Nayiniyappa as a victim, calling the broker “a poor innocent whose goods they wanted [who thus] found himself convicted by his own hand without knowing it.”

The appeals alleged Hébert and his allies had employed various methods to also persuade the witnesses against Nayiniyappa into signing the papers put before them, including intimidation, threats of vengeance by the powerful French officials, promises that they would benefit by pleasing Hébert, and references to others’ compliance. Nayiniyappa’s sons claimed that Pedro, their father’s rival, told a group of potential witnesses that if they testified they would receive twenty-four pagodas as compensation, but if they refused they would be given twenty-four lashes of the whip.

In their questioning in 1718 about Nayiniyappa’s conviction, several witnesses claimed that two years earlier, they had tried to avoid signing the written account of their testimony by claiming that they did not know how to write. The witness Andiapen, for instance, admitted to making such a claim. Andiapen also testified that while the documents pertaining to his deposition made it appear as if he had come to the fort three times—one for inquiry, a second time for recollement, and a third time for a confrontation with Nayiniyappa—he was called in only one time. Another man “declared that when Hébert asked him if it wasn’t Nanyapa who counseled them to leave the city [in the exodus of 1715], he responded, ‘Monsieur, you brought me here and had me sworn in to tell the truth. I am an old man, I do not want to lie, and I do not want to make a false oath.’ He also said that he had declared that he didn’t know how to write, in order to avoid being made to sign a paper of which he didn’t know the content, and many of his friends did the same.” Here the witness explicitly linked the proceedings to a threat to his reputation.
Falsification of official documents threatened the very ability to act with purpose and to trust that certain actions—here, the act of putting one’s name to a text—would produce certain results, an unbreakable tie between the signed document and the actor who signed it. One of Nayiniyappa’s appeals said the caste heads brought in to testify about the employee exodus of 1715 were especially reluctant to perjure themselves with false signatures. Some witnesses claimed, under requestioning two years after their original depositions, that like the accused, they had signed their depositions without knowing their contents. The deposition of a witness named Calichetty centered on the validity of his signature: “First he was asked if he recognized his signature, which was given along with seventeen others at the bottom of Tanapachetty’s testimony, declaring the testimony [against Nayiniyappa] to be true. He said it was. Asked if he knew what was written in it, before he signed it, he answered that he didn’t know, and that he had asked that it be read to him before he signed it, but he was told that it wasn’t necessary and he signed it, because he was afraid.” Dozens made the same accusation, saying they had been intimidated and pressured into signing testimonies against Nayiniyappa. “Some of [the witnesses] said they had made some difficulty about signing, because they didn’t know what they were signing, but Hébert had told them: ‘your friends signed this, you must sign it.’”

Nayiniyappa’s sons summarized these questionings, writing that “every single witness stated that his testimony had not been explained or read to him . . . that when someone made some resistance or refused to sign, he was threatened . . . if something was written in their presence, they did not know what it was . . . and when the witnesses or Nanyapa asked that something be read or explained to them, this was refused.”

In Indian Ocean practices of attestation, South Asian merchants accepted or denied promissory notes commonly known as hundis according to whether they recognized the validity of the style and form of the note, gathered through personal experience of previous notes. By signing a document they believed to be false, the witnesses would have been jeopardizing their future reliability, and by extension their credit. An incident that suggests that signatures were as much a marker of status and respectability for Frenchmen as for local merchants is described in the diary of the broker Ananda Ranga Pillai. In 1736 he observed a spirited council debate as to the order in which French councillors would append their signatures to documents after the appointment of a new member. One of the councillors learned his signature would henceforth appear below that of the new appointee. Governor Dumas told him, “Your functions will continue undisturbed, and your salary will still be the same. The only change required is in the position of your signature, which
you will have to affix after those of the gentlemen already mentioned.” The councillor replied, “My means are not so insufficient as to compel me to submit to such an indignity. I regard honor as of greater value. I will, therefore, give up my post,” and he stormed out.\(^\text{78}\)

In the course of the Nayiniyappa Affair, some signatures were also tampered with in more direct ways. One man admitted that when he was called to testify against Nayiniyappa he was not even in Pondichéry, and others were made to sign in his name.\(^\text{79}\) Another signatory said he and his father-in-law had both been called to testify, but his father-in-law hid so as to avoid the summons. The man then signed both his own name and that of his father-in-law under duress.\(^\text{80}\) One of Nayiniyappa’s associates, Ramanada, claimed he had been made to sign his name to a document that carried the wrong date so as to make it appear that he was present in Pondichéry on a day when he was not. When this was discovered, Ramanada’s missionary supporters from the MEP wrote an appeal, describing the falsified document as “false, illusory, abusive.”\(^\text{81}\)

Most of the witnesses and Nayiniyappa did not deny that they had signed the testimonies. They merely argued the signatures did not signify verification. The issue is one of semiotic integrity: a signature is an index of both presence and intention. It makes the claim “I was here” and the accompanying statement “I agree.” While presence was not called into question, since most of the signers agreed that they had physically signed, intention posed more of a problem. When witnesses claimed that they had signed their name only because Hébert threatened them or promised to reward them, their signatures lost their power as marks of verification and markers of proper legal procedure. They accused Hébert and his secretary of semiotic perversion. As Nayiniyappa’s sons argued, Hébert and his secretary “abused the signatures of these Malabars.”\(^\text{82}\) A French supporter of Nayiniyappa echoed the sons’ appeal and highlighted the political and religious motivations behind these actions. He described Hébert’s crime as “the abuse of Indians’ signatures, for the pleasure of the Jesuit Fathers.”\(^\text{83}\) In a world in which French authorities and the local population had few shared signs—lacking common language, modes of doing business, or rites of religious practice—the manipulation of a signature’s meaning only accentuated the semiotic cacophony.

In 1669, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, following the Venetian example, founded the École des Jeunes de langues in Paris, which provided dragomans-in-training with language instruction in Turkish, Arabic, Persian, and Armenian for diplomatic service in the Ottoman lands. Fittingly, the Jesuits—strong advocates and practitioners of linguistic immersion—were entrusted with
instruction in the Parisian school. However, this institution did not teach Indian languages. Thus Frenchmen developing imperial interests in India had to pursue other solutions to language barriers, including the local brokers and interpreters who became key players in the Nayiniyappa Affair.

If the affair suggests French ambivalence about this solution, the fact that the directors of the French trading company in Paris would soon decide on a different approach indicates the affair was a harbinger of other approaches to French colonialism in India. Less than a decade after the conclusion of the Nayiniyappa Affair, the directors opined that local interpreters were compromising French interests by failing to take a firm tone with Indian leaders and demand terms that would be most beneficial to the French. In a letter sent from Paris to India in 1727, the directors ordered the company’s agents in Pondichéry, as well as in Chandernagore and Mahé, to “choose several young children of French birth, and instruct them in the languages used in the lands where [French] trading posts are located, so that these young men can serve as your interpreters in the future.”

The French government in Pondichéry voiced unequivocal support for the idea of tutoring French youth in Indian languages, admitting that “not being able to write or speak to make ourselves understood has caused us great difficulty in many small matters.” The colonial council offered a cash prize of one thousand livres to the young resident who became most proficient in an Indian language. But it also warned of many obstacles to ending reliance on local linguistic intermediaries. To start, the local French youth were not eager to undertake the rigors of the study of Indian languages. The council cited only one French boy who was both interested and capable and sufficiently healthy to undertake taxing language studies, and claimed there was no one who could teach him Persian, the language used by the Mughal court. It made no reference to the study of Tamil. Problematic as reliance on Indian interpreters might be, finding a solution proved difficult.

The predicament of interpretation went beyond the issue of interpreters’ supposed timidity. Dependence on linguistic intermediaries was disturbing precisely because of its inevitability, and the difficulty was finding a way out of this dependence. Ananda Ranga Pillai revealed the depth of this dependency in one of his diary’s entries. Governor Dupleix wanted a missive to be sent in Persian regarding some territorial diplomatic negotiations. But the difficulty in doing so in secret revealed the utter reliance on local intermediaries:

[The Governor] . . . said that a letter to that effect must be written by M. Delarche, and that the Brahman in charge of preparing the Persian letters should not know of it. I replied: “The plan is a good one, but
M. Delarche can only speak and read Persian. He cannot write that language.” The Governor said: “only a few words have to be written, M. Delarche can manage that,” and he then sent for him. He came. The Governor gave him the subject, and asked him to write the letter. M. Delarche said that he could not write Persian, but that he would get the Brahman writer to do what was required, and would strictly warn him not to reveal the secret to anyone.88

The problem of interpretation, as the Nayiniyappa Affair so clearly shows, was densely woven into the fabric of colonial life. The reliance on local linguistic go-betweens reflected local social structures and power relations characterized by distributed authority and not so easily overturned. In the course of the Nayiniyappa Affair the polylingual and mediated reality of French governance in Pondichéry was suspended, but the resulting uproar thwarted, at least for a while, those who would remove Nayiniyappa from his post. By refusing to use a shared language, Nayiniyappa’s adversaries were refusing to cede authority to their intermediary and tried to maintain control in their hands. While the exoneration of the broker suggests at least partial failure of this effort, the growing use of French by Tamil go-betweens later in the eighteenth century points to the eventual success of this strategy.

Struggles over interpretation and the use of multiple languages revolved around the ability of shared signs—whether textual or oral—to serve as stable markers in exchanges already rich in the possibility for misunderstanding. Nayiniyappa and his cohort of commercial and religious interpreters provided an indispensable linguistic service to traders and missionaries alike, by making disparate sign systems mutually comprehensible. This history explains the outrage Nayiniyappa and his supporters expressed over the denial of shared language in the course of his trial.

Nayiniyappa had amassed significant authority from his position as a go-between. His indignation over the silence and incomprehension imposed on him during his trial stemmed from the striking contrast between his previous life, devoted to mediating and facilitating exchange, and his life after his arrest. As both a Chaudrie interpreter and the company’s head commercial broker, he had made his fortune and his reputation because of his ability to communicate. He was accustomed to moving fluently between Tamil and Portuguese, conferring with South Indian rulers on behalf of the French government, firmly negotiating terms of trade with Pondichéry’s merchants or laborers, giving loud orders to the members of his household, or speaking to large crowds of the poor receiving his largesse. His life was a noisy,
productive symphony of overlapping yet comprehensible speech. How different were the months he spent locked up in a prison cell at Pondichéry’s Fort St. Louis. Which would have been worse: the long hours of imposed and solitary silence, when he was not allowed to speak even to his guards, or the incomprehensible babble of French in the interrogation room, where he must have been all too aware that the impenetrable noise was the sound of his fate being sealed?