Tamil =$\bar{e}$ as a focus-sensitive scalar operator

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ABSTRACT

The Tamil enclitic =$\bar{e}$, described as an "emphatic" focus particle in literature, gives rise to a wide range of interpretations depending on its syntactic position and the discourse context. When =$\bar{e}$ is cliticised sentence-medially, it can license scalar additive, exclusive, intensifying and precisifying inferences. When it attaches sentence-finally, =$\bar{e}$ serves to signal that the prejacent proposition is already in the common ground. This paper offers an analysis of =$\bar{e}$. I argue that the sentence-medial and sentence-final uses of =$\bar{e}$ correspond to two distinct lexical items, =$\bar{e}_1$ and =$\bar{e}_2$ respectively, motivated by the fact that only =$\bar{e}_1$ is obligatorily sensitive to focus. In the rest of this paper, I examine =$\bar{e}_1$. I propose that =$\bar{e}_1$ associates its prejacent with the highest-ranked proposition among a contextually specified set of alternatives. The various discourse effects associated with =$\bar{e}_1$ are shown to arise due to its compatibility with multiple types of alternative propositions and strength rankings, and other contextual factors.

1 Introduction

Tamil has an extremely multi-functional discourse enclitic =$\bar{e}$. When =$\bar{e}$ cliticises sentence-medially within a finite clause, it can give rise to a range of interpretations depending on the context, including scalar additive (1a), scalar exclusive (1b), exhaustive (1c), intensifying (1d) and precisifying (1e) inferences.[1,2] When =$\bar{e}$ attaches at the end of a finite clause, it serves discourse functions which include signalling the speaker's belief that the prejacent proposition is already in the common ground of discourse (1f).[3]

(1) a. CONTEXT: Ram won a bronze medal in a Decathlon, and:
ʃyām veḷḷi meḍal=ē jeyi-cc-ān
Shyam silver medal=$\bar{e}$ win-PST-3.SG.M
'Shyam won even a *silver medal*.' [⇝ *This is very unexpected/noteworthy.*]

b. CONTEXT: Ram won a gold medal in a Decathlon, and:
ʃyām veḷḷi meḍal=ē jeyi-cc-ān
Shyam silver medal=$\bar{e}$ win-PST-3.SG.M
'Shyam only won a *silver medal*.' [⇝ *Nothing better than a silver medal.*]

[1]Tamil is transcribed as follows: *t* /t̪/, *d* /d̪/, *c* /tʃ/, *j* /dʒ/, *y* /j/, *ŭ* [i̯]. Macrons mark long vowels: *ā* /aː/, etc.

[2]Glosses follow the Leipzig rules, with the following additional abbreviations: ADD = additive particle, ASP = aspect, HON = honorific, HUM = human, NHUM = non-human

[3]Unless noted otherwise, all the data is based on the author's intuitions, confirmed by three other speakers.

c. CONTEXT: Ram had wanted to go to several cities in Europe, but in the end:
rām barlin-kk=ē pō-n-ān
Ram Berlin-DAT=*ē* go-PST-3.SG.M
'Shyam went *only* to Berlin.' [⇝ *Ram went nowhere else.*]

d. rām osaram-ā irŭ-pp-ān, ʃyām osaram-ā.v=ē irŭ-pp-ān
Ram height-ADV be-FUT-3SG.M, Shyam height-ADV=*ē* be-FUT-3.SG.M
'Ram is tall, (and/but) Shyam is *really* tall.' [⇝ *Shyam is taller than Ram.*]

e. ellār=um=ē va-nd-ānga
everyone-ADD=*ē* come-PST-3.PL.HUM
'*Absolutely* everyone came.' [⇝ *Every single person came.*]

f. CONTEXT: A had told B earlier that A's son lives in Delhi. A few weeks later, B asks A, "Where does your son live now?" A replies:
avan ɖelli-lɛ irŭ-kk-ān=ē
he Delhi-LOC be-PRS-3.SG.M=*ē*
'He's in Delhi, as you know.' [⇝ *A believes that B already knows this.*]

This paper offers an analysis of =$\bar{e}$. In §2, I argue that =$\bar{e}$ should be treated as two distinct lexical items, =$\bar{e}_1$ and =$\bar{e}_2$, motivated by their complementary syntactic distributions — =$\bar{e}_1$ must occur sentence-medially and =$\bar{e}_2$, sentence-finally — and the fact that only =$\bar{e}_1$ is obligatorily sensitive to focus. This departs from prior authors (Arokianathan 1981; Chevillard 1997; Murugaiyan 2009), who do not appreciate this distinction. In the rest of this paper, I examine the focus-sensitive enclitic =$\bar{e}_1$, leaving =$\bar{e}_2$ for future work.

§3 describes the range of interpretations that =$\bar{e}_1$ gives rise to in different contexts. §4 presents the analysis. I propose that =$\bar{e}_1$ is uniformly a scalar operator: =$\bar{e}_1$ introduces the presupposition that its prejacent corresponds to the highest-ranked true alternative proposition in the Current Question (Beaver & Clark 2008). Its various discourse effects arise due to its compatibility with multiple types of alternative propositions and strength rankings, as well as other contextual factors. §5 concludes.

It bears noting that =$\bar{e}_1$, described in the literature as an "emphatic" enclitic (e.g., Asher 1989: 94), resembles several other "emphatic" enclitics in other South Asian languages, such as its Telugu cognate =*ē* or Hindi =*hī*. Of particular relevance is Deo's (2023) study of the Marathi variant =*ts*, which develops a unified account of =*ts*'s similarly varied discourse uses. However, while Deo's analysis greatly informs the present study, it cannot be adopted fully for Tamil =$\bar{e}_1$, as =$\bar{e}_1$ is licensed only in a strict subset of the contexts that license Marathi =*ts*, so that applying Deo's account to =$\bar{e}_1$ would overgenerate.[4] This paper restricts its focus to the Tamil data, with the aim of studying crosslinguistic variation in future research.

[4]In particular, as Deo (2023) demonstrates, Marathi =*ts* can signal that its prejacent is the most salient focus alternative among the interlocutors; in fact, she identifies this as =*ts*'s core discourse function. Notably, Tamil =$\bar{e}_1$ does not share =*ts*'s use of coordinating the mutual salience of focus alternatives.

2 =ē corresponds to two separate lexical items

I assume Hamblin semantics for questions, and a standard Roothian alternative semantics for focus (Hamblin 1973; Rooth 1992). A question denotes a set of propositions that potentially answer it, and focus introduces alternatives in an alternative-semantic dimension. An expression α has an ordinary semantic value $[\![\alpha]\!]^o$ and a focus semantic value $[\![\alpha]\!]^f$. If α is unfocused, $[\![\alpha]\!]^f = \{[\![\alpha]\!]^o\}$. If α is focused, $[\![\alpha_F]\!]^f$ is the set of all objects of the same type as $[\![\alpha]\!]^o$. Focus semantic values of complex expressions are computed by applying functional application point-wise to each element in the FSVs of their constituents.

I adopt a Question Under Discussion framework, in which discourse structure is modelled along hierarchically stacked Questions Under Discussion (QUD) (Roberts 2012, a.o.). At any point in a conversation, there may be a number of open QUDs; following Beaver & Clark (2008), I refer to the most salient QUD, at the top of the QUD stack, as the Current Question (CQ). I also adopt Beaver & Clark's (2008) proposal that obligatorily focus-sensitive expressions conventionally associate with the CQ. Congruence between focus and the CQ is regulated by the Focus Principle: "Some part of a declarative utterance should evoke a set of alternatives containing all the Rooth–Hamblin alternatives of the CQ" (Beaver & Clark 2008: 37).

With this background, I now examine =ē's interactions with focus. When =ē cliticises sentence-medially to a constituent contained within a finite clause, =ē's host must contain the focused element.[5] Given the question (2a), (2b) is a felicitous answer, as =ē is cliticised to *ʃyāmɛ* 'Shyam.ACC', and this placement of focus makes (2b) congruent with (2a). In contrast, (2c), in which =ē is cliticised to *rām* 'Ram', is an infelicitous answer, as focus on *rām* renders (2c) incongruent with (2a).

(2) a. QUESTION: Whom did Ram see?
b. rām ʃyām-ɛy=ē pātt-ān
Ram [Shyam-ACC]$_F$=ē see.PST-3.SG.M
'Ram only saw *Shyam*.' [⇝ *He saw nobody else.*]
c. #rām=ē ʃyām-ɛ pātt-ān
#[Ram]$_F$=ē Shyam-ACC see.PST-3.SG.M
#'Only *Ram* saw Shyam.' [⇝ *Nobody else saw Shyam.*]

=ē is banned from cliticising inside NPs (i.e., to participial relative clauses and adjectival modifiers). If nominal modifiers are focused, =ē must cliticise to the nominal head, and focus on the modifier is expressed by prosodic stress (glossed in bold). (3a) and (3b) thus have different interpretations solely due to different placements of focus, which strongly suggests that =ē is obligatorily sensitive to focus.

(3) a. QUESTION: Which pen did you buy?

[5]The determinant of finiteness in Tamil, and more generally in Dravidian languages, is a matter of debate (McFadden & Sundaresan 2014; and citations therein). I remain agnostic on this issue.

nān **karŭppŭ** pēnā.v-ɛy=ē vāng-in-ēn
I [black]$_F$ pen-ACC=*ē* buy-PST-1.SG
'I only bought the *black* pen.' [⇝ *I bought no other sort of pen.*]

b. QUESTION: What did you buy?
nān karŭppŭ pēnā.v-ɛ.y=ē vāng-in-ēn
I [black pen-ACC]$_F$=*ē* buy-PST-1.SG
'I only bought the *black pen*.' [⇝ *I bought nothing else.*]

However, =*ē* does not exhibit obligatory sensitivity to focus when it occurs sentence-finally, i.e., when it is cliticised at the end of a finite clause. In (4a-b), =*ē* is felicitous regardless of the position of focus. Moreover, this sentence-final =*ē* contributes meaning that is orthogonal to focus: it signals the speaker's belief that the prejacent is in the common ground.

(4) a. QUESTION: Where did Ram go?
rām ɖelli-kki pō-n-ān=ē
Ram [Delhi-DAT]$_F$ go-PST-3.SG.M=*ē*
'Ram went to *Delhi*, as you know.' [⇝ *Spkr believes that Addr knows this.*]

b. QUESTION: Who went to Delhi?
ɖelli-kki rām pō-n-ān=ē
Delhi-DAT [Ram]$_F$ go-PST-3.SG.M=*ē*
'*Ram* went to Delhi, as you know.' [⇝ *Spkr believes that Addr knows this.*]

To highlight the contrast between sentence-medial =*ē* and sentence-final =*ē*, consider the context in (5) along with a prejacent sentence "*Siva hit*$_F$ *Shyam*", with narrow focus on the verb. As (5a) shows, for the obligatorily focus-sensitive =*ē* to associate with the verb focus, it must attach to a non-finite form of the content verb "hit" (*aɖikka* 'hit.INF'), with a dummy verb *cey* 'do' bearing the finiteness inflections (tense marking and subject agreement). (5a) thus expresses that the prejacent is the most unexpected proposition among alternatives of the form "*Siva* VERB *Shyam*" (5a-i). Crucially, when =*ē* cliticises sentence-finally to the finite verb *aɖiccān* 'he hit' (5b), this interpretation is unavailable (5b-i), meaning that focus-associating =*ē* must surface inside a finite clause. Instead, just as in (4), the sentence-final =*ē* in (5b) gives rise to an inference that is orthogonal to the focus, namely that Sita already knows the prejacent (5b-ii), which makes (5b) infelicitous in this context. Note that this "*as you know*" reading is unavailable with sentence-medial =*ē*, shown in (5a-ii).

(5) CONTEXT: Sita hears that Shyam and Siva had a fight, and asks Ram about it. Ram says: "At first Shyam and Siva were just yelling at each other, then...

a. ʃivā ʃyām-ɛ aɖi-kka.v=ē cenj-ān
Siva Shyam-ACC [hit-INF]$_F$=*ē* do.PST-3.SG.M

i. 'Siva even *hit* Shyam.' [⇝ *This was a surprising escalation of the fight.*]

ii. UNAVAILABLE: 'Siva *hit* Shyam, as you know.'

b. #ʃivā ʃyām-ɛ aɖi-cc-ān=ē
#Siva Shyam-ACC [hit-PST-3.SG.M]$_F$=$\bar{e}$
i. UNAVAILABLE: 'Siva even *hit* Shyam.'
ii. #'Siva *hit* Shyam, as you know.' [⇝ *Ram believes that Sita knows this.*]

I therefore conclude that =$\bar{e}$ represents two distinct lexical items, =$\bar{e}_1$ and =$\bar{e}_2$, differentiated by their complementary syntactic positions and differing sensitivity to focus. =$\bar{e}_1$ necessarily occurs in sentence-medial positions and is obligatorily focus-sensitive, whereas =$\bar{e}_2$ cliticises sentence-finally and does not exhibit obligatory focus-sensitivity. That is, only =$\bar{e}_1$ conventionally associates with the Current Question (Beaver & Clark 2008). In the rest of this paper, I restrict my attention to =$\bar{e}_1$. Hence, I will refer to =$\bar{e}_1$ simply as '=$\bar{e}$' when there is no ambiguity. For discussion on =$\bar{e}_2$, see Murugaiyan (2009), Chevillard (1997) and Arokianathan (1981), although none of them distinguish between =$\bar{e}_1$ and =$\bar{e}_2$.[6]

3 Empirical landscape

This section describes the range of interpretations associated with =$\bar{e}_1$, and the contexts in which they arise. This discussion draws heavily from Deo's (2020, 2023) insightful accounts of Marathi =*ts*. Note that since the rest of this paper (§3-4) deals exclusively with =$\bar{e}_1$, I refer to it simply as '=$\bar{e}$' throughout.

3.1 Scalar inferences

Firstly, =$\bar{e}$ licenses inferences similar to those associated with scalar additives like English *even* when the focus alternatives are ranked by a salient contextually determined scale. Consider a context which provides a pragmatic scale. (6) gives rise to three inferences: (i) a mirative evaluative inference that the prejacent proposition is considerably unexpected or noteworthy; (ii) an additive inference that individuals lower on the hierarchy also praised Ram; and (iii) an upper-bound inference that no-one higher on the hierarchy did so. The additive inference is cancellable: (6) can easily be followed by "*But nobody else praised me*". The upper-bound inference cannot be cancelled: (6) is judged infelicitous in contexts where the Chairman also praised Ram.

(6) CONTEXT: Ram's workplace has a Chairman, President, Vice-President and Manager, in decreasing levels of hierarchy. Ram was complimented at work. He says:
enn-ɛ prɛsiɖɛnʈ=ē pārāʈʈ-in-ārŭ
I-ACC President=$\bar{e}$ praise-PST-3.SG.HON
'Even the *President* praised me.'

However, whether =$\bar{e}$ licenses an *even*-like evaluative inference depends crucially on the position of the prejacent on the contextual scale relative to salient expectations or stan-

[6] =$\bar{e}_2$ resembles the German discourse particle *ja* in several respects (cf. Schneider 2022).

dards.[7] Consider (7), where Siva and Shyam have participated in separate events in a decathlon. In each of (7a-c), Sita's utterance about Siva's award establishes an expectation regarding the award that Shyam won. In (7a), where the prejacent ranks higher than the contextual standard (winning bronze), =*ē* gives rise to a mirative "stronger-than-expectations" inference, akin to English *even*. In (7b), where the prejacent matches the standard (winning silver), =*ē* emphasises that Shyam's performance *exactly* met the benchmark set by Siva, no more and no less. In (7c), where the prejacent ranks below the contextual standard (winning gold), =*ē* contributes a scalar exclusive inference. Note, however, that (7c) does not license a mirative "weaker-than-expectations" evaluative inference, meaning that =*ē* does not give rise to expectation-lowering effects, unlike exclusives like English *only*.[8]

(7) a. CONTEXT: Sita: "Siva won a bronze medal. What about Shyam?" Ram says:
ʃyām veḷḷi meḍal=ē jeyi-cc-ān
Shyam silver medal=*ē* win-PST-3.SG.M
'Shyam won even a *silver medal*.' [⇝ *This is very unexpected/noteworthy.*]

b. CONTEXT: Sita: "Siva won a silver medal. What about Shyam?" Ram replies:
ʃyām=um veḷḷi meḍal=ē jeyi-cc-ān
Shyam=ADD silver medal=*ē* win-PST-3.SG.M
'Shyam too won *exactly a silver medal*.' [⇝ *No better or worse than a silver.*]

c. CONTEXT: Sita: "Siva won a gold medal. What about Shyam?" Ram replies:
ʃyām veḷḷi meḍal=ē jeyi-cc-ān
Shyam silver medal=*ē* win-PST-3.SG.M
'Shyam only won a *silver medal*.' [⇝ *Nothing better than a silver.*]

The common thread in (6) and (7) is that when the alternatives are ranked by a salient contextually determined scale, =*ē* indicates that no alternative stronger than the prejacent is true. Additionally, when the prejacent exceeds contextual standards, =*ē* gives rise to a mirative "greater-than-expectation" inference, as in (6) and (7a), and further licenses additive inferences when the context supports them, as is the case in (6), but not in (7a).[9]

(8) CONTEXT: Ram was not expected to run more than 5 kms in a marathon, but:
rām pattŭ kilomīṯṯar=ē ōḍ-i-ṯṯ-ān
Ram ten kilometre=*ē* run-ASP-COMPL.PST-3.SG.M
'Ram even ran *ten kilometres*.' [⇝ *This is very unexpected/noteworthy.*]

Note that =*ē* exhibits the same behaviour in contexts involving numerical scales. (8) parallels (7a), and the same sentence would have interpretations analogous to (7b) and (7c) in the appropriate context. I do not illustrate this here due to space constraints.

[7] This discussion is inspired by ideas in Deo's (2020) earlier analysis of Marathi =*ts*. Though this is superseded by Deo (2023), her earlier approach applies well to Tamil =*ē*.

[8] Note that =*ē* also differs from Marathi =*ts* in this respect, as Deo (2023) describes =*ts* as licensing both "greater-than-expectations" and "lesser-than-expectations" mirative inferences.

[9] In this respect, =*ē* contrasts with the enclitic =*kūḍa*, which conventionally expresses both scalar and additive meanings and corresponds more directly to English *even* (Lehmann 1993: 159).

3.2 Exhaustive inferences

When the context does not provide a salient ranking over the alternatives, =*ē* gives rise to exhaustive inferences. That is, =*ē* expresses that all alternatives other than the prejacent are false, as in (9a) and (9b), the latter adapted from Asher (1989: 95). These exhaustive inferences are not cancellable. For instance, continuing (9a) with "*And I also went to Paris*" is infelicitous. Note also that just like in (7c) above, exhaustive uses of =*ē* such as in (9a-b) also do not give rise to mirative expectation-lowering effects, unlike English *only* or *just*.

(9) a. CONTEXT: Ram had gone on a vacation to Europe. After he returns, Sita asks, "Where did you go during your trip?" Ram replies:
nān barlin-kk=ē pō-n-ēn
I Berlin-DAT=*ē* go-PST-1.SG
'I only went to *Berlin*.' [⇝ *I went nowhere else.*]

b. vivasāya vēlɛ.y=ē nān en vāɻnāɭŭ pūrā.v=um
agriculture.OBL work=*ē* I I.OBL lifetime entirety=ADD
cenjŭ-giʈʈ=irŭ-nd-ēn. vēra enda toɻil=um
do.ASP-PROG=be.AUX-PST-1.SG other which occupation=ADD
teri.y-ādŭ
know-FUT.NEG.3.NHUM
'I was doing just *agriculture* my entire life. I don't know any other occupation.'

In §3.1, I presented the generalisation that when the alternatives are ranked by a salient contextual scale, =*ē* indicates that the prejacent is the strongest true alternative. Following Coppock & Beaver (2014), I assume that when no such scale is salient in the context, the alternatives are ranked by entailment, such that they give rise to a boolean lattice. If we make the additional assumption that =*ē* is compatible with multiple types of strength rankings over the alternatives, the earlier generalisation can then account for the exhaustive inferences in (9) as well.[10] I will make this precise in §4.1 and §4.2.

3.3 Intensifying inferences

When =*ē* cliticises to gradable expressions[11], it licenses intensifier-like interpretations, depending on the scale associated with the expression. In (10), which involves the upper-bounded scales OPEN and CLOSED, the argument entity is evaluated as having the property to the maximal degree, translatable with English *fully* or *completely*.

(10) a. kadavŭ tara-nd=ē irŭ-kkŭ
door open-CVB=*ē* be-PRS.3.NHUM
'The door is *fully* open.' [⇝ *It is wide open, not closed even an inch.*]

[10] In this, =*ē* contrasts with the enclitic =*maʈʈum*, which is an exclusive operator compatible only with alternatives ranked by entailment scales (Lehmann 1993: 159), akin to English *exclusively*.

[11] Tamil does not have adjectives as a lexical category (see Venkatesan 2025; and citations therein). I hence use the neutral term "gradable expression", abstracting over the morphosyntactic differences among gradable expressions in Tamil.

b. kadavŭ mūɖ-i.y=ē irŭ-kkŭ
door close-CVB=*ē* be-PRS.3.NHUM
'The door is *fully* closed.' [⇝ *It is not open even an inch.*]

In the case of an upper-open scale, like TALL, =*ē* indicates that it holds true of the argument entity relative to the highest relevant contextual standard. This can have a comparative-like effect when there is a limited set of salient entities in the discourse, as in (11a). Note that this is distinct from a comparative construction, as both Ram and Shyam must be evaluated as tall in (11b), while a comparative only requires that one be taller than the other. In the absence of a salient comparandum, =*ē* conveys the evaluation that the gradable expression holds true no matter the contextual standard. In (11b), the speaker asserts that everyone who judges his roommate's cupboard would find it dirty, no matter the context.[12]

(11) a. rām osaram-ā irŭ-pp-ān, ʃyām osaram-ā.v=ē irŭ-pp-ān
Ram height-ADV be-FUT-3.SG.M Shyam height-ADV=*ē* be-FUT-3.SG.M
'Ram is tall, (and/but) Shyam is really tall.' [⇝ *Shyam is taller than Ram.*]

b. CONTEXT: A university student says of his flatmate's cupboard:
avan alamāri aɻŭkk-ā.v=ē irŭ-kkŭ
he.OBL cupboard dirt-ADV=*ē* be-PRS.3.NHUM
'His cupboard is *completely* dirty.' [⇝ *It is dirty no matter the standard of dirtiness.*]

Additionally, when =*ē* cliticises to intensifying modifiers like *romba* 'very' (12) or *naraiya* 'a lot', =*ē* amplifies their standard-raising effect, similar to English *really very*.

(12) paɖam romba.v=ē aɻag-ā irŭ-kkŭ
picture very=*ē* beauty-ADV be-PRS.3.NHUM
'The picture is really very beautiful.' [⇝ *Even more beautiful than expected*]

=*ē*, as a focus-sensitive particle that can yield both scalar and intensifying interpretations, has parallels in Hebrew *bixlal* and Mandarin *gèng*. Greenberg (2020) and Chen & Greenberg (2024) argue that *bixlal* and *gèng* are scalar operators that can associate with focus on covert syntactic elements — specifically, a companion class argument *c* for *bixlal*, and a covert comparative COMP for *gèng*. Based on this and further cross-linguistic parallels such as Russian *voobščé*, they propose that the ability to associate with focus on covert elements is a parameter of variation for focus-sensitive operators. Orenstein & Greenberg (2021) extend this proposal to Hebrew *be-sax ha-kol*, analysing it as a scalar exclusive that associates with a covert degree modifier to license approximative inferences.

I adopt this proposal for =*ē*. Translating it into Beaver & Clark's (2008) framework, I propose that =*ē* is compatible with a Current Question consisting of alternative propositions obtained by applying varying values to covert contextual parameters in the prejacent

[12] =*ē* differs from Marathi =*ts* in its interactions with gradable expressions. Deo (2023) argues that =*ts* has no standard-raising effect when cliticised to adjectives and only yields a "no matter the context" reading.

sentence. When =*ē* cliticises to gradable expressions in their "positive form", the alternatives vary only in the contextual standard of evaluation supplied by the covert modifier POS (Kennedy 2007). Intensification obtains as =*ē* selects the strongest alternative, i.e., the proposition associated with the highest relevant standard. I will make this precise in §3.4.

3.4 Precisifying inferences

When =*ē* cliticises to expressions that allow for imprecision in their interpretation, it has similar functions as slack regulators such as English *exactly* and *right* (Lasersohn 1999). Precisifying interpretations frequently arise with universal expressions (13a), in which case =*ē* cliticises outside the obligatory additive enclitic =*um*. They are also common with numerals and deictics, such as (13b) and (13c), which correspond to English "*that exact/very*" and "*exactly three*", respectively. Precisifying interpretations also arise with spatial and temporal expressions, particularly in contexts where there is epistemic uncertainty among interlocutors, as shown in (13d).[13]

(13) a. ellār=um=ē va-nd-ānga
everyone=ADD=*ē* come-PST-3.PL.HUM
'*Absolutely* everybody came.' [⇝ *Every single person in the group came.*]

b. nān mūn=ē postagam paɖi-cc-ēn
I three=*ē* book read-PST-1.SG
'I read *exactly* three books.' [⇝ *No more or less than three books.*]

c. CONTEXT: Speaker is at a mobile phone shop and points at a phone on display:
en-akkŭ ad=ē fōn vēŋum
I-DAT that=*ē* phone want
'I want that *exact* phone.' [⇝ *The same device; not another one of that model.*]

d. CONTEXT: Sita: "I think the meeting starts at around 8:30." Ram replies:
illɛ, mīʈiŋ eʈʈ-arɛ-kk=ē ārami-kkum
NEG meeting eight-half-DAT=*ē* start-FUT.3.NHUM
'The meeting will start *exactly* at eight-thirty.' [⇝ *No earlier or later.*]

Drawing on Wiegand's (2018) account of precisifying readings of English *just*, I propose that when =*ē* cliticises to imprecise expressions, the Current Question contains alternatives that vary only in size of the pragmatic halo associated with the host of =*ē* (Lasersohn 1999). Precisification obtains as =*ē* selects the strongest alternative, i.e., the proposition associated with the smallest relevant pragmatic halo. I will elaborate on this in §4.4.

3.5 Interim summary

=*ē* licenses scalar additive, scalar exclusive, and exhaustive inferences, depending on the presence of a salient contextual ranking over the focus alternatives, and the relative strength

[13] =*ē* diverges from Marathi =*ts* in this regard, as Deo (2023) reports that =*ts* does not yield slack regulator-like inferences with spatio-temporal expressions like 'at eight-thirty'.

of contextual expectations. When $=\bar{e}$ cliticises to expressions with context-sensitive interpretations, including gradable and imprecise expressions, it has intensifying and slack regulator-like effects, respectively. In §4, I present the formal analysis of this data.

4 Analysis

Following Coppock & Beaver (2014), I assume that each discourse context c provides a common ground INFO_c, modelled as the set of worlds that verify the mutual public discourse commitments of all interlocutors (the Stalnakerian context set). Each c also provides a Current Question CQ_c and a strength ranking $\geq_c$. The CQ_c is formalised as a set of propositions (set of set of worlds), and $\geq_c$ is a partial order over the CQ_c.

The lexical entry in (14) is based on the MAX operator in Coppock & Beaver (2014). $=\bar{e}$ combines with a proposition p, which is the denotation of the prejacent sentence S at context c, and introduces the presupposition that p is stronger according to $\geq_c$ than all propositions in CQ_c that are true in world w. If this presupposition is satisfied, $=\bar{e}$ is truth-conditionally vacuous and returns p. Hence, the discourse function of $=\bar{e}$ is to indicate that p is the strongest true proposition in the CQ_c.

(14) $[\![=\bar{e}]\!]^c = \lambda w_s.\ \lambda p_{\langle s,t\rangle} : \forall q \in \text{CQ}_c\ [q(w) \rightarrow p \geq_c q].\ p$

The discourse effects associated with $=\bar{e}$ arise depending on the nature of the alternatives in the CQ_c, as well as the strength ranking (Orenstein & Greenberg 2021). When the CQ_c is ordered by a salient contextual scale, the presence of $=\bar{e}$ emphasises the maximal strength of p in the CQ_c, yielding different pragmatic effects depending on p's strength relative to contextual expectations (§4.1). In the absence of a contextually salient scale, the CQ_c is ordered by entailment, in which case $=\bar{e}$ gives rise to exhaustive inferences (§4.2).

Importantly, $=\bar{e}$ is able to operate over a CQ_c that contains alternative denotations of the prejacent sentence varying only in the values of covert contextual parameters, including standards of evaluation of gradable expressions, and the degree of restriction of pragmatic halos. In the former case, $=\bar{e}$ selects the alternative relative to the highest relevant standard, giving rise to intensifying interpretations (§4.3). In the latter case, it selects the denotation with the most restricted pragmatic halo, giving rise to precisifying interpretations (§4.4).

4.1 Accounting for scalar inferences

§3.1 showed that when the CQ_c is ordered by a salient contextual scale, $=\bar{e}$ licenses an upper-bound inference that no alternative stronger than the prejacent p is true. Additionally, if p ranks higher on the scale than salient contextual expectations, $=\bar{e}$ gives rise to a mirative "greater-than-expectation" inference akin to English *even*, and further licenses a cancellable inference that propositions weaker than p are true. (6), repeated as (15), illustrates all three effects.

(15) CONTEXT: Ram's workplace has a Chairman, President, Vice-President and Manager, in decreasing levels of hierarchy. Ram was complimented at work. He says:

enn-ɛ prɛsiɖɛnʈ=ē pārāʈʈ-in-ārŭ
I-ACC President=*ē* praise-PST-3.SG.HON
'Even the *President* praised me.'

Let *X* be shorthand for the proposition "*X praised me*". In (15), the CQ_c is the set in (16a), ranked by a scale of unexpectedness (16b). According to (14), (15) asserts *President* as true, and presupposes that it is stronger than all true alternatives in the CQ_c. I argue that these together yield the upper-bound inference due to Gricean Quality. That is, if a speaker asserts the truth of p in the actual world w_0 while presupposing that p is stronger than all alternatives true in w_0, it must be the case that the speaker is not in a position to assert the truth of any q stronger than p. Moreover, since the speaker has made explicit reference to the relative strength of the alternatives, they cannot be assumed to be ignorant of the truth of any stronger q in w_0. Hence, it must be that they believe that all alternatives stronger than p (which is *Chairman* in 15) are false, as otherwise the utterance would violate Quality.[14]

(16) a. $\{Chairman, President, Vice-President, Manager\}$
b. $Chairman \geq_c President \geq_c Vice-President \geq_c Manager$

The "greater-than-expectations" inference in (15) arises as a pragmatic implication due to the interaction of this upper-bound inference with salient contextual expectations. In the context of (15), it is understood that receiving praise from someone as senior as the President is relatively uncommon. In such a case, the speaker's use of *=ē* conveys that the strongest true alternative in fact exceeds what is normally expected. This has the effect of emphasising that the prejacent is stronger (i.e., more unexpected) than expectations, giving rise to the mirative evaluative inference in (15), as well as (7a).

Finally, drawing on ideas in Rullmann (1997), the additive inference in (15) arises as a conversational implicature. When a speaker asserts a proposition while pragmatically highlighting that it exceeds expectations, addressees reason that less unexpected alternatives are probably also true, since if p is true in w and p is more unexpected than q, q is typically also true in w. Importantly, this reasoning is based on what is typical and is defeasible, which accounts for the cancellability of the additive inference in (15) and the fact that it is not licensed in contexts incompatible with it (7a).

In contexts where the prejacent is equally strong as contextual expectations (7b; repeated as 17a), in addition to the upper bound inference (which follows from the same Gricean reasoning described above), the speaker's use of *=ē* highlights the fact that the strongest true alternative equals, and does not exceed, the contextual standard (here, winning a silver). This has the pragmatic effect of emphasising that the prejacent *exactly* equals the standard — Shyam's performance in (17a) exactly matches Siva's.

(17) a. CONTEXT: Sita: "Siva won a silver medal. What about Shyam?" Ram replies:
ʃyām=um veḷḷi meḍal=ē jeyi-cc-ān
Shyam=ADD silver medal=*ē* win-PST-3.SG.M
'Shyam too won *exactly a silver medal*.' [⇝ *No better or worse than a silver.*]

[14]This argument is inspired by Deo's 2023 account of the exclusive readings of Marathi *=ts*.

b. CONTEXT: Sita: "Siva won a gold medal. What about Shyam?" Ram replies:
ʃyām veḷḷi meḍal=ē jeyi-cc-ān
Shyam silver medal=*ē* win-PST-3.SG.M
'Shyam only won a *silver medal*.' [⇝ *Nothing better than a silver.*]

I now turn to cases where the prejacent is weaker than expectations. (7c), repeated as (17b), yields an upper-bound inference, which again follows from a combination of the assertion in (17b), the presupposition of =*ē*, and interlocutors reasoning by Gricean Quality. However, recall from §3.1 that (17b) does not give rise to mirative "lesser-than-expectations" inferences. This is unexpected — (17b) expresses that the strongest true alternative in the CQ_c is weaker than the contextual standard, which is predicted to give rise to an expectation-lowering effect in a way that is analogous to the mirative inferences in (15) and (17a). It is unclear how to explain the lack of this pragmatic effect in (17b).[15]

Finally, this account straightforwardly extends to cases in which the CQ_c is ordered by numerical scales, such as (8).

4.2 Accounting for exhaustive inferences

§3.2 showed that when the context does not provide a salient order over the CQ_c, =*ē* licenses exhaustive inferences. Following Coppock & Beaver (2014), I assume that in such cases, the CQ_c is ordered by entailment. The alternatives in the CQ_c hence give rise to a boolean lattice, in which each node corresponds to an alternative, and the nodes' arrangement corresponds to the entailment ranking. Consider (9a), repeated as (18).

(18) CONTEXT: Ram had gone on a vacation to Europe. After he returns, Sita asks, "Where did you go during your trip?" Ram replies:
nān barlin-kk=ē pō-n-ēn
I Berlin-DAT=*ē* go-PST-1.SG
'I only went to *Berlin*.' [⇝ *I went nowhere else.*]

Let us assume that Ram had planned to visit Berlin, Paris and Rome, and let *X* be shorthand for "*I went to X*". The CQ_c is hence the set in (19a). Assuming that the predicate "*go to*" is distributive, such that it holds of a group just in case it holds of each entity in the group, this set is ordered such as in (19b).

(19) a. {*Berlin*, *Paris*, *Rome*, (*Berlin* ∧ *Paris*), (*Berlin* ∧ *Rome*), (*Paris* ∧ *Rome*), (*Berlin* ∧ *Paris* ∧ *Rome*)}
b. (*Berlin* ∧ *Paris* ∧ *Rome*) $\geq_c$ (*Berlin* ∧ *Paris*) $\geq_c$ *Berlin*, etc.

According to (14), (18) asserts *Berlin* as true, and presupposes that *Berlin* is stronger than all true alternatives in the CQ_c. By the same reasoning as was described in §4.1, the

[15] Interestingly, Tamil has another focus-sensitive enclitic =*dān*, which licenses exclusive and "lesser-than-expectations" inferences, but not "greater-than expectations" inferences. Descriptively, =*ē* and =*dān* appear to be in complementary distribution in their interactions with contextual expectations.

combination of the assertion and presupposition in (18) leads interlocutors to jointly reason, by Gricean Quality, that all stronger alternatives (i.e., those that entail *Berlin*) are false:

(20) *Berlin* ∧ ¬(*Berlin* ∧ *Paris*) ∧ ¬(*Berlin* ∧ *Rome*) ∧ ¬(*Berlin* ∧ *Paris* ∧ Rome)

This entails ¬*Paris* ∧ ¬*Rome*. Hence, assuming that the speaker is cooperative, it must be that they believe *Berlin* to be the only true alternative, lest Quality be violated.

Note, however, that this account relies on the assumption that the predicate is distributive. Crucially, we find that exhaustive inferences associated with =*ē* are cancellable when the predicate is non-distributive. Consider (21), with the predicate "*drive the car*" being non-distributive in this context. In such cases, =*ē* conveys what Lehmann (1993: 157) terms "self-performance". Intuitively, (21) conveys that Ram drove the car personally, without assistance, and by his own volition, which corresponds to meanings expressed by exclusive adverbial reflexive intensifiers in English (König & Gast 2006). Notably, (21) does convey an exhaustive inference, but it is cancellable: Ram can continue his utterance by saying "*I drove partway, and Siva drove the rest of the way*".

(21) CONTEXT: Ram is talking about a road trip that he and his roommates went on over the weekend. Sita knows that Ram and his friends share a single car amongst each other. Sita asks, "Who drove the car?" Ram replies:
nān=ē vaɳḍi.y-ɛ ōṯṯ-in-ēn
I=*ē* car-ACC drive-PST-1.SG
'*I* drove the car *myself*.' [⇝ *I drove it by myself, without help, of my own volition.*]

I suggest that the cancellability of the exhaustive inference in (21) arises from the predicate "*drive the car*" being non-distributive. In the context of (21), "*X and Y drove the car*" does not entail "*X drove the car*" or "*Y drove the car*" individually. Hence, given an entailment ordering over the CQ_c, the two propositions are unordered relative to each other, so that applying the presupposition of =*ē* to one does not require the other to be false. A parallel to this is found in English *it*-clefts, which interact in an analogous way with non-distributive predicates (Velleman et al. 2012). However, the source of the additional "self-performance" inferences in (21) — that subject, Ram, performed the action personally and independently — is unclear. I leave this as an open question.

4.3 Accounting for intensifying inferences

§3.3 showed that when =*ē* cliticises to gradable expressions, it has intensifier-like effects, which depend on the nature of the scale that the expression is associated with.

Following Kennedy (2007), I assume a semantic ontology that includes a type *d* for degrees, and that gradable expressions denote measure functions from entities to degrees (type $\langle e, d \rangle$).[16] I also assume that the bare "positive forms" of gradable expressions contain a covert modifier POS (22), which supplies a contextually specified standard of evaluation

[16] As noted in §3.3, since Tamil lacks a distinct category of adjectives, this abstracts over the syntactic and potentially semantic differences in the ways that Tamil realises adjective-like expressions.

$s^c(g)$. $\text{POS}(x)(g)$ holds just in case the entity x has the property g to a degree that exceeds $s^c(g)$, thus introducing contextual variation in interpretation.

(22) a. $[\![\text{POS}]\!]^c = \lambda g_{\langle e,d\rangle}.\ \lambda x_e.\ g(x) > s^c(g)$
b. $[\![\textit{tall}]\!]^c = \lambda x_e.\ \text{TALL}_{\langle e,d\rangle}(x)$
c. $[\![\text{POS}(\text{TALL})(\text{RAM})]\!]^c = \text{TALL}(\text{RAM}) > s^c(\text{TALL})$

As discussed in §3.3, building on ideas in Greenberg (2020) and Orenstein & Greenberg (2021), I propose that $=\bar{e}$ can operate over a CQ_c that contains alternative propositions obtained by applying varying values to covert contextual parameters in the prejacent sentence *S*. In cases where the $=\bar{e}$ cliticises to a gradable expression in the positive form, the Current Question is along the lines of "To what degree does *X* have the property *Y*?". Hence, the CQ_c contains alternative denotations of *S* that differ only in the contextual standard of evaluation introduced by POS. As per (14), $=\bar{e}$ indicates that the interpretation of *S* corresponds to the strongest alternative in the CQ_c, i.e., the denotation in which the gradable expression is evaluated against the highest standard that is relevant in the context.

I first examine gradable expressions that map to upper-closed scales. In (10a), repeated as (23), the CQ_c contains alternatives in which 'open' is evaluated against different relevant standards of openness. Since OPEN is an upper-closed scale that has a salient maximal endpoint, $=\bar{e}$ selects the alternative evaluated relative to this maximal standard. (23) thus asserts that the door's openness exceeds the maximal degree, i.e., it is as widely open as it could be.

(23) kadavŭ tara-nd=ē irŭ-kkŭ
door open-CVB=$\bar{e}$ be-PRS.3.NHUM
'The door is *fully* open.' [⇝ *It is wide open, not closed even an inch.*]

When the associated scale is upper-open and lacks a maximal endpoint, such as TALL, $=\bar{e}$ indicates that the gradable expression is evaluated against the highest contextually relevant standard. In (11a), repeated as (24), two salient entities are under comparison. Assume that Ram's tallness is evaluated against a standard s_1. The CQ_c then consists of two alternatives, p_1 and p_2, where Shyam's tallness is evaluated against the standards s_1 and s_2, respectively, where $s_2 > s_1$, and therefore $p_2 \geq_c p_1$. $=\bar{e}$ selects the stronger alternative p_2. Hence, (24) asserts that Shyam's degree of tallness exceeds s_2, and Ram's tallness exceeds s_1. This gives rise to a scalar implicature that Ram's tallness does not exceed the higher standard s_2, implying that Ram is less tall than Shyam.[17]

(24) rām osaram-ā irŭ-pp-ān, ʃyām osaram-ā.v=ē irŭ-pp-ān
Ram height-ADV be-FUT-3.SG.M Shyam height-ADV=$\bar{e}$ be-FUT-3.SG.M
'Ram is tall, (and/but) Shyam is really tall.' [⇝ *Shyam is taller than Ram.*]

Compare (24) with (11b) in §3.3. In (11b), there is no salient comparandum for the argument entity. The CQ_c thus contains alternatives in which the expression 'dirty' is evaluated

[17] This argument is indebted to Greenberg's (2020) account of Hebrew *bixlal*.

against different standards of dirtiness of rooms. $=\bar{e}$ selects the alternative evaluated against the highest such standard. Hence, (11b) asserts that the flatmate's room is dirty beyond all possible standards — it would be judged dirty by everyone who evaluates it.

The effect of $=\bar{e}$ on intensifiers, as in (12), can be explained similarly. Following Kennedy & McNally (2005), I assume that a modifier like *romba* 'very' denotes a function that returns a standard of evaluation calculated based on entities to which the positive form of the gradable expression already holds. As $=\bar{e}$ has the pragmatic effect of raising the standard of evaluation for the positive form, it also has a knock-on effect of increasing the intensifier's standard-raising effect. I leave it to future work to develop this argument.

4.4 Accounting for precisifying inferences

§3.4 showed that $=\bar{e}$ has a precisifying effect when it cliticises to expressions that license imprecision, including universal expressions, numeral and deictic determiners, and spatial and temporal expressions.

Following Lasersohn (1999), I model imprecision using "pragmatic halos". In Lasersohn's framework, each expression α is associated with a pragmatic halo $H_c(\alpha)$, which is a set of objects of the same type as α's literal denotation $[\![\alpha]\!]$, that differ from $[\![\alpha]\!]$ only ways that are "pragmatically ignorable" at context c. The elements of α's pragmatic halo $H_c(\alpha)$ are ordered by their relative closeness to $[\![\alpha]\!]$, and the size of $H_c(\alpha)$ may vary across contexts. A halo $H_1(\alpha)$ is smaller than halo $H_2(\alpha)$ just in case the farthest element from $[\![\alpha]\!]$ in $H_1(\alpha)$ is closer to $[\![\alpha]\!]$ than the farthest element from $[\![\alpha]\!]$ in $H_2(\alpha)$, meaning that the smaller α's halo, the more precise the interpretation of α. Pragmatic halos of complex expressions are derived compositionally from the halos of their parts through pointwise functional application — sentences thus have halos containing propositions.

Slack regulators are operators that restrict or expand pragmatic halos, thereby regulating the degree of acceptable imprecision in interpretation. In this regard, Wiegand (2018) proposes the existence of covert slack regulators. Specifically, she argues that the precisifying readings of English *just* arise from *just* quantifying over covert slack operators. I have also proposed in this paper that $=\bar{e}$ is able to operate over alternative propositions that vary only in the values of contextual parameters.

Based on these ideas, I propose that when $=\bar{e}$ cliticises to an expression α that allows imprecision in its interpretation, the CQ_c is along the lines of "How many/Where/When exactly?". The CQ_c thus contains alternative denotations of the prejacent sentence S that vary only in the degree to which a covert slack regulator restricts the pragmatic halo of α. Since halos are compositional, assuming that the halos of other expressions in S are constant, the degree of restriction of α's halo exclusively determines the size of S's halo. The CQ_c is thus ordered by the degree of restriction of S's halo, such that $p_1 \geq_c p_2$ if p_1 is associated with a more restricted halo than p_2. As per (14), $=\bar{e}$ then indicates that the interpretation of S corresponds to the strongest alternative, i.e., the one associated with the most restricted pragmatic halo.

For instance, in (13a), repeated as (25), the CQ_c contains alternatives that differ in the

precision with which the universal expression 'everybody' is interpreted. Under a relatively imprecise interpretation, (25) may be judged true even if some individuals in the group did not come. In contrast, under the most precise interpretation, corresponding to the most restricted pragmatic halo, (25) judged true just in case every single individual in the group came. =*ē* selects this alternative, so that 'everybody' receives its strictest interpretation.

(25) ellār=um=ē va-nd-ānga
everyone=ADD=*ē* come-PST-3.PL.HUM
'*Absolutely* everybody came.' [⇝ *Every single person in the group came.*]

Finally, recall from §3.4 that when =*ē* cliticises to spatial and temporal expressions, precisifying interpretations obtain especially when there is epistemic uncertainty among interlocutors about the precise answer to the CQ_c (13d). This is explained by the fact that uncertainty regarding times and locations easily lends itself to a salient CQ_c such as "When/where exactly *X*?", in which the alternatives are ordered by their precision in answering the CQ_c.

5 Conclusion

This paper has offered a formal account of the Tamil enclitic =*ē*. I argued that =*ē* should be analysed as two distinct lexical items, $=\bar{e}_1$ and $=\bar{e}_2$, corresponding to =*ē*'s sentence-medial and sentence-final uses, respectively. This is motivated by the fact that only $=\bar{e}_1$ is obligatorily sensitive to focus, i.e., only $=\bar{e}_1$ conventionally associates with the Current Question (Beaver & Clark 2008). I then outlined the empirical range of $=\bar{e}_1$ and proposed that it is a scalar operator: $=\bar{e}_1$ associates its prejacent with the highest-ranked true alternative in the Current Question. The various discourse effects associated with $=\bar{e}_1$ arise depending on different types of alternatives in the Current Question, different strength rankings, and other contextual factors. In particular, drawing on Greenberg (2020), I proposed that $=\bar{e}_1$ is compatible with alternatives varying only in the instantiations of covert parameters, including contextual standards for gradable expressions and Lasersohnian pragmatic halos.

I conclude with a brief discussion on diachrony. As Chevillard (1997) and Arokianathan (1981) note, in Classical Tamil texts, =*ē* attests a wider range of uses than it has today. In particular, Old Tamil =*ē* had certain discourse functions that in Modern Tamil are performed by the enclitic =*dān*. In fact, impressionistically, Old Tamil =*ē* appears to have borne greater resemblance to "emphatic" focus particles in other South Asian languages, such as its Telugu cognate =*ē*, or Hindi =*hī*. I speculate that the grammaticalisation of =*dān* (from the anaphor *tān*) in post-Classical Tamil may have led to =*dān* in essence "taking over" some of the functional load of Old Tamil =*ē*, as a result of which Modern Tamil =*ē* has only a subset of the discourse functions of its South Asian counterparts

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