

# **The Guilty Reader: Acrostic Form and the Recovery of Intimate Address in Sangam Tamil Translation**

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## **Abstract**

This paper argues that the acrostic form functions as a formal mechanism for recovering intimate address in the translation of classical Sangam Tamil akam poetry. Bringing cognitive poetics, reader-response theory, Tamil poetics, and translation theory into dialogue, the paper proposes that addressed acrostics may intensify reader receptivity through attentional salience, self-reference, reward anticipation, empathic social cognition, and predictive processing. It further identifies an eavesdropper effect, in which readers who are not the encoded recipient nevertheless experience the poem as a witnessed intimacy, producing a form of guilty attentiveness that deepens engagement. Through analysis of acrostic translations from the Kuruntokai (c. 100 BCE–250 CE), the paper argues that akam poetry and the acrostic represent mirror solutions to the same affective problem: how to make a poem feel personally addressed. It further proposes that the acrostic translator who encodes a reader's name throughout a translated anthology installs that reader in the formal position of the Thozhi (Tamil: **தோழி**; *tōli* /tɔːɻi/), the heroine's intimate companion and mediating interlocutor in Sangam Tamil akam poetics. The acrostic thus becomes a compensatory formal system for recovering intimate address across cultural and historical distance.

**Keywords:** acrostic form, cognitive poetics, neuroaesthetics, poetic address, reader-response theory, Sangam Tamil poetry, akam tradition, Thozhi, translation theory, intimate address, foregrounding, neurocognitive poetics

## **1. Introduction**

Why does a form as ostensibly superficial as the acrostic, a poem whose first letters spell a hidden name or word, recur independently across virtually every major literary culture and period? From the alphabetic acrostics of the Hebrew Bible to the Greek and Latin verse of antiquity, from Chaucer's embedded names to Nabokov's posthumous messages, the acrostic appears without any single traceable tradition of transmission, emerging again and again as if in response to a persistent demand. No formal feature so limited in its mechanism has such a wide cross-cultural footprint. This paper proposes that the explanation is neurological before it is aesthetic.

Scholarship on the acrostic form is surprisingly sparse. Studies of biblical alphabetic acrostics (Assis, 2007; Van der Spuy, 2008) focus on liturgical function and mnemonic purpose. Classical scholarship identifies acrostic practice in Ennius and the Sibylline Oracles (Skutsch, 1985) but rarely develops a theory of the form's cognitive or affective effects. Literary scholarship on acrostics in modern poetry treats them as curiosities rather than as instances of

a coherent formal psychology. No study has brought the methods and models of cognitive poetics or neuroaesthetics to bear on the acrostic form, nor has any attempt to explain the form's cross-cultural persistence through a unified account of its effects on the reading brain been made. The present paper addresses this gap.

This paper makes four interlocking arguments. First, the acrostic form activates four distinct neurological systems: (i) attentional salience, (ii) dopaminergic reward, (iii) empathic social cognition, and (iv) predictive processing, while maintaining genre context in working memory in ways that standard poetic address does not. Second, the paper identifies a further mechanism that has not previously been theorised: the eavesdropper effect, in which readers who encounter a poem addressed to a named other experience a productive guilty intimacy that deepens engagement. Third, the paper situates these arguments within a cross-cultural framework through the classical Tamil Sangam akam tradition, which achieved a structurally equivalent intimacy-effect through the opposite formal strategy. Fourth, the paper examines the translation-theoretical implications through analysis of three translated acrostic poems from the *Kuruntokai*, proposing that the acrostic translator who encodes a dedicated reader's name in every poem enacts a more radical version of Benjaminian transparency: not the invisibility of the translator but their structural self-substitution by the reader.

## 2. Situating the Argument: A Literature Review

The present argument sits at the intersection of five distinct fields of inquiry, each of which has developed independently and without reference to the acrostic as a test case. Situating the paper within these fields simultaneously establishes its theoretical grounding and demonstrates the novelty of its contribution.

### 2.1 Cognitive Poetics and the Foregrounding Tradition

The foundational claim that literary form produces measurable cognitive and affective effects emerges from the foregrounding tradition running from Viktor Shklovsky's concept of 'ostranenie' or defamiliarisation, understood as art's disruption of automatised perception through slowed and intensified experience (Shklovsky, 1917/1965), through the Prague Linguistic Circle (Mukařovský, 1964) to contemporary cognitive poetics. Roman Jakobson's account of the poetic function as 'the projection of the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection to the axis of combination' (Jakobson, 1960) established the theoretical basis for understanding how vertical formal patterns (metre, rhyme, and, we argue, acrostic structure) interact with the horizontal axis of semantic reading. Shklovsky's and Jakobson's insights converge on the acrostic. The vertical encoding both defamiliarises the linear reading process by introducing a competing demand on attention, and creates a vertical equivalence relation that foregrounds every line-initial letter as a doubly significant element. Reuven Tsur's foundational work in cognitive poetics (2008) provided the first systematic theory of how poetic form interacts with cognitive processes, particularly those governing perception, attention, and gestalt formation.

Peter Stockwell's *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction* (2002) extended the field by grounding it explicitly in cognitive linguistics, particularly in schema theory, figure-ground relations,

and conceptual integration. Stockwell's framework of text worlds is useful for understanding how the acrostic creates a secondary text world which is the world of the hidden address running in parallel with the primary semantic world of the poem. Willie van Peer's empirical foregrounding studies (1986) and David Miall and Don Kuiken's landmark study (1994) demonstrated empirically that foregrounded stylistic features such as those that deviate from or intensify the local norm produce increased reading times, heightened affect ratings, and greater strikingness judgements. The acrostic is a species of foregrounding in both the Jakobsonian and the Tsur-Stockwell senses. It imposes a vertical equivalence relation on the horizontal sequence and thereby foregrounds every line-initial letter as simultaneously a semantic unit and a structural one. Miall and Kuiken's finding that foregrounding prolongs reading time and intensifies feeling is directly applicable to the acrostic's dual-tracking effect. This amplifying interaction between formal recurrence and emotional intensity has since been empirically confirmed at scale: Menninghaus, Wagner, Wassiliwizky, Jacobsen, and Knoop (2017) demonstrated that parallelistic features – metre, rhyme, and phonological repetition – measurably intensify both emotional and aesthetic ratings in poetry reading, and Menninghaus et al. (2024) extend this account by showing that parallelism and deviation together constitute the two principal aesthetic dimensions of all poetic diction. The acrostic's vertical encoding structure is precisely such a feature of formal recurrence: each line-initial letter repeats the address structure, and the emotional intensification Menninghaus et al. document applies directly to the acrostic's dual-axis design.

## 2.2 Neuroaesthetics and the Neuroscience of Literary Reading

The neuroscientific turn in aesthetics, associated primarily with Semir Zeki's coining of the term "neuroaesthetics" (Zeki, 1999) and developed in his account of the neural bases of visual aesthetic experience (Zeki, 2001), has increasingly been extended to literary reading. Anjan Chatterjee's *The Aesthetic Brain* (2013) synthesised evolutionary, cognitive, and neuroscientific accounts of aesthetic pleasure, arguing that aesthetic responses are not cultural epiphenomena but functional adaptations with identifiable neural substrates. Arthur Jacobs's Neurocognitive Poetics Model (NCPM; Jacobs, 2015) provides the most developed framework for the empirical study of literary reading, distinguishing between immersive processes which is the automatic, affective engagement of the reader in the text world and aesthetic processes, which involve the explicit, reflective appreciation of formal features. Jacobs's NCPM is particularly relevant to the present argument because it positions the dual-route processing of literary texts, simultaneous immersive and aesthetic engagement, as a defining feature of literary reading that distinguishes it from ordinary language comprehension. The acrostic, as we argue, is an extreme and demonstrable case of this dual-route processing, making it an ideal test case for the NCPM's predictions. A decade of subsequent research has reinforced the model's core claims: Jacobs (2022) confirms that the duality of immersive and aesthetic processing remains the NCPM's most robust finding, and extends it specifically to address ecological validity challenges in naturalistic poetry reading. Tilmatine, Lüdtke, and Jacobs (2024) provide the most recent empirical confirmation, demonstrating in a large-scale reader response study that subjective affect and comprehensibility ratings in narrative poetry are reliably predicted by foregrounding features at both the surface and semantic levels, exactly the dual-route prediction the NCPM makes.

Wassiliwizky and Menninghaus (2021) further argue that cognitive science's engagement with aesthetics is methodologically necessary for any complete account of language processing, a position that buttresses the interdisciplinary approach taken throughout this paper.

Lisa Zunshine's *Why We Read Fiction* (2006) offers a complementary account in terms of theory of mind, arguing that fiction exercises and rewards the brain's capacity for mind-reading, for attributing mental states to others. The acrostic, by encoding the evidence of the poet's intentional directedness toward a specific recipient, provides an unusually direct stimulus for theory-of-mind engagement: the reader must model not only the poem's speaker and addressee but the poet's deliberate act of encoding. Jacobs and Willems (2018) situate this theory-of-mind engagement within the wider neurocognitive architecture of literary reading, demonstrating that mental simulation of characters' and authors' mental states, immersion, and imagery together constitute the core neuronal correlates of fiction engagement, precisely the constellation activated in heightened form by the acrostic's dual encoding structure. Their review confirms that the form-level features examined in this paper have neurological reality, not merely phenomenological plausibility.

### 2.3 Reader-Response, Reception, and Transactional Theory

The paper engages centrally with the tradition of reader-response and reception theory. Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory (1978) describes reading as a transaction between reader and text, in which meaning is not contained in the text alone but emerges from the dynamic interplay of reader and work. The acrostic is a particularly powerful instance of Rosenblatt's transactional model i.e., the poem's hidden address is not activated until a specific reader brings their own name or their knowledge of another's name to the vertical axis of the text. The text contains the structure and the reader activates it. Hans Robert Jauss's *Reception Aesthetics* (1982) introduced the concept of the horizon of expectations, the set of literary, cultural, and generic norms against which a reader receives a text. The acrostic exploits and transgresses this horizon by hiding a second text within the visible one, creating what Jauss would describe as an aesthetic distance between expectation and reception that is the source of the form's affective power.

Stanley Fish's "affective stylistics" (1970) argued that meaning is not contained in a text but produced through the reader's temporal experience of moving through it, an experience shaped by the emotional responses generated by the text's language at each successive moment. This framework anticipates the acrostic's dual-tracking effect. The reader's sequential encounter with each line-initial letter generates an affective response of recognition, anticipation, or revelation, that is distinct from, and simultaneous with, the response generated by the horizontal semantic content. Fish's "interpretive communities" (1980) are further relevant to the known/discovered acrostic distinction. Readers who know that a text encodes a hidden address bring different interpretive conventions than those who encounter the form without foreknowledge, and the same text can thereby produce neurologically distinct reading experiences across reader populations. Jonathan Culler's work on apostrophe (1977, 2015) and Virginia Jackson's account of lyric mediation (2005) provide

the literary-theoretical baseline against which the acrostic's structural address exceeds and complicates the standard accounts of poetic address.

## 2.4 Tamil Poetics: The Akam Tradition and Its Scholarship

The classical Tamil Sangam *akam* tradition has been the subject of sustained scholarship in Tamil Studies, though this scholarship has not previously been brought into dialogue with cognitive poetics or the neuroscience of reading. Kamil Zvelebil's foundational study *The Smile of Murugan* (1973) remains the authoritative account of the *Thinai* system, the landscape-emotion correspondences that structure *akam* poetry, and of the formal conventions governing the *akam* poems' deliberate namelessness. George Hart's *The Poems of Ancient Tamil* (1975) provided the first major English-language study of the Sangam corpus, situating it within a broader theory of Tamil poetics and demonstrating the sophistication of the *akam* convention as a systematic formal strategy rather than a local practice. Martha Selby's work on gender and voice in classical Tamil poetry (2000) illuminated the role of the *Thozhi* (Tamil: தோழி; *tōḻi* /t̪oːɻi/), the heroine's intimate female companion and mediating interlocutor, arguing that the *Thozhi's* position within the *akam* poem is structurally irreplaceable: without her, the poem's social and emotional meaning cannot be completed.

A. K. Ramanujan's translations and critical writings (1967, 1985) remain the most widely read English-language engagement with the Sangam corpus, and his account of *akam's* "interior landscapes" as a formal system of emotional correspondences is central to the present paper's argument about the cultural inaccessibility of that system to modern English readers. Norman Cutler's *Songs of Experience* (1987) extended the understanding of Tamil poetic traditions beyond the Sangam corpus, while Eva Wilden's manuscript studies and critical editions of the *Kuruntokai* (2014) provide the most rigorous philological foundation for any serious scholarly engagement with the text.

## 2.5 Translation Theory

The paper's translation-theoretical argument engages a tradition running from Walter Benjamin's account of translation as afterlife (1923/1968) through George Steiner's hermeneutic theory of translation in *After Babel* (1975) to Lawrence Venuti's critique of translator invisibility (1995) and the more recent work of Antoine Berman (1992), Susan Bassnett (1980), and Emily Apter (2013). This tradition has debated the ethics, politics, and phenomenology of translation without engaging with the acrostic as a formal strategy for managing the cultural distance between source and target. The present paper proposes that the acrostic translator's structural installation of the reader in the translator's place constitutes a position not accommodated by any of the major translation-theoretical frameworks, and that understanding this position requires the neurological and affective account developed in the preceding sections. Chen, Shen, Ochs, and Xiao (2022) provide the closest existing parallel from the emerging field of neurocognitive translation studies: working within a NCPM-compatible framework, they demonstrate that cross-cultural variations in point of view, specifically the addition or erasure of first-person perspective in translated poetry, produce measurable differences in reader immersion through mirror neuron and

temporal-parietal junction responses. Their finding that first-person perspective supplements in translation boost immersive engagement by neurological means is directly cognate with the present argument: the acrostic encodes a second-person address that constitutes a neurological trigger more direct even than the first-person modulations Chen et al. examine, and does so structurally rather than lexically.

### 3. What the Acrostic Does: Form as Material Address

Before advancing neurological claims, it is necessary to establish what distinguishes the acrostic from other forms of poetic address. An acrostic is a composition in which certain letters, characteristically the initial letters of successive lines, spell a word, name, or phrase when read vertically. The form admits significant variety. The alphabetic acrostics of the Hebrew Bible differ structurally from the named acrostics of Renaissance love poetry or Nabokov's posthumous message acrostics, yet all share the fundamental property of encoding a second, hidden text within the linear body of the poem.

In Jakobson's terms, the acrostic projects a principle of equivalence onto the vertical axis of the poem. Every line-initial letter is simultaneously a semantic unit contributing to the horizontal reading and a structural unit contributing to the vertical encoded name. This vertical equivalence relation is a species of foregrounding in Mukařovský's sense: it intensifies the materiality of language by making the letter, below the level of the word, into a bearer of meaning. The phenomenological effect is what Tsur (2008) would describe as a thickening of the perceptual quality of the text: the reader's attention is distributed across two simultaneously active reading tracks rather than flowing freely along the horizontal semantic axis alone.

What distinguishes this from other modes of poetic address is the nature of the address itself. In Jonathan Culler's influential account, lyric address is characteristically indirect i.e., "triangulated address" (Culler, 2015, p. 186). The reader is a bystander to an apostrophe aimed elsewhere. In Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory, the "implied reader" is a textual structure, a network of response-inviting structures built into the text, rather than a named or identified individual (Iser, 1974, p. xii). For Rosenblatt (1978), reading is a transaction in which the reader brings lived experience to the text's structures; but neither Iser nor Rosenblatt accounts for the case in which the text encodes a specific individual's name in its formal architecture. The acrostic exceeds all three accounts: it does not merely imply, invite, or transact with a reader; it names one.

We further distinguish between known acrostics, those in which the reader is told in advance that a hidden address exists, and discovered acrostics, in which the reader encounters the form unexpectedly. This distinction matters neurologically, as we explore in Section 4, and it maps onto Jauss's distinction between texts that confirm the horizon of expectations and those that transgress it productively (Jauss, 1982). The known acrostic confirms a horizon the reader brings; the discovered acrostic shatters and reconstitutes it.

The following three poems from the *Kuruntokai* (c. 100 BCE–250 CE), rendered here as English acrostics by the present author, illustrate the range of formal possibilities this paper theorises. In each poem, the first letter of each line encodes the name of the translation's dedicatee – a practice sustained across all 402 poems of the collection:

Larger than Earth, deeper than Space  
Inscrutable is my love, like Ocean's face;  
Nursing Kurinci's black stalks, the bees  
Comb in the hills with rich honey's breeze;  
Yes, this man from the hills my love does grace!  
(*Kuruntokai* 3, by Thēvakulathār, translated by the author)

Look at your dear mother and look at mine.  
I and thou, what genealogy fine?  
Now, our clans, our fathers: what are they worth?  
Come together we merge: rain and red earth!  
Yes, so our loving hearts are one in Love's true shrine!  
(*Kuruntokai* 40, by Sempulapēyaneerār, translated by the author)

Little do they know who give me advice.  
It's a young tortoise with a mother nice,  
Nourished by sight like an egg in the nest;  
Cold and abandoned, it would die depressed.  
Yearning for him, likewise, there is no rest.  
(*Kuruntokai* 152, by Killimangalam Kilār, translated by the author)

In each poem, L-I-N-C-Y is encoded vertically. In *Kuruntokai* 3, the surface text addresses the landscape of the beloved's hill country, the *kurinji tinai* of union, while the vertical name addresses the dedicatee with equal structural force. *Kuruntokai* 40 dissolves genealogical and individual distinction in the image of rain merging with red earth, yet the acrostic insists on a particular reader's identity even as the surface text celebrates its dissolution. *Kuruntokai* 152 figures the speaker's longing through the tortoise nourished by sight alone, and in doing so, figures the eavesdropper reader's own position: sustained by witnessed intimacy, outside the exchange that sustains them.

The present translations function here not primarily as autobiographical artefacts but as experimental formal demonstrations of the paper's theoretical claims: each poem offers a verifiable instance of the mechanisms described in Section 4, available for analysis by any reader who traces the vertical axis. Miall and Kuiken's finding (1994) that foregrounded segments increase reading time and affect ratings predicts that the acrostic's formal double-tracking should produce precisely the heightened, slowed, affectively intensified reading the following sections describe in neurological terms.. A methodological note is warranted here. The three translations presented in this section are the author's own unpublished work. Their use as primary evidence is deliberate and epistemically transparent:

because no published English acrostic translations of the Kuruntokai currently exist, the translations constitute original practice-based research rather than a convenience sample, and the theoretical claims they illustrate are formulated so as to be independently verifiable by any reader who constructs an acrostic translation under the same formal constraints. The translations function as experimental demonstrations, not as authoritative readings.

#### 4. The Neuroscience of Being Addressed: Five Mechanisms

We propose that the acrostic form may engage the reading brain through five neurological mechanisms, each supported by an independent body of empirical research that offers a plausible model for understanding the form's affective and cognitive effects. We stress that no empirical study of acrostic reading specifically has yet been conducted: the mechanisms described below are theoretically grounded extrapolations from adjacent experimental literature, offered as a framework for future empirical investigation. The application of neuroscientific findings to literary experience involves inherent methodological challenges, as the ecological validity of laboratory conditions differs from naturalistic reading (Jacobs, 2015). What follows is an interpretive account, not an experimental report. The framework we develop is consistent with the most recent systematic account of the mechanisms by which poetic form generates emotion. Johnson-Laird and Oatley (2022) propose that poetry evokes emotions through three coordinated simulations: of semantic content, of prosodic cues such as metre and rhyme, and of the self as an agent engaged with the poem. This tripartite structure maps directly onto our five mechanisms: the self-simulation Johnson-Laird and Oatley identify corresponds to our self-reference mechanism (Section 4.1); the prosodic simulation corresponds to the genre-embodiment mechanism (Section 4.5); and the semantic simulation undergirds all five. The acrostic adds a fourth simulation layer that Johnson-Laird and Oatley's account does not anticipate: the reader simulates being addressed, a simulation with its own neurological signature, as the following sections describe.

##### 4.1 Attention and Salience: The Own-Name Effect and Self-Reference

The most fundamental mechanism by which the acrostic commands the reading brain is through the neurological prioritisation of self-relevant stimuli. Cherry's 1953 research on selective attention established that the brain continuously monitors background input for self-relevant signals, most notably, one's own name (Cherry, 1953). Moray (1959) demonstrated that the own name reliably broke through attentional filtering on an unattended channel. Wood and Cowan (1995) showed that name detection operates at a level of processing prior to conscious attention, while Symons and Johnson's meta-analysis (1997) of 129 studies confirmed that self-referent encoding, processing information in relation to the self, yields superior memory performance relative to both semantic and other-referential encoding strategies. This self-reference effect (SRE) is directly applicable to the acrostic: information processed as self-relevant is more deeply encoded, better retained, and more affectively vivid than equivalent information processed as other-relevant.

An acrostic that encodes a reader's name may plausibly engage the salience network – inferior frontal gyrus, intraparietal sulcus, superior temporal gyrus – even before the reader consciously registers the vertical pattern. The reclassification of the text as something



personally directed can be understood, through this framework, as reorganising the hierarchy of what is perceptually significant in the reading experience. Even in readers who are not the named individual, the perception of a hidden address suggests the possibility of what we term second-order salience: the poem has a target, and the reader becomes aware of that target's existence.

#### 4.2 Reward Circuits: Known and Discovered Acrostics

The neurological mechanisms of reward differ significantly between known and discovered acrostics. For discovered acrostics, the perception of the hidden address constitutes an insight event of the kind studied by Kounios and Beeman (2009, 2014): a sudden reorganisation that produces a burst of gamma-band activity in the right anterior temporal lobe followed by activation of the dopaminergic reward circuitry. Tik et al. (2018) confirmed using ultra-high-field fMRI that the Aha-moment specifically engages the subcortical dopaminergic reward network. The discovery of an acrostic address fits this profile: it reorganises the entire text retroactively and produces measurable affective reward.

For known acrostics, the mechanism is anticipatory: the reader maintains a second predictive process running in parallel with semantic reading, scanning the vertical axis for the confirmation of a known address. This produces sustained reward deferral. The brain anticipates the gratification of a confirmed address and sustains engagement in order to reach it. Conway and Pleydell-Pearce's self-memory system (2000) is relevant here: the activated working self, defined by its current goals, processes the vertical sequence as a goal-relevant pattern, integrating it into the autobiographical knowledge base in a manner that strengthens encoding and retention of the entire poem.

#### 4.3 Mirror Neurons, Empathy, and the Intentionality Signal

The acrostic form is, by its nature, evidence of deliberate, effortful, directed address. Mirror neuron research has established that the perception of intentional action directed at a target activates empathic resonance in the perceiver (Gallese, Fadiga, Fogassi, & Rizzolatti, 1996; Gallese, Eagle, & Migone, 2007; Iacoboni et al., 2005). In the context of the acrostic, the reader who perceives the hidden address does not merely recognise a formal device: they simulate the poet's deliberate act of encoding, and in doing so, they feel the poet's intentional directedness toward a specific recipient. This is qualitatively different from other formal constraints. A sonnet's rhyme scheme is felt as an aesthetic structure; the acrostic is felt as a directed act of care. Zunshine's theory-of-mind account (2006) adds a further dimension: the acrostic prompts the reader to simultaneously model the poet's intentions, the encoded recipient's likely reception, and their own position relative to both, a higher-order mind-reading exercise that recruits social-cognitive resources not typically engaged by other formal features.

#### 4.4 Predictive Processing, Double Reading, and Somatic Markers

Andy Clark's account of the predictive brain (2013) describes neural processing as fundamentally anticipatory. The acrostic may be understood through this framework as creating a second prediction stream that runs simultaneously with primary semantic reading:

the brain maintains a predictive model of the vertical sequence alongside its model of the poem's semantic development. Baddeley's multi-component model of working memory (1986, 2000) offers a plausible model for this dual processing: the vertical acrostic sequence could be maintained in the phonological loop as an evolving pattern, while the semantic content is processed through the central executive, and the episodic buffer integrates these two streams into a more deeply encoded representation than either alone would produce. Research on elaborative encoding consistently shows superior retention and emotional impact relative to shallow encoding ( Craik & Lockhart, 1972), suggesting that this dual-stream processing, if operative, would produce measurably richer engagement. Damasio's somatic marker hypothesis (1994, 1999) provides a further dimension. Emotional responses generate somatic markers – bodily states associated with the cognitive contexts in which they were first activated – that bias subsequent processing of similar contexts. In a 402-poem translation where a single reader's name is encoded throughout, the somatic markers accumulated across the collection create a sustained affective architecture qualitatively different from reading a collection with a general or unmarked address. Each successive poem re-activates the somatic state first produced by the initial recognition of address.

#### 4.5 Genre Embodiment: The Acrostic as Context-Keeper

Extended reading produces what we term genre-feeling fade: the emotional and cognitive context established by a poem's genre tends to attenuate as the reader's attention is occupied by the specifics of diction, imagery, and syntax. This phenomenon has received little sustained theoretical attention in the cognitive poetics literature. The acrostic may resist this fade through a plausible mechanism: a love poem structured as an acrostic, encoding the beloved's name, can be understood as continuously re-signalling its genre context with each successive line. At every line, the reading brain processes not only the semantic content but also the next letter of the encoded name, which may re-activate the social-emotional context of the poem's address. Baddeley's episodic buffer (2000) offers a model for this: the vertical sequence could continuously re-engage the integrative binding function of the buffer, preventing the dissipation of the poem's affective frame. In *Kuruntokai* 40, the surface text dissolves individual identity in the image of rain and red earth; yet the acrostic insists on a specific reader's identity, creating a productive tension between the poem's universal aspiration and its particular formal destination.

#### 5. The Guilty Eavesdropper: Intimacy, Voyeurism, and Moral Attention

The five mechanisms described above pertain primarily to the first-person acrostic: the experience of the reader who is the encoded recipient. But the majority of acrostic encounters are not of this kind. Readers of Poe's Valentine acrostics, of Nabokov's encoded messages in "The Vane Sisters" (1959), of Renaissance love poems spelling a lady's name, all are reading poems addressed to someone else. The neurological account shifts significantly when the reader is not the named recipient.

The answer involves the eavesdropper effect. When a reader encounters a poem whose acrostic encodes a name that is not their own, they become aware of reading an intimate

communication not intended for them. This positioning is not incidental: it is constitutive of the reading experience. Culler's triangulated address positions the reader as an indirect bystander; the eavesdropper effect positions the reader as an inadvertent witness, an affectively and neurologically quite different role. Virginia Jackson's account of lyric mediation (2005) helps specify what is distinctive here: where Jackson describes the lyricisation of poetry as a historical process by which heterogeneous address becomes universalised, the acrostic resists lyricisation by inscribing the particularity of its address in the body of the text, permanently.

Research in the psychology of moral emotion illuminates what this positioning does to the reader. Tangney and Dearing (2002) distinguish guilt, a specifically action-focused response to the sense of having transgressed, from shame, a global self-evaluation. Guilt is other-oriented: it attends to the person whose space has been invaded. The eavesdropper reader experiences a mild but distinctive form of this guilt: the awareness of reading something intimate, something not meant for them. Crucially, this guilt does not produce withdrawal. Research on moral emotions suggests the opposite: guilt-adjacent emotions heighten attentiveness to the object of transgression and increase the cognitive and emotional care the reader brings to it (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007). The guilty eavesdropper reads with heightened reverence. In the *akam* tradition, where intimate emotional experience is characteristically mediated through indirect witnessing rather than direct disclosure, such reverential attentiveness is structurally central to the poem's affective world.

Cacioppo and Patrick (2008), drawing on the neuroscience of social belonging, have argued that the human desire to be included in an intimate exchange is among the most powerful of social motivations. The acrostic love poem, addressed to a named other, offers the eavesdropper reader the simultaneous experience of exclusion and inclusion: excluded from the primary exchange, but included, by virtue of access to it, in a secondary and no less intimate one. Norman et al. (2012) have shown that oxytocin is implicated in exactly this kind of witnessed intimacy: the experience of being given access to a private exchange activates affiliation responses even in the witness. Kuruntokai 152 demonstrates the eavesdropper effect with exceptional precision: the tortoise nourished by sight alone figures the reader's own position, sustained by access to an intimacy not intended for their eyes, dying of deprivation if that access were withdrawn.

#### 6. Mirror Solutions: The *Akam* Tradition, the Thozhi, and the Acrostic Translator

The argument advanced in the preceding sections gains considerable force when examined against the classical Tamil Sangam *akam* tradition. Sangam literature, composed approximately between 300 BCE and 300 CE, is divided into *akam* (interior) poetry which is concerned with the interior landscape of love, and *puram* (exterior) poetry. The *akam* poems, including the 401 short poems of the Kuruntokai, are remarkable for a deliberate formal principle that is the structural opposite of the acrostic: the systematic erasure of names. In *akam* poetry, the characters have no names. They are "the man," "the woman," "the companion." The poets achieved through this namelessness what Ramanujan (1985) described as a radical interiority: by evacuating the specific, they created a space that any reader could inhabit without obstruction. Universality is achieved through erasure.

The *thinai* system, Zvelebil's (1973) term for the landscape-emotion correspondences that structure akam poetry, provided the cultural key that unlocked this nameless universality: readers who recognised the mountains of *kurinji* as the landscape of union, the forests of *mullai* as the landscape of patient waiting, the agricultural plains of *marutam* as the landscape of domestic conflict and infidelity, the seashore of *neytal* as the landscape of longing and anxious separation, and the parched plains of *palai* as the landscape of dangerous separation, could inhabit the poem's emotional space without requiring named characters to orient them. Hart (1975) demonstrated that this system was not merely a literary convention but a deeply embedded cultural grammar. Selby's (2000) analysis of the *Thozhi*'s structural role adds a crucial dimension: the companion-speaker is the *akam* poem's structurally embedded mediating reader, without whom the poem's emotional meaning cannot be completed. The *Thozhi* interprets, questions, relays, and gives the heroine's feelings their social form. She is the poem's first reader, built into its own architecture.

The *akam* tradition and the acrostic thus represent mirror solutions to the same neurological problem: how to make a poem feel personally intimate. *Akam*'s route: erase the particular, leave the space open, let every reader step in unobstructed. The acrostic's route: name the particular, create the space of the eavesdropper, let every reader feel the guilty intimacy of witnessed address. The destination is the same; the routes are structurally opposite.

There is a significant historical asymmetry. The *thinai* system's cultural competence is not available to modern English-language readers, for whom it is a scholarly acquisition rather than a living inheritance. The *akam* poem, translated into English without formal compensation, risks becoming merely anonymous rather than universally intimate. It is here that the translation-theoretical argument becomes unavoidable. Benjamin (1923/1968) argued that the ideal translation is transparent: that the translator becomes a medium through which the pure language of the original shines. Venuti (1995) challenged this invisibility as a political act. Steiner (1975) described translation as an act of trust, aggression, incorporation, and restitution. The acrostic translator who encodes a specific reader's name in every poem takes a position that transcends all three frameworks.

The translator disappears not into the original but into the reader. The reader is not invited to fill a role, as in Iser's model; they are installed in the role, formally and materially. Though the *Thozhi* also serves social and ethical functions irreducible to reading alone, as kinship negotiator, guardian of feminine reputation, and agent within the social structures governing courtship, the role we invoke here is specifically her function as the poem's structurally embedded mediating reader, without whom the poem's emotional meaning cannot be completed. It is in this specific formal and hermeneutic capacity that Lincy, the dedicatee named here, occupies an analogous position in these English translations. She is not merely the collection's dedicatee, she is its formal condition of possibility. The acrostic is the '*thinai*' of the translation: the formal system that replaces the cultural key no longer available to English readers with a neurological mechanism that generates the same intimate receptivity through different means.

## 7. Historical Persistence as Convergent Evidence

The argument gains additional support from the independent, cross-cultural recurrence of acrostic form across periods and traditions with no continuous chain of transmission. The oldest sustained examples are the alphabetic acrostics of the Hebrew Bible: fourteen alphabetic acrostic poems, including Psalm 119 and the four acrostic chapters of Lamentations (Assis, 2007; Van der Spuy, 2008). Ennius (239–169 BCE), regarded as the father of Latin poetry, encoded his own name and those of his patrons in the vertical architecture of his verse (Skutsch, 1985), the first systematic use of the form as a signature of intentional relationship between poet, text, and recipient in the Latin tradition. Medieval devotional acrostics encoded the names of patrons, beloveds, and divine recipients. Chaucer, Sidney, and Raleigh exploited the eavesdropper dynamic in publicly circulated poems that addressed specific individuals through their vertical structure. Nabokov's sophisticated deployment, most notably in *The Vane Sisters* (1959), where the acrostic final paragraph delivers a message from deceased characters, demonstrates how the form can encode not merely a name but an entire semantic event (Boyd, 1990). The acrostic tradition continues into the contemporary moment: recent poet-translators working with classical non-Western material have increasingly turned to acrostic and other fixed-form compensatory strategies precisely because target-language readerships cannot be assumed to share the cultural competence of source-culture readers, the situation the present paper addresses directly in its analysis of Sangam Tamil translation. The independent rediscovery of this strategy by contemporary practitioners, without reference to the ancient examples, is itself evidence for the convergent-evolution argument this paper develops.

This pattern of independent invention across cultures with only partial literary contact is difficult to explain by diffusion or influence alone. The more parsimonious explanation is that the acrostic form satisfies something consistent and deep in human psychology that does not change with culture or period. The neurological and affective mechanisms we have described (attentional salience, self-reference, reward, empathic social cognition, predictive processing, genre embodiment, somatic marking, and the eavesdropper effect) provide a unified account of what that something is. The acrostic is not a literary fashion. It is a convergent cultural solution to a neurological affordance.

## 8. Conclusion

This paper has argued that the acrostic form produces a distinctively receptive reading state through the convergence of several neurological mechanisms: attentional salience and self-reference activated by encoded address, reward responses generated through anticipation or discovery, empathic resonance with the poet's demonstrated intentionality, predictive processing sustained across dual reading tracks, and the continued maintenance of emotional context across extended reading. A further mechanism, the guilty eavesdropper effect, produces a paradoxical deepening of engagement in readers who are not the poem's named recipient: exclusion from the intended address generates heightened reverence for the intimacy being witnessed. Few fixed poetic forms appear to combine these effects in quite this configuration. The acrostic's fusion of hidden personal address, structural intentionality,

and dual-track reading remains distinctive, even if other constrained forms such as refrain, ghazal, sestina, or visual poetry may share individual mechanisms.

Situated within cognitive poetics, neuroaesthetics, reader-response theory, Tamil poetics, and translation theory, the paper has demonstrated that the acrostic's cross-cultural persistence, from the Hebrew Bible through Greek and Latin antiquity to Renaissance love poetry and contemporary translation practice, is best explained as convergent cultural evolution around a stable neurological affordance. The *akam* tradition's mirror solution, achieving the same intimate receptivity through namelessness rather than naming, confirms that the affective goal is universal even when the formal means are opposite.

The paper has further argued that the acrostic translator who encodes a reader's name within a translated collection enacts a more radical version of Benjaminian transparency than translation theory has previously theorised: not the invisibility of the translator behind the text, but the structural substitution of the reader in the translator's place, installing the reader in the formal position of the *Thozhi*, the mediating companion-reader who serves as the *akam* poem's condition of emotional intelligibility.

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**Data Availability:** The translated poems presented in this article are the original work of the first author. No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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