The construction of a “sacred” Tamil for Protestant use has not been the result of stable, reliable processes progressing in a linear fashion toward establishing a fixed set of terms as “Protestant.” As I demonstrate in this chapter, there are two main reasons for this. First, the dichotomy between the desire to fix a set of terms as sacred and the fluidity of language use in social practice has disrupted the construction of a permanent Protestant sacred in Tamil. Second, and more importantly, existing “sacred” terms from the Tamil religious domain, when co-opted into the Protestant context, have circulated in parallel Protestant and non-Protestant religious domains and have thus been called upon to denote different meanings in each. The expectation that the same term should function with differentiated meaning in multiple religious contexts has meant that non-Protestant usages of terms have continued to challenge the semantic boundaries of Protestant terms. In general, both translators and readers of the Tamil Bible have proceeded by making continual efforts to distinguish sacred meanings as either Protestant or non-Protestant, with the dominant view among translators being that a clearly visible “Protestant sacred” could only be demarcated by its disassociation from the structures of beliefs, scriptures, and ritual practices of rival religious faiths. Indeed, this vocabulary newly invested with Protestant meaning was to have the additional function of designating converts with a Protestant identity. As we will see, a range of strategies, from lexical modifications to rhetorical claims, have been employed to assemble suitable Protestant terms in Tamil; these strategies have contributed to a wider discourse that has offered a progressive narrative on Protestant Tamil terms: that is, that there has been a linear development toward the accumulation of a fixed set of terms with more-or-less impermeable boundaries, thus clearly denoting a Protestant sacred for Protestant use.
Such narratives of linear development regarding the Tamil Bible and language have involved translating twice over: they have entailed translating the source text into Tamil, which demanded in turn the “translation” of the Tamil language itself into an appropriate linguistic vehicle. Let me clarify with an example. The following exchange between Ziegenbalg and some “Malabarian (Tamil) heathens” who visit him brilliantly captures the central tension in the Protestant use of the Tamil sacred:

[Tamil:] [Y]ou may rail . . . as much as you please, against our Books; yet, for what I can find, your Books have no Letters, but ours; and no Words, but what are borrow’d from our Books, and from our Language.

[Danish missionary:] 'Tis very true . . . that I make use of your Words and Characters, in order to make myself intelligible to you, . . .: [But] tho’ your Words are very good, yet what you mean by them is Falshood [sic] and Vanity. (Ziegenbalg 1719: 243)

As this brief exchange recorded by one of the first translators of the Tamil Bible demonstrates, Tamil words must first be separated from their “meanings” to enable a process of conversion from their original “false meanings” to “true meanings.” In other words, key sacred non-Protestant terms had to be reinscribed with Protestant meaning in order to allow their incorporation into Protestant holy ground. Importantly, this was neither a rejection of Tamil sacred terms nor a denial of the sacred status of the terms, but a redefining of the sacred signified by these terms. Or, Protestant translators often engaged in a “complicated linguistic ratiocination” similar to earlier Catholic translators who, as Županov (2005: 242) points out, assumed that terms only provided “neutral” phonological husks for Christian concepts while at the same time preserving something of an authorial mystique culturally inherent in these words. Selective alterations or appropriations of Tamil terms into the Protestant fold and the justifications offered to accomplish this make visible the several discursive translation and reading strategies that together or oppositionally construct sacred meaning. In saying this, I should clarify that these disputes over terminology occurred not just between translators but also between translators and their readers and among subgroups within the readership.

Before we proceed any further, it is worthwhile to contextualize this Protestant use of Tamil within a longer history of Tamil religious