

BRAJ B. KACHRU, YAMUNA KACHRU, and S.N.SRIDHAR, Ed. *Language in South Asia*. Cambridge, New York; Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp. xxiv, 608.

This volume of 26 articles provides a wealth of information about language on the Indian Subcontinent, one of the densest and most complex language areas in the world, within whose seven political divisions are spoken varieties representing Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Tibeto-Burman, and the Munda subdivision of the Afro-Asiatic taxon, along with several contact languages, by one and a half billion people, about 25% of the world population, in a great ancient *Sprachbund*. The sheer linguistic variability of the region is staggering. The 1961 census counted the *Mother Tongues* of India at more than 1,600, although R.E. Asher (“Language in Historical Context,” 31 - 48) puts the number of languages at closer to 300. The usual difficulties of classification apply, given that in many cases a language name is a cover term for a set of varieties.

South Asia’s reputation as a *Sprachbund*, first suggested by Murray Emeneau in 1956 (India as a Linguistic Area in *Language and Linguistic Areas: Essays*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980), is well justified, as over several millennia major and minor representatives of the aforementioned language taxa have coexisted, diffused, and converged. K.V. Subbarao, in “Typological Characteristics of South Asian Languages” (49 – 78) makes a survey of typological features shared by important representatives of the languages in South Asia, including, among numerous others, basic word order, auxiliary verb order, postpositions, and order of direct and indirect objects (55, f). As is typical throughout the volume, many exemplifying data are provided. While a great number of languages are distributed across the region, the survey of similar features in the languages cited is striking. These observations also underscore the reality that, for the purpose of comparative historical work, such convergence

phenomena demonstrate that these features are highly unreliable, in themselves, in establishing genetic relations.

Over the long pre-history and history of language in the region, Sanskrit, Persian, and English, in their turn, have served as languages of wide influence. Persian, which functioned as a language of literature and business, brought with it the influence of Islam and many elements from Arabic, while during its history in the region undergoing “Indianization” as it absorbed Indian philosophical thought into its literature (S.A.H. Abidi & R. Gargesh, “Persian in South Asia,” 103 – 120). Historically interesting samples of literature in the tradition are quoted in the text (112 f). In addition to extensive borrowing from Arabic and Turkish via Persian, another consequence of the mutual influence of languages in the area is the occurrence of many lexical compounds in Hindi-Urdu, of which one element is Indic in origin and the other Arabic or Persian (Y. Kachru, *Hindi-Urdu-Hindustani*, 81 - 102).

Extensively productive affixation in Dravidian languages using derivational morphemes from Indo-Aryan languages, chiefly Sanskrit and Hindi-Urdu, is exemplified in S.N. Sridhar, “Language Contact and Convergence in South Asia” (235 – 252). It is noted that these affixes freely attach to native words as well, while as borrowed morphs they are used in different senses than attested in the source language. These developments are chiefly observable in, but not limited to, literary languages. Along with other syntactic developments in Dravidian varieties, this phenomenon suggests a developing diglossic situation. Code mixing in the morphology is also observed within the Indo-Aryan branch. In contact situations speakers of Punjabi employ Hindi-Urdu aspect and tense markers with Punjabi verb stems (T.K. Bhatia “Major regional languages” 121 - 132). Hindi and Punjabi are likewise mixed in music and entertainment videos (*ibid.*), and in advertising (T.K. Bhatia & R.J. Baumgardner, “Language in the Media and

Advertising,” 377 – 394), where an advertisement is depicted. In it, the product name in Hindi-Urdu is written in roman script, a subheader in Hindi written with Devanagari script, and a third slogan in Urdu using Perso-Arabic script. Such “multiple language and script mixing ... is the hallmark of advertising discourse in India” (388). Likewise, in Sri Lanka small serving size snack packets are labeled in multiple languages. In her intriguing article, “Language and Youth Culture” (466 – 494), R.B. Nair discusses language practices among students at the famous India Institute of Technology, who freely mix codes in the youth-culture argot that characterizes student speech on and near the campus. Such extensive mixing and code switching is not surprising at all, in an area with such a long history of bi- and multilingualism.

Despite tribalism in the region being very much in the news over the last eight years, the notion of this type of social culture structure, as A. Abbi (“Tribal Languages,” 152 – 174) notes, with deep roots binding it to the land and its traditions, remains ill understood. In the tribal regions, where language contact has been extensive, bilingualism is seen to a very high degree, while at the same time language maintenance is the rule. Abbi also notes that this multilingualism is based upon coexistence, not competition. In a region where no language has majority status (although Hindi comes closest) multilingualism is typical, where, according to E. Annamalai, neat vertical or horizontal stratification of the selected codes is not the norm; code-mixing and switching is common in one and the same context, and different codes are selected for speech or for writing, for the same content. Often, he notes, the self-reporting of mother tongue is often motivated by social and political considerations. On the margins of language areas, language conversion has reached the extent that can be referred to as “one system and two expressions,” i.e., the grammatical margins between two codes have dissolved, facilitating

communication using elements of both languages on a common scaffold (“Contexts of Multilingualism,” 223 – 234).

A great deal is known about Sanskrit, preserved in the *Vedas* and *sutras* from early in the second millennium BCE which make up the sacred lore that informs the philosophical and literary tradition and the object of the monumental Grammar of Panini. A. Aklujkar, in “Traditions of Language Study in South Asia” (189 – 220), provides a synopsis of Panini’s ingenious methodology and a review of subsequent grammars in that tradition, in what is a fitting encomium to the early master, to whom the modern study of language owes such a great debt. Madhav M. Deshpande, in “Sanskrit in the South Asian Sociolinguistic Context” (177 – 188), discusses the role of Sanskrit and its attributions in subsequent philosophical movements. In addition to its role in religious and ritual contexts, it continued to serve as the written code for philosophical, technical, and scientific writing until the advent of English. Even today, such information is often available otherwise only by translation in English (*ibid.*). This has had very important consequences for the transmission of scientific knowledge and education in such a socially stratified, broadly multilingual environment. The Dravidian languages exhibit extensive borrowing from Sanskrit, including in the cultural, technical, and scientific spheres, and this process is ongoing in Kannada, the primary (Dravidian) language of Karnataka, which extensively borrows derivational morphology and word-formation processes from Sanskrit (S.N. Sridhar, *Language Modernization in Kannada*, 327 – 341). Nor does this occur in an insubstantial literary context: notably, writers in Kannada have been awarded seven of the 39 prestigious Jnanpith Awards for literature since 1965 (<http://jnanpith.net/awards/index.html>, Retrieved August 6, 2008).

The ancient role of Sanskrit included that of embodying the laws that regulated morals and the conduct of life. While today, under the Indian Constitution, the high courts and the business of national government is to be conducted in English, states are granted the right to choose a language for its courts and other organs of government. V.K. Bhatia & R. Sharma, in “Language in the Legal System” (361 – 376), provides extensive details across the region.

In the “Introduction,” B.B. Kachru provides an historical sketch, both pre- and post-European presence. Of course the largest immediate object in the rear view mirror is English. In that regard, Missionary David Allen (1854) demonstrated marvelous prescience in his comment, “the English language is hereafter to exert an influence in the world far beyond any other language, ancient or modern” (10). Likewise fascinating is the following part of a sample (from 1877) of *Anglo-Indian*, a variety spoken by English colonials and their contacts: *I’m dikk’d to death! The khansamaah had got chhutti, and the whole bangle is ulta-pulta ‘I’m bothered to death! The butler has got leave, and whole house is turned upside down’* (11). The default post-modern reflex is to find English guilty of dominating every landscape over which its shadow has fallen. These data, though, show how early and how thoroughly English was woven into the linguistic tapestry of South Asia. These data, along with the persistence of *babu English* i.e., the English of civil servants, underscore the opportunity for, in addition to traditional studies of regional and social variation, modern studies of stylistic variation and social identity. While the influence of English in the region is undeniable, the long history and traditions of other major languages in this great mix make it easy to accept the notion, as expressed by R.D. King (Language Politics and Conflicts in South Asia, 311 – 324), that “English has become simply one more Indian language” (319).

The status of English as one of the official languages of India provides convenience on two fronts, modernization and India's participation in the global economy, and the necessity for an acceptable language of broad influence. The "three language formula" to preserve minority languages in education, outlined in R.M. Bhaty & A. Mahboob, specifies teaching the mother tongue first, Hindi or English (or a non-Hindi language, depending on area) second, and English or a non-Hindi language third (Minority Languages and their Status, 132 – 152). Because of the well-known historical association of cultural identity with traditional languages, it has not been practical to achieve broad acceptance of any Indian language; to that extent, Annamalai points out, English has been useful as a weapon against the majority languages. In other words, English has served a vital role in language planning and education in a region characterized by extremely complex, deeply rooted language traditions.

These traditions are reflected in the more than 200 scripts used to write the languages as well. All the scripts ultimately derive from West Semitic alphabetic writing, but their routes of transmission and derivation have embedded them in the socio-cultural identities of their users. Despite the close similarity between Hindi and Urdu, the latter, with its right-to-left Nasta'liq script (derived from the Perso-Arabic tradition), came to index Muslim identity, and was thus enforced as the national language of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, at the expense of Bengali, the majority language of present day Bangladesh (Batt & Mahboob) and Punjabi (traditionally written in left-to-right Gurmukhi script, supplanted by Shahmukhi script among Punjabi-speaking Muslims in Pakistan after its founding). (\*\*Coulmas)

Accompanying high degrees of bi-and multilingualism is a high degree of multiscriptality in the region. It is the routine, for example, that Gujarati speakers learn to write their mother tongue in the Gujarati script and Hindi in the Devanagari script, while also learning the roman

alphabet for English and other European languages. This situation is no great inconvenience in urban India (consider the norm in Japan, where children learn to write *four* scripts, *kanji*, *katagana* and *hiragana*, and roman, representing three writing systems), but in tribal regions across the subcontinent the great variety of scripts used for local and regional languages adds layers of complexity to language planning and education. Peter T. Daniels, in “Writing Systems of Major and Minor Languages” (285 – 308) offers an excellent outline of the history and development of major writing systems and scripts in the region.

South Asia has not witnessed anything approaching the universal literacy achieved in the West since the end of the nineteenth century. As Florian Coulmas points out, though, writing, at best, facilitates complex social development (*The Writing Systems of the World*. Oxford, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1989, 1991). Thus we agree with R.K. Agnihotri that achieving literacy is, in itself, no panacea. It is true that the experience South Asia confounds modern ideas about literacy and orality (*Orality and Literacy*, 271 – 284).

Ian Smith provides a very apt discussion of contact languages in the region in “Pidgins, Creoles, and Bazaar Hindi,” (253 – 268), a fascinating example of which is Nagamese, lexified by Assamese, spoken in Nagaland. Bazaar Hindi appears to be a special case, assigned by Smith to the “constellation of pidgins,” even though it resulted from incomplete acquisition of its target, without appearing to be a koiné, either.

In an area with such long traditions, the atmosphere would seem ripe for conflict, but primarily in Sri Lanka is found intense ethnic violence, embodied in the Tamil rebellion. There the Constitution establishes Sinhalese and Tamil as national languages, along with English, and guarantees that all state business and documents must be available in whichever of the tongues is

requested (Bhaty & Mahboob). I think King is right when he says that this conflict is the result of “communal antagonism” of which language is “the least part” (ibid.).

An article that warrants particular mention is T.M. Valentine, “Language and Gender,” (429 – 449). Here Valentine traces the development of the highly polarized, post-modern Western conception of gender, informed by revolutionary feminism, where it is presupposed that men are men and women are women, i.e., that one mode for each fits all. Valentine points out that the cultural resources of South Asia provide many models for men, for women, and intermediate values. One is frequently taken aback by Western Feminist reactions to the cultures of East and Central Asia; here, in contrast is a refreshing, highly instructive account centered on the cultural traditions and resources of the region.

In every sphere in South Asia, the ethnic, religious, linguistic, literary, and economic, one finds variety and plurality, a situation extant from the earliest recorded times. Multiple religions are communicated in multiple languages and written in multiple scripts. The notion ‘one language, one nation’, as R. King points out, is out of the question. King summarizes thus:

[B]y everything we know about language conflict and language politics, some part of South Asia should be in linguistic turmoil almost any given day. But that is not the case. One wishes one could say with conviction that that is because South Asia is a triumph of good linguistic planning. But that is not the case either. What one can say is that by and large the countries of South Asia have done a pretty good job of sorting things out linguistically in ways that permit them to function (323).

We are reminded here of Abbi’s remark that the linguistic diversity occurs in a spirit of “coexistence.” Based on this long history of the region, we share King’s optimism that “the south Asian genius for reconciling dualities will prevail in language as well as in other matters” (324).



This richly informative text is well served with indices of languages and authors in addition to the usual subject index, which are very helpful in searching for specific topics. The tedious necessity to convert traditional notation for the languages in question to IPA is obviated by the use of traditional notation for the languages in question, and relevant abbreviations are provided chapter by chapter after the TOC, although a number of entries appear to contain ordinary items (adj = adjective, etc).

Every topic on the language situation that one could envision is represented in this collection. The scholars who have produced these articles continue the great Indian tradition of literature about language preserved since the time of Panini.

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