

# Linguistic Diversity in South Asia, Reconsidered

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## Introduction

*Linguistic Diversity in South Asia*, the landmark volume edited by Charles Ferguson and John Gumperz and published in 1960, was a watershed in South Asian studies and sociolinguistics, opening a host of conceptual and empirical issues that set the agenda for generations of scholars. Over 50 years later, in this entry we critically reconsider what this phrase, “linguistic diversity in South Asia” might mean for a new generation of sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists, whose work, we argue, deconstructs every term in this phrase in ways that productively advance the interventions of Ferguson and Gumperz and the fields they helped to inaugurate.

By all accounts, South Asia is and has been a linguistically diverse place: at least four language families (Austro-Asiatic, Dravidian, Indo-European, Tibeto-Burman, plus the various groups of sign languages across South Asia [Morgan, Green, and Khanal 2016]), hundreds of named languages (Asher 2008) and thousands of regional dialects, countless enregistered varieties (by caste, class, gender, age, medium, institutional context, subculture, etc.), as well as distinct semantic structures (Bright 1968; Annamalai 2012), multiple scripts and graphemic styles (Daniels and Bright 1996, 371–442; Sridhar and Kachru 2000; Choksi 2014, 2015, 2017, 2018), and a cornucopia of discourse genres (literary, religious, academic, political, journalistic, storytelling, astrology reading, document writing, etc.). Of course, as sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists have long argued, variation and multilingualism are the norm when it comes to language. In South Asia, it would seem, it *really* is the norm.

But by what accounting could this diversity, and its high degree, be palpable to anyone? For whom is South Asia, that geographic region that could contain such diversity? And what is “language” (or dialect or register) such that instances of it can be delimited, and even counted, so as to constitute “diversity” “in” some place (to wit, South Asia) in some way (structurally, functionally, or otherwise, e.g. by modality)? As we suggest, none of these questions can be answered solely on language-internal grounds (though they can’t be answered independently of questions of linguistic form or function either, of course). Rather, they are intrinsically *ideological* and *perspectival*. As such, these questions are not the sole provenance of academics. They are the concerns of state and para-state institutions, of experts and of everyday speakers. As such, each of these questions is deeply political, enmeshed with imperial and state power as well as local histories and perceptions, and thus subject to contestation, negotiation, and

transformation. Such politics, we suggest below, is not incidental to but constitutive of linguistic diversity, in South Asia and beyond.

## South Asia as a region

Diversity is a scalar notion. Some scale or measure must be posited or made such that questions of sameness or difference, homogeneity or heterogeneity, can be construed (Carr and Lempert 2016). But what kind of scale is South Asia (or in other, earlier designations, “India,” “Hindustan,” or the “subcontinent”)? What kind of social unit is it such that it could serve as the basis for linguistic diversity?

Linguistically, at the basis of this question is the distinction between historical and areal studies of language. While nineteenth-century philology, and later twentieth-century historical linguistics, came to construe questions of language, and its diversity, on genetic models of descent that assumed some origin or stage sans variation (Trautmann 1997), a continual problem for such views was (and is) convergence and borrowing across lines of descent. In a special issue of *Language* dedicated to Alfred Kroeber, a student of Franz Boas (long a critic of notions of purity, origins, and descent, linguistic, cultural, and racial), Murray Emeneau (1956) pointed out just this issue as the basis for defining India as a “linguistic area” (also see Masica [1976] 2005; Hock 1996; Krishnamurti 2003; Subbarao 2008; Hock and Bashir 2016, 241–374).<sup>1</sup> For Emeneau and others, a linguistic area is a geographical region defined by shared linguistic features across genetic groupings created by contact.<sup>2</sup>

This line of research has shown that a contiguous region – viz. South Asia – can be analytically characterized by a series of (tendencies of) linguistic features across languages (and language families) that have had a long history of contact, bi/multilingualism, and hybridity: for example, retroflexion, dative subjects, left-branching word order, verb finality, and serial verbal constructions, among others. Yet as Masica ([1976] 2005) has noted, South Asia can only be so characterized with the realization that this “area” is not, in fact, a single area but *multiple* areas, each anchored by some particular linguistic feature; and further, that each such area lacks clear boundaries, boundaries which, in any case, extend far beyond the notion of “South Asia” that is used in this line of research to ground its findings.

Three points are worth noting. First, South Asia as an area – that is, as a geographical basis by which to construe diversity – has a linguistic reality, both as a historical zone of contact and as set of shared, convergent formal features. Second, construing South Asia as a linguistic area turns on a particular, narrow conception (or ideology) of language – namely, language as a(n oral) denotational “code.”<sup>3</sup> Third, construing South Asia as a linguistic area requires semiotic labor. It requires making certain analytic choices, seeing language in a particular way, and seeing it in a particular cartographic imagination – indeed, one in which “South Asia” is already a pre-given region whose boundaries are determined in language-independent ways. Even though there are sound, if fuzzy, linguistic criteria by which to construe “South Asia” as an area, it is just as evident that this areal designation (and the scaling projects that take it up) is

not purely linguistic in nature. It is political and ideological in nature – and in at least two ways.

First, as David Ludden (1994), Nicholas Dirks (2003), and others (Van Schendel 2002; Mohammad-Arif 2014; Kaviraj 2014) have demonstrated, concepts of “South Asia” (or “India,” “Hindustan,” the “subcontinent”) have a layered political history. In the twentieth century, this history was linked to the rise of area studies departments in the United States – funded by the American government in its Cold War realpolitik – who, in the case of the first South Asia studies departments, were founded by scholars ensconced in a particular Orientalist view of what came to be called South Asia (Dirks 2003): namely, a geopolitical region defined around a Hindu civilizational core (cf. the anthropological notion of “culture area”) grounded in a Sanskritic germ.<sup>4</sup> Such an imaginary construed South Asia, as Mohammad-Arif (2014) points out, as a set of discrete *nations* (cf. a linguistic area as made up of discrete languages) centering on – and indeed, being held together by and emanating from – the nation-state of India.<sup>5</sup>

Such a view was itself an uptake of other, contemporary and past, conceptualizations of the region: most proximately, that of the postindependence Indian state, as informed by a longer history of British colonialism and Orientalist knowledge production – the roots of which, the “discovery” of Sanskrit as a sister language to Latin and Greek, are a historical basis of modern linguistics and its construal of linguistic diversity (as discussed above). And this colonial conception was itself an uptake both of imaginations of region linked to Mughal empire building and premodern epistemes associated with various political regimes (on which, more below).

While the complicated intellectual and political history of this idea of the region is beyond the scope of this entry, important here is that “South Asia” – and thus the linguistic diversity construed relative to its scaling – is the outcome of particular political projects and their territorial imaginaries; or, as we might say, with Subrahmanyam (2014) and Ludden (1994), South Asia is the pragmatic product, always in the making, of an ideological and discursive process; it is a set of interested *claims* by political actors on a cultural geography that is not self-evident or singular but multiple and contested. Which is also to say, South Asia is not just a geographical region “containing” a diversity of languages (or dialects, registers, etc.); it is a *discursive* site marked by a historical diversity of ideologies about language and place.<sup>6</sup>

Second, such ideological conceptions of the region (linguistic or otherwise) have had their own historical effects on the region they conceptualized and thereby constituted. The issue, thus, isn’t that “South Asia” is an ideological fiction that simplifies a messier reality. Rather, it is that regions are the performative *outcomes* of their conceptualization in very real political *and* linguistic terms (which is not to say that such outcomes are the same as the ideologies that regiment and constitute them). We can productively see South Asia as forged by political processes (premodern empire formation, colonialism, modernization, standardization, nation-building, neoliberal restructuring, globalization) that have shaped both ideologies of diversity and region *and* linguistic diversity itself. “Defining a linguistic area” (see Emeneau 1978), then, is not, or not only, an academic process of mapping some already existing order of linguistic facts; it is a historical and political process whose effects include those convergences and divergences at the level of linguistic form and function that the areal linguist studies. There is, we might say,

a total semiotic fact of diversity – a dialectical relation between ideologies of diversity and the structural-functional facts of linguistic diversity they construe and constitute, as mediated by situated discursive practices – that we can semiotically and historically trace (Nakassis 2016b; cf. Silverstein 1985). Below we turn to some examples of such diversity projects and their effects.

## Political projects of standardization and diversification

From December 1946 until 1950, India's Constituent Assembly debated the recent nation's Constitution (proclaimed on 26 January 1950). These debates featured explicit discussions of questions of linguistic (and scriptal and numeral) diversity in the context of nation-building and decolonization, of which language(s) would unite the nation, which language(s) were appropriate for state institutions (legal, educational, etc.), and the like (Thirumalai and Mallikarjun 2006; Hasnain 2013; Agnihotri 2015). New labels were given to named languages, as delimited by previous censuses and surveys, to define their (and their speakers') developmental status and functional role vis-à-vis the modernist state: "official" language (Hindi, English), "major" scheduled language (e.g. Tamil, Bengali, Marathi, Sanskrit; listed in the constitution's eighth schedule as simply "Languages"),<sup>7</sup> "minor(ity)" language (e.g. in 1950, Kashmiri, Konkani), or "tribal" language (e.g. Gondi, Santali, Mizo).<sup>8</sup> It is significant that despite designs and desires by some representatives to make what had come to be constructed in the colonial and postcolonial period as "Hindi" (vs. Urdu or Hindustani; Lelyveld 1993) the "national language," there was strong and at times violent resistance from non-Hindi language communities, in particular from South India, who feared "imposition" of Hindi and proposed to maintain English as India's national language (Annamalai 2010).

While the constitution recognized different language communities, at independence this was not reflected in the territorial organization of regional states (indeed, the Linguistic Provinces Commission of the Constituent Assembly suggested against it), with the maintenance of colonial-era states (such as the Madras Presidency). As a result of agitations from a number of language movements, over a number of years in the 1950s and culminating in the 1956 States Reorganisation Act, the Indian government introduced a number of new states and adjusted the boundaries of existing states to conform to perceived ethnolinguistic communities. Such language movements, and the state apparatus that conceded to them, abided a particular ideology of linguistic diversity and political sovereignty (the very one that had hoped to instate Hindi as India's national language): one that correlates *a* language (qua denotational code), *a* people (qua ethnos), and *a* territory (qua nation) (Anderson [1983] 1991). In effect, with the 1956 reorganization each state was treated as a subnation with its "own" language, people, and territory based on the region's majoritarian language community (*sensu* Silverstein 1998a) and the erasure (Irvine and Gal 2000) of other languages. Hence, the Telugu language was imagined to have as its boundaries what came to be called Andhra Pradesh, a region filled by speakers whose "mother tongue" was Telugu, the Tamil language had what came to be called Tamil Nadu, Malayalam Kerala, Kannada Karnataka, and so on (Annamalai 1979; Ramaswamy 1997; Mitchell 2009).

The instantiation of this quintessentially modern, Herderian language ideology (Irvine and Gal 2000; Bauman and Briggs 2003) drew on and transformed earlier conceptions of linguistic diversity in colonial India (Trautmann 1997; Hoffmann-Dilloway 2010). Such conceptions were the product of various colonial projects of knowing and documenting the linguistic diversity of the subcontinent – themselves influenced by Indigenous language ideologies of diversity – associated with a long tradition of Orientalist scholarship that we might narrate with the names of famous scholar-administrations and missionary-scholars like Jones, Colebrooke, Campbell, Caldwell, Hodgson, and, Grierson, among others.

The early Orientalists, as Bernard Cohn (1996) famously argued, were concerned to know the languages and peoples of India as part of justifying and aiding the colonial project of ruling India. Grammars, lexicons, maps, and later censuses were all part of the technological apparatus of such knowledge production. Informed by a Christian historicism and Mosaic genealogical imagination (Trautmann 1997), eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Orientalists construed, and attempted to reconstruct, diversity as comprising bounded autonomous peoples and their languages linked by descent, migration, and conquest. In doing so, however, they objectified and distorted the objects of their analysis, variously projecting literary registers as regional languages (Ollett 2014, 2017), splitting and standardizing dialect continua into discrete (quasi-standardized) languages (Hastings 1996), and ideologically erasing various other forms of variation (Sarangi 2009).

This project reached its culmination, if also deep problematization and partial negation, with George Abraham Grierson's ambitious *Linguistic Survey of India*. First conceived at the 1886 Vienna International Congress of Orientalists with Max Müller and Monier-Williams (imagined as the equivalent of what Boas and his colleagues were doing for the languages of native North America), from 1903 to 1928 Grierson carried out a linguistic survey of north India, cataloguing, naming, and describing a monumental number of dialects (544) and languages (179), published as nearly 8000 pages over 11 volumes (Carlan 2018). While Grierson was wary of forms of cartographic objectification (and often insisted, in his text if not in the maps, on the fuzzy boundaries of his maps, Majeed 2015), the survey was primarily organized by mapping language by region (Lelyveld 1993). Building on the civilizational imaginary of earlier generations' comparative philology (Grierson had studied Sanskrit and Hindi at Trinity College, Dublin, before being sent to India as part of the Indian Civil Service; Sarangi 2009), Grierson hoped to expand the linguistic knowledge of the subcontinent beyond literary languages to the spoken languages (and dialects) actually used by "the people," and to organize such linguistic varieties based on the taxonomies elaborated by an earlier generation of comparative philologists (namely, [vernacular] dialect < [standard] language < language family).

Grierson's work, like that of earlier scholar administrators, did not simply document or come to know the linguistic diversity of the subcontinent (as if it existed independently of it); it also entailed it into being. The overall effect of such colonial projects, while ambivalent in many ways, was to reify a linguistic and ethnological geography and to institutionalize its classifications and divisions. Indeed, such colonial projects were often cited and taken up by regional ethnolinguistic and religious communities and by

the postcolonial state (Lelyveld 1993; Sarangi 2009) in articulating their own political projects – be it making claims for recognition and territory (as in language movements for Andhra Pradesh or Tamil Nadu), distributing institutional resources, or by articulating the need for new surveys to know the population’s language use (Carlan 2018). And, of course, Grierson’s survey in particular has had a continued life as an academic source of data; Bloch, Chatterjee, Bloomfield, Emeneau, and Gumperz, among others, all drew on the survey to make their empirical arguments about South Asian languages.

Critical to see is that this form of knowing and constructing linguistic diversity was not just ideological. It was substantive. The current landscape of linguistic diversity of modern India was *shaped* by political projects of standardization and diversification that were informed by the survey and its predecessors, even if – as we discuss below – such effects were never totalized by the ideologies that animated them. Also critical to see is that such ideologies, and the projects they animated, were not simply European in origin (Trautmann 1997; Mitchell 2009). They were the result of a dialogic relationship, a structure of the conjuncture, to use Marshall Sahlins’s phrase (1981), between the language ideologies (and ideologies about linguistic diversity) of European scholars and administrators and Indigenous elites. Indeed, the project of producing colonial knowledge was based on intimate, if ambivalent and fraught, collaboration with high-caste elites, often Brahmin pandits, who brought their own distinct understandings and claims on language to bear in the production of colonial-era grammars and the like.

As Pollock (1998, 2006) and others have argued (Freeman 1998; Ollett 2017), the long-standing metalinguistic traditions that local elites drew on ideologically construed linguistic diversity as a hierarchy of literary styles, with Sanskrit as its transcendent axiological apex and all other varieties (including what we would call languages) as derivations defined by literary usage. Such traditions did not scale linguistic diversity by language qua denotational code, nor by region qua territory, nor by people qua ethnos. Rather, language was “ordered,” as Ollett (2017) has put it, by literary function, genre, and by aesthetic potential. The major distinction was between Sanskrit (as the language of the Gods, the language most appropriate to systematic knowledge, literature, among other genres), Prakrit (also a translocal language, but figured – in relation to Sanskrit – as more “common,” a “language of men,” and appropriate to different literary genres), and – as a fractal recursion of the Sanskrit/Prakrit distinction – “regional” vernacular languages. Here, then, languages were ordered as enregistered literary variants, appropriate to some uses or others, and ranked by that very fact.

As Lisa Mitchell (2009) has argued, there was a productive misunderstanding by European scholar-administrators of these metalinguistic traditions. Orientalist scholars reconstructed *out of* the Sanskritic and Prakritic metalinguistic traditions (and their ideologies of diversity) a genetic model of identity/difference that fit within their episteme, reanalyzing literary derivation *as* historical derivation. While the first generation of Orientalists construed Sanskrit as the origin for the linguistic diversity of all of India (an idea recycled well into the twentieth century; see Agnihotri 2013; 2015, 50–51), later Orientalists like Francis Ellis (in the Madras Presidency), operating within the same basic mode of inquiry, argued that Indigenous sources revealed not one but multiple origins. As Mitchell (2009) and Trautmann (2006) have shown, Ellis ([1816] 1849) cleaved a “local” Telugu language out of Indigenous classifications of language

(as described above), refiguring Sanskrit as a “foreign” element imposed upon what could now be reclaimed as a “pure” Telugu. This genetic, regionalized understanding produced what came to be called the Dravidian language family (after Bishop Robert Caldwell [1856]) – and later much more (such as linguistic states and political parties; Ramaswamy 1997; Bate 2009) – in contrast to the Indo-Aryan languages of the north.

In short, colonial understandings of Indian languages took up and transformed a particular, situated ideological position on linguistic diversity, one historically formulated by the translocal literary elite of premodern South Asia. And like the colonial regimes that reanalyzed them, such metalinguistic traditions were part of wider political projects. As Sheldon Pollock (2006) has argued, the hegemonic ideology of linguistic diversity articulated by this literary elite was an idiom of political power and polity, a “Sanskrit cosmopolis” that emerged out of an intense traffic between languages and registers (Freeman 1998; cf. Shulman 2016) that prefigured later (post)colonial uptakes. As Ollett (2017) suggests, the literary hierarchy between Prakrit and Sanskrit served as a model for the political and literary projects of regional elites in medieval India to raise particular regional languages (e.g. Kannada) to perform the role of Prakrit within the Sanskrit cosmopolis, eventually giving rise to processes of vernacularization that reorganized the literary and linguistic landscape of premodern South Asia in the ninth to twelfth centuries CE. It was such vernacularization that was reanalyzed at a later moment by colonial scholar-administrators based on their own Herderian language ideologies equating languages with peoples with territories.

As this shows, questions of language and its diversity can never be construed, or analytically parsed out, without accounting for the situated ideologies of language (Silverstein 1979; Woolard 1998; Gal 2005) that comprehend and construct – and thus entail – diversity (whatever this might mean in the instance). Such ideologies are linked to various projects and institutions, or “language orders” (Ollett 2017). Such orders, however, are never singular (even in their historical moment) nor necessarily internally coherent, instead betraying contestation and multiplicity and thus historical instability and change. They are intrinsically political in nature. Not just claims on language and linguistic diversity, they are always also claims on peoplehood, value, and authority.

The locatedness of such ideological claims is important to remember. As David Ludden (1994, 11) writes, while the state-linked Indigenous elites in medieval South Asia framed their loss of power, in Sanskrit, as a fall from purity and grace, “more cosmopolitan minds might have viewed this trend [i.e., shifts in power to new empires] as an end of parochialism, and agricultural workers might not have even noticed.” How, then, might the so-called “agricultural worker” have perceived questions of language and its diversity?

## **Ideologies of diversity beyond state imaginaries**

As noted above, Grierson hoped to move beyond literary languages to the languages spoken by everyday South Asians (the “agricultural workers” that Ludden mentions above, among many others), an aim that also characterized the emergent sociolinguistics of the 1950s and 1960s. But if Grierson and Gumperz et al. were concerned with

actual language use, ideologies of language held by such users, while often noted and discussed, were not a central object of analysis. Consonant with modern linguistics' ambivalence toward speakers' conceptions of language, for Grierson (like Boas 1911 on "secondary explanations"), speakers' linguistic consciousness was a problem to be worked around. Grierson was "appalled" both by the number of names for the "same" languages (or "sub-varieties not worth classifying"; cited in Majeed 2011, 20) and by the fact that speakers often lacked a "name" for their own language – simply referring to their language as "correct language" – or only had names for other peoples' languages (Carlan n.d.).<sup>9</sup>

Similarly consider William Bright's (1990, viii) narration of his experience of learning Kannada and unwittingly "discovering" diglossia in 1955, a half-century after Grierson's comments about the survey:

I once tried to prove to a "literary" speaker that he really did use two languages: he swore that the only way to say "he doesn't do it" was *māḍuvudilla*, but I was able to confront him with a tape-recording of his own voice saying *māḍolla* to a family member. My victory was hollow, since the man stopped speaking to me. (see also Hill 2007, 633n5)

At issue in this example, like the Grierson example above, are two different (non-)perceptions (and ideologies) of diversity. In Bright's case, between the sociolinguist who discerns difference – and theorizes it as di-glossia (two languages) – and the speaker who can't, or refuses to, hear such difference. In Grierson's, between the linguist who can – if with much difficulty – separate, and name, real from false difference, and the speaker who cannot. Ultimately, in both cases, it is the first perspective that discerns linguistic variation, the second consigned to an epiphenomenon to be filtered out and corrected for so as to get to the real data.

A major advance in the study of diversity, however, has been to pose speakers' conceptions of diversity as an ethnographic, empirical question: how is language diversity differentially perceived and experienced by different users (see Boas 1889)? Here, the question shifts from being one of documenting difference as such to documenting the processes by which difference itself comes into epistemological, felt existence (Irvine and Gal 2000).

As ethnographers and sociolinguists have noted, not only are speakers' perceptions of linguistic diversity often different from state-backed imaginaries, speakers' perceptions and valuations of linguistic diversity differ by sociological positionality just as they shift across contexts. While college students, for example, within the contexts of higher education in South India that Nakassis (2016b) discusses, may experience linguistic diversity within the classroom as an opposition between proper and improper English vis-à-vis pure and vernacular Tamil (with intuitions not dissimilar from those Bright reported among his informants in 1950s Mysore State), among themselves in the hostel questions of diversity and variation just as frequently depend on the performatively consequential boundary between "ordinary" and "stylish" speech, a boundary marked by the successful blending of non-normalized "English" words into otherwise ordinary Tamil (itself comprised of much "borrowed" English). Yet where that boundary between English and Tamil was located was shiftily and often indeterminate, subject to negotiation in interaction. What elite, English-educated students considered "ordinary" Tamil,

less-elite, Tamil-medium students might consider incredibly “stylish,” perhaps not even Tamil at all but something else entirely (viz. “Tanglish”).

Important here is how students’ conceptions of linguistic diversity and value stood ambivalently toward, and in partial opposition to, hegemonic discourses of linguistic standardization and purity that championed literary Tamil as the basis of linguistic and cultural identity (as forged by the Tamil ethnolinguistic movement mentioned above). Instead, students’ speech oriented to other horizons of value and meaning, both intensely local (to their generation-based peer groups) and global (to the expanding English-demanding neoliberal workforce and to cosmopolitan media programming). As this example shows, linguistic diversity is itself a kind of shifter, not simply across ideologies but across sociological positionalities and contexts of interaction.

Consider another example of the dialogic relationship between state-backed and local concepts of linguistic sameness and difference discussed by Annamalai (1993): that of (what the state sees as) non-standard Hindi speakers as they encounter the state’s construction of “official” Hindi in census recording (an encounter that not-coincidentally echoes Grierson’s own experience conducting the survey). While state censuses figure “official” Hindi as a self-same “code,” from the perspective of many speakers, and linguists, it is an amalgamation of many different varieties, varieties which different language communities consider to be distinct languages with separate political and literary histories. Indeed, when the 1961 census revealed a decrease in Hindi speakers, with speakers claiming languages such as Braj, Awadhi, Maithili, and Bhojpuri and *not* Hindi (*khadi boli*) as their mother tongues, the 1971 census decided to classify all such “dialects” as simply tokens of Hindi (Agnihotri 2015, 55; a practice of linguistic nationalism that continues on in the 2011 census; see Devy 2018), evincing at one and the same moment multiple politically contentious perspectives of linguistic diversity.

Finally, it is critical to point to the ongoing struggles of members of sign-language communities to achieve recognition for sign languages *as* language, both from non-signers – often including hearing family members – and from the state and its institutions (Friedner 2015; Hoffmann-Dilloway 2016). Indeed, no sign language in South Asia to date has received recognition from state censuses, with the exception of Nepali Sign Language (recognized in 2001) (Morgan, Green, and Khanal 2016).<sup>10</sup> Much political work by signers, civil society advocates, and academics has been and continues to be done to achieve recognition for sign languages, to counter discriminatory oralist ideologies of diversity that would efface sign language from view as non-linguistic, rudimentary gesture. Erika Hoffmann-Dilloway (2010, 2016) has written, for example, about how Nepali Sign Language (NSL) users have struggled against older views that see Deafness as a result of bad karma, as ritually polluting, and thus linked to low-caste status. Such beliefs long kept sign language and its users invisible. To counter such views, by citing international NGOs and linguists on the linguistic equality of sign languages, activists over the last several decades have worked to transform Deafness from a disability (or religious stigma) into the basis of an ethnolinguistic minority whose “mother tongue” is NSL. Appropriating state-backed imaginaries of linguistic diversity in contesting how the state “sees” languages – namely, that distinct, standardized languages (should) have distinct ethno-nations as their

speakers (tellingly, Deaf associations were forbidden by the Nepal government until the 1990s) – claims for NSL’s linguistic status have become a way to make novel political claims of ethnicity (transforming, arguably, notions of ethnicity in the process). Yet as Hoffmann-Dilloway suggests, by being linked to educational institutions the standardization and recognition of NSL as an ethnolinguistic emblem has involved taking on elements of the state’s Hindu-centric framing of nationalism and, thereby, its ideologies of diversity. Such an anticipatory interpellation to state ideologies are not without contestation, however. Indeed, efforts to standardize NSL and Deaf identity that have associated them with (upper-caste, urban) signs of Hindu identity remain contested within the internally heterogeneous Deaf community (Hoffmann-Dilloway 2010, 437ff.).

The above examples highlight the complex ways that ideologies of linguistic diversity get hitched to distinct yet entangled political projects, social positionalities, and institutional contexts. Such examples suggest that the analysis of linguistic diversity as a linguistic and cultural phenomenon in South Asia will be incomplete without attention to the differential and shifty values ascribed to various linguistic varieties in and beyond the state, which is to say, to its political dimensions.

## **Beyond “language,” beyond “diversity,” beyond “in South Asia”**

First of all, one of the fundamental problems of linguistics is the delimitation of languages as the “natural” units of linguistic analysis and classification ... Questions like this [e.g., “Are Konkani and Marathi two languages or one? How many Dravidian languages are there?”] cannot be answered until the concept of language as a unit is rejected and another formulation of the questions becomes accepted. (Ferguson and Gumperz 1960, 2)

Ferguson and Gumperz, in carving out a new domain of study – the study of regional, social, and functional variation in South Asia – both drew on and differentiated themselves from their predecessors; perhaps most importantly, from Grierson (see e.g. Gumperz and Naim 1960, 94), who himself stood ambivalently between a previous generation of comparative philology and what he saw as a new horizon for the study of linguistic diversity in colonial India (Carlan 2018). Of interest is how both conserved and transformed the questions they took up through initiating a deconstructive turn toward the objects of their inquiry: from literary languages to named languages and dialects to complexly reticulated linguistic varieties and matrices of linguistic resources; from civilizations to peoples to speakers; and from regions to speech communities to contexts of usage. Twenty-first-century sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology stand in a similarly ambivalent, deconstructive relationship to the objects of inquiry they have inherited (Nakassis 2016b, 2018), a point we have endeavored to make in this entry by critically reconsidering the phrase “linguistic diversity in South Asia.” As we suggest in this final section, our fields continue to worry this phrase, if on transformed grounds, thinking with and beyond language, diversity, and South Asia.

### *Beyond language and linguistic diversity*

Recent scholarship of South Asia, building on Ferguson and Gumperz, has diversified the notion of linguistic diversity, looking beyond regional dialects, caste dialects, and diglossia (the bread and butter of an earlier generation of sociolinguistics) to notions of *registers* and *discourse genres* (Agha 2007), that is, to the question of how repertoires of linguistic forms come to share non-referential indexical values and metapragmatic stereotypes (e.g. of identity, situation, place, participation framework). Such a view shifts from multilingualism as made up of denotational “codes” to social practices involving the indexical signaling of social context, stance, inequality, hierarchy, and identity (Hall 2005; Bate 2009; LaDousa 2014; Proctor 2014). Language ideologies, as these works show, are critical to how linguistic repertoires get hooked into social values (Gal 2005, 2018).<sup>11</sup>

To recall the students discussed by Nakassis (2016b), college youths’ speech in urban Tamil Nadu – and in particular, their engagements with various registers of Tamil and English – result not only in forms of code-mixing and code-switching but in the blurring and bracketing of the boundaries between languages. As Nakassis argues, explaining the social pragmatics of such speech involves not simply delineating what the codes (or registers) are but also the question of how the boundaries between such varieties are simultaneously put into play by speakers (as they “mix” “Tamil” and “English”) and productively rendered indeterminate by them. Here, “language” and “code” cannot suffice as mere analytics but are part and parcel of speakers’ reflexive (if implicit) work in and through speech. This is the very stuff of what these youth call “style,” an ideologically laden value-scheme through which they enact status, identity, and social relationality in and by their discourse.

Scholars have also focused on the diversity, real and perceived, of discourse genres in South Asia. Bernard Bate (2005, 2009, 2010), for example, showed on how new concepts of “textuality” emerged in colonial South India, where Protestant genres of homiletic discourse came to be taken up and transformed by Indigenous religious and political movements (e.g. nineteenth-century Saivism, twentieth-century Dravidian oratory). Such movements hybridized the sermon with literary genres (e.g. of poetry, epic) and their associated registers. Taken from the pulpit and put onto the political stage (as *mēdai tamil*, or “stage Tamil”), such hybrid discourse genres entailed novel participation frameworks that had radical political consequences. As Bate argued, the uptake of the sermon in/as political oratory involved addressing large publics who, first in the Swadeshi movement and then in the Dravidian movement, were interpellated as novel social agents, eventually enabling a new imagination of language, community, and polity – what we now know as “the Tamil people.”

In these cases, “language” is much more than a denotational code and diversity much more than formal variation (phonetic, phonemic, semantic, or syntactic). Rather it is an iconic and indexical semiotic mediated by users’ own reflexive ideologies. At the same time, as these works show, as more than just a symbolic system of denotation, language is always entangled with the non-linguistic. Language ideologies always articulate speech signals to other semiotic media (Woolard 1998; Nakassis 2016a). In Nakassis’s discussion (2016b), English and Tamil are not simply modes of speech but are deeply

entangled with forms of youth fashion, where the “style” of English is conspicuously displayed on clothing, often in semantically nonsensical combinations that evince the purely aesthetic, indexical function of English. And, as Bate’s case attests, oratorical discourse genres are constituted by particular technologies (microphones, stages, loudspeakers), forms of dress (the recognizable “white on white” of the politician), visual culture (posters), and the like. Register phenomena and discourse genres like “youth slang” or “stage Tamil,” in short, can never be solely defined by appeal to “code” or “language” alone.

Beyond “language,” then, linguistic anthropologists have looked to how multiple media come to indexically entangled (or enregistered, Agha 2007) with each other. Kathryn Hardy’s (2014, 2015) work on “Bhojpuri” cinema and language brilliantly demonstrates this. Bhojpuri, Hardy tells us, is a contentious linguistic and cinematic object. Grierson classified “Bhojpuri” among the varieties of what he called “Bihari” (the theoretical language he posited that would encompass the multiple “dialects” spoken in this part of North India) (Hastings 1996). A hundred years later, Bhojpuri has emerged from being a mere “dialect” of a theoretical language to being the object of focus for its own language community – that is, as a language of its own to be claimed by speakers as their “mother tongue” (cf. “official” Hindi; see discussion above). Cinema has been central in transforming such ideologies of linguistic diversity and thus, to some extent, linguistic diversity itself.

As Hardy shows, when it comes to the production of a so-called Bhojpuri film there is no single ideology of what constitutes the language, Bhojpuri, such that the film could be, unequivocally and linguistically, a “Bhojpuri film.” Rather, each stage of production evinces its own distinct construal of the language and its relationship to regional dialects and other languages (most critically, Hindi): writing scripts operate according to one idea about what Bhojpuri is and is not, shooting another, dubbing a third. And at each stage, different linguistic forms and different ideologies about the indexical value of such diversity are at play. While scripts are written in a relatively standard Hindi with certain shibboleths of Bhojpuri thrown in, on set and during dubbing it may be decided that different (i.e. more Bhojpuri) linguistic forms indexical of certain places and persons are more appropriate, or simply sync better with the screen performance.

Yet, as Hardy argues, despite the heterogeneity of conceptions of what constitutes Bhojpuri across the production process, such films are taken up by journalists, audiences, and scholars as definitive statements on what “Bhojpuri” “is”; indeed, the circulation of such films have become one basis for how “the” Bhojpuri language is being reimagined. What “Bhojpuri” means, however, as a cinematic object is markedly distinct from its life in other media (such as face-to-face conversation); indeed, the requirements for intelligibility across vast transregional distribution networks, as well as ideologies about the value of such a “vernacular” by the (Hindi- and English-speaking) elites who make such films, results in a Bhojpuri that, for the linguist, is more or less standard Hindi with certain “Bhojpuri” shibboleths, discourse genres (such as folk songs), and tropes (related to urban, male migration) mixed in. Here, language and non-language (cinema) blur into each other, and what counts as a differentiated language is as much reckoned based on discursive diacritics – aspects of filmic form (in particular, the raunchy “item number,” a negative emblem of Bhojpuri cinema) – that

stand outside of what linguists would consider “the” “language” in question. The result is not a standard language (even if certain shibboleths are standardized in the process) but the continuous production of an open-ended register of signs – linguistic, cinematic, and musical – that is emergently being canonized as Bhojpuri. As Hardy argues, the consolidation of a Bhojpuri language community has itself been part of the historical process of the consolidation of a Bhojpuri film industry, and both in a process of differentiation from a Hindi language community/film industry.<sup>12</sup>

As this discussion demonstrates, an approach to language attentive to its open-ended, fuzzy entanglements with non-linguistic media must be attentive to the diversity of diversities, that is, to the multiple ways in which diversity itself is construed by different social groups and in different contexts, not simply vis-à-vis language but also far beyond it.

### *Beyond South Asia*

What “South Asia” might mean has been productively transformed by recent scholarship, in particular, research focusing on diasporic communities (Eisenlohr 2006; Shankar 2008; Das 2016) and transnational speech communities (e.g. those mediated by call-centers; Aneesh 2015). Such work has deterritorialized linguistic diversity, following speakers and discourses as they move beyond, and bring along, South Asia in their movements, real and virtual.

The migration of South Asians under conditions of colonialism and now globalization raises the question of what happens to language, diversity, and ideology when transplanted into new lands. There is no single answer to this question given the differences between labor markets, political cultures, linguistic ecologies, and ideologies of the lands migrated to, and the reconstituted speech and language communities of the “home” language within which migrants arrive/reside, as shown by the differences between diasporic populations and their use of language in the Caribbean and Indian-Ocean island countries; the Gulf countries; North American, European, and Australian contexts; and in the neighboring lands on the Bay of Bengal (Sri Lanka, Singapore, and Malaysia).<sup>13</sup>

Sonia Das (2016), for example, explores how first-generation Tamil speakers from South India and Sri Lanka bring different language ideologies from their countries of origin into the Canadian, Montreal diaspora, encountering new, if also uncannily similar language regimes of purism, standardization, and “rivalry.” The result is a complex set of transpositions and conservations: of the linguistic tensions in the host and home country (such that Anglo–French “rivalries” in imperial South Asia and in modern multicultural Canada inform and are recreated between Sri Lankan and Indian communities); of historical imaginations of and cultural values imputed to one’s “home” language (the perceived suitability of Tamil to the diasporic world, pride in its antiquity, an emphasis on purism or cosmopolitanism, etc.); as well as the differential values and identity-based claims attached to speaking so-called high (“pure,” “older,” “written”) or low (“impure,” “modern,” “spoken”) “diglossic” varieties. Consequently, as Das shows, ideologies of diglossia – as interdiscursively sourced from precolonial and colonial-era constructions of linguistic diversity – have come

to form the basis for ethnonational difference within the diasporic Tamil speech community such that, in ways that echo and appropriate Canadian ideologies of Anglo-Franco difference, self-styled cosmopolitan and relatively upper-class Indian Tamil migrants claim “spoken Tamil” as their heritage language while refugee and relatively working-class Sri Lankan Tamil migrants claim “written Tamil” as their heritage language. This differentiation is compounded by participation in educational institutions, with Indian Tamils matriculating in private English-medium schools and Sri Lankan Tamils in French-medium government schools. The result is a reproduction of ideologies of diversity and “linguistic rivalries” across entangled scales: within the contemporary Tamil speech community of Montreal between Indian and Sri Lankan Tamils and within the Canadian nation between Anglo and Franco Canadians. If in previous examples we saw ideology as a principle for the shiftiness of diversity within South Asia, Das’s ethnography shows us ideology as a conservative, if dynamic, force scaling diversity beyond South Asia, reproducing and perhaps even rigidifying views of linguistic diversity in novel and transformative diasporic contexts.

Patrick Eisenlohr (2006) presents a distinct case of a “Little India” in Mauritius. In Mauritius, not unlike Canada, ethno-racial communalization and claims on the state have a distinctly linguistic basis, based on so-called “ancestral languages” and not necessarily to languages actually used. Hence, Eisenlohr reports, Hindu Indians in Mauritius who speak Bhojpuri in everyday life claim “Hindi” as their ancestral language, reflecting a language ideology sourced from India (see discussion above) but transformed in the diaspora. Here British and French colonial ideologies of language purity and standardization gain a new purchase; but if in the Indian context this has led to the incipient genesis of Bhojpuri as its own language, in the Mauritian context that Eisenlohr discusses this has involved a tendency to embrace Hindi (and Hindi-ize Bhojpuri) – for example, in classrooms, in media, in religious ritual – and thus to efface rather than intensify forms of linguistic diversity and difference (despite the fact that speakers continue to mix and shift between Bhojpuri, Hindi, Creole, English, and French in everyday life in ways that problematize bounded notions of code, as discussed above). Such ideologies of diversity are, as we would expect, themselves linked up to particular political projects: transnationally, to a Hindutva politics of Hindu majoritarianism; but, more locally, to attempts to capture the state apparatus by consolidating a communal population (Hindi-speaking Hindus) and displace black Creole speakers who, on such language ideologies, lack any ancestral language (and thus key claims on the state). Here, fears of minoritization, deculturalization, and language loss (ironically, of Bhojpuri) find their expression in ideologies of language diversity (in effect, rallying around Hindi as an emblem of ethnolinguistic and racial identity) that contest other visions and imaginations of language diversity (e.g. those that articulate a creole modernity and language as the basis of a multiracial Mauritian nation).

Critical to all these studies are the ways in which they push beyond language, diversity, and South Asia to interrogate how ideologies of language, diversity, and South Asia are themselves part and parcel of the empirical materials under study, how language, diversity, and South Asia are themselves perceived and institutionalized, acted on and worked upon by those we study, and how in doing so the autonomy and coherence of language, linguistic diversity, and South Asia are problematized and transformed at one

and the same time. What this shows up is that what we, as academics, do is not different in principle from those that we study (Silverstein 1998b); further, that just as the language ideologies of everyday speakers, language movements, and state institutions may have entailments on the languages they reanalyze so too may academics' ideologies (or theories) of language have entailments on their objects of study. Indeed, the former is often mediated by the latter. After all, it is not just scholars who cite Jones or Caldwell or Grierson or Gumperz; language movements, states, and everyday speakers do as well.

## Conclusion

In this entry, we have reconsidered the question of “linguistic diversity in South Asia” from the perspective of contemporary sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, looking back to how the question of language in the subcontinent has been at the core of both fields from their origins – from the discovery of Indo-European and Dravidian to the founding of areal linguistics, from Grierson's monumental survey to midcentury sociolinguistics. In doing so, we have been concerned to deconstruct and reassemble each term in this phrase. We've argued that the empirical reality of each cannot be disassociated from the ideologies and political projects that construe and animate each term, and indeed, that such ideologies and projects entangle and (co)constitute such terms and their referents in complex and often unpredictable ways. At the same time, however, contemporary linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics have not disposed of the questions that animated earlier generations of scholars but have reinvigorated and transformed them in sophisticated ways that are empirically sensitive to the realities of social and linguistic life in all its complex reflexivity.

SEE ALSO: Bright, William O.; *Diaspora Language*; *Diglossia*; Ferguson, Charles; Firth, John Rupert; Gumperz, John J.; *Historical Linguistics*; *Language Contact*; *Language Families*; *Language, Globalization, and Colonialism*; *Language Ideology*; *Language and Politics*; *Linguistic Anthropology, History and Development of*; *Sociolinguistics*; Whitney, William Dwight

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## NOTES

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1. By “India,” Emeneau (1956, 5n2) simply meant the subcontinent, or what we have been provisionally referring to as South Asia (see main text for more discussion).
  2. Note how the notion of linguistic area in its classic formulation already presupposes a genetic imagination of linguistic diversity, to say nothing of discrete languages qua denotational codes

- such that “borrowing” could occur across such lines of difference; this is made explicit by Emeneau himself in his definition of a linguistic area (1956, 16n28; cf. Zvelebil 1990 on the Nilgiris as a linguistic area). Also note how this logic – in its own troubling of descent by borrowing – is itself haunted by the possibility of independent development of “shared” features (Hock 1996), just as it stands on a complete non-consideration of sign languages, whose relations to each other, and to spoken languages, are difficult to characterize genetically (Morgan, Green, and Khanal 2016).
3. Once we move beyond denotational infrastructures for referential function – for example, into realms of indexical variation/convergence by register, discourse genre, and so on (all only tractable by attending to questions of language ideology) – then we begin to see how multiply complex all such areal issues are. We might begin to query, for example, South Asia as an area based on shared pragmatic (e.g. Pandit 1972; Emeneau 1978, 206) or ideological features, though many of the same critiques noted above would still apply.
  4. The first generation of American sociolinguists of South Asia, such as Ferguson, Bright, and Gumperz, were part of this emergent institutional context even as they radically expanded the horizons of what South Asia, and language, might mean (see Levinson 2015).
  5. This bias unfortunately continues in much of the academic discussion of South Asia, including this entry, which disproportionately focuses on case studies from postcolonial India.
  6. As this implies, the point isn’t that “South Asia” is simply an invented Other of the US war machine, of European Orientalism (*sensu* Said 1986), or the like. Rather, the point is that (i) every such region is a political claim; and (ii), such claim making is not simply a product of colonialism but is mediated by longer histories of regional elites engaged in their own political projects (Ludden 1994, 19–20).
  7. While the scheduled languages, which represented different literary and cultural histories, were initially to serve as feeders to develop a register of Hindi that could function as the official language of the Indian Union, “official” Hindi was instead deeply Sanskritized, losing the aim advocated by some of the constitution makers to have the official language of India reflect (something of) the linguistic diversity of the country.
  8. Inclusion into the eighth schedule was, and remains, a political decision, as evinced by the growth in the number of “Languages,” with “minority” languages like Kashmiri and Konkani and “tribal” languages like Santali coming to be included in the schedule over the years.
  9. As Majeed (2011) points out, the Language Survey of India only ever problematically encountered Indigenous metalinguistic notions of linguistic diversity (e.g. in the surfeit of names) even as it preserved that diversity (by keeping all those names in the volumes’ indexes). Our discussion here is not meant to caricature Grierson as simply in the business of simplifying complex linguistic realities and forms of diversity that he dismissed out of hand. Indeed, Grierson was a serious language scientist concerned with questions of how to know and represent the delicate linguistic complexities that he encountered and collected, down to the individual speaker. We thank Katy Hardy for pushing us to make this point.
  10. Importantly, the recent People’s Linguistic Survey of India has included sign languages as part of its mandate (Devy 2014).
  11. Cf. Ferguson and Gumperz’s (1960, 5) admission that definitions of a variety are impossible without appeal to speakers’ own reflexive sense of variation.
  12. This itself follows a general classification of cinemas in South Asia by language, based on a kind of monoglot/Herderian assumption: X cinema = produced by X-speakers in the X-language for an audience of X-speakers in X-territory – pointing to another life of linguistic diversity beyond “language”: for example, how cinemas are produced, classified, and experienced by filmmakers, the state/censor board, and audiences.
  13. One factor is the maintenance of the region-based ethnic identity (Sharma and Annamalai 2003). As Pandit (1972) observed, multilingualism in South Asia was maintained despite conditions of linguistic domination by particular languages. Under premodern conditions, Pandit argued,

there was a rigid relationship between communal and regional identity and linguistic variety, with movement between identities, and thus speech varieties, tightly regimented. Such a rigidity worked, he suggested, against standardization and to promote the maintenance of Indian ethnolinguistic and communal identity across generations. In diasporic contexts, this identity breaks down along linguistic lines when it comes to community networking such as cultural associations and internet groups, and entertainment such as film, television watching, and the internet. In aural entertainment, for example, Hindi may find a place in addition to the home language, while in reading English may prevail. This is similar to the pattern of language use in South Asia. But there are two differences. First, the larger national identity is strongly expressed by the different linguistic communities in relation to other ethnic communities in the adopted country and there is greater identification with the official language of the home country. Second, there is no standardization of the dialects which are brought with the migrants; proficiency in and use of the home language thus often decreases down the generations.

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