

Neither Linguistics, Nor a Successor to Grierson's LSI: The People's Linguistic Survey of India Volumes, but still a Point of Reference

Social Change

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The data on languages and mother tongues collected by the 2011 Census has been in for some months now.¹ Once again, Hindi has emerged as the language spoken by the most number of people: 4,363 out of every 10,000 citizens speak it, which when compared to the language that comes in second in this distribution, Bangla with 803 speakers, once again underlines the national spread of this language. Once again, India is shown to be a country with an admirable linguistic diversity, it has 270 mother tongues which are grouped into two sets as Scheduled Languages and Non-Scheduled Languages. Responses tabulated by the 2011 Census show that 96.71 per cent of the Indian population has, ‘...one of the Scheduled Languages as their mother tongue, the remaining 3.29 per cent is accounted for by other languages’.

As is perhaps widely known these days, each one of these truths uttered by the census data is a massive fiction (refer Kidwai 2017 for a discussion on issues of census methodology). Hindi is such a populous language only because the census classification groups 54 other languages plus a category of ‘others’ under the language name Hindi. At least 50,579,447 of these fictive ‘Hindi’ speakers told census enumerators that they spoke Bhojpuri, as did 2,309,265 Nimadi speakers and 15,835 Baghati speakers. In fact, all the Scheduled Languages do not have one fixed referent in the real world and include as their speakers who actually responded with other language names to the enumerators. Thus, the claim that Hindi speakers number 528,347,193 is incorrect (actually the numbers who returned ‘Hindi’ as the name of their language were 322,230,097) and even the 24,821 mother tongue speakers figure for Sanskrit masks the fact that 112 persons actually returned some other name.

Furthermore, the classification and rationalisation processes employed by the census also ‘disappear’ a significant number of languages, as languages with speakers that number less than 10,000 are not reported at all in the census tables. Across India, 1,875,542 people speak these unnamed/unidentified languages, the maximum concentration of which can be found in Karnataka with 386,552 such persons.

The census is thus not an initiative that represents the full linguistic diversity of India; in fact, it seeks to manage it and minimise it. To carry out the rationalisation and classification it does, it relies fundamentally on the 11 volumes of George Abraham Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India (LSI) published between 1898 and 1928. Approved by the British in 1891 and begun in 1894, the survey's findings were used as the means by which colonial censuses made a distinction between languages and dialects, classified languages, and rationalised returns of language names. The LSI continues to be one of the most important resources that the census uses today. But it also is much more than that.

A great deal of social science and humanities scholarship (far too numerous to cite here) has examined how the life/afterlife of the survey gave shape to ideas that place language at the centre of the construction of 'racial' and social difference, conflict, imagined communities and diversity. Many linguists, however, read the LSI doing something quite the opposite and consider it to be a *tour de force* for a number of reasons. The first is the survey's methodology itself—the care taken in arriving at comparable data and texts, the choice of parameters to be studied cross-linguistically and the transparency with which survey results are presented were a radical departure from the treatment hitherto given to the languages of the subjected—the texts, the variants thereof, on which the grammatical sketches are based, are presented for readers to evaluate, analyses justified. Second, linguists admire the LSI for the linguistic analysis itself; to accomplish internally consistent analyses of groups of superficially very diverse languages is simply extraordinary. That this feat of analysis of individual languages could manage to yield coherent parameters for the determination of language groupings and subgroupings, dialect continua and distributions of linguistic features represents a success of Grierson's version of the modern linguistics method that was just about being born. Third, linguists appreciate the LSI for actually how far it departs from colonial grammar writing in refusing to deploy extra-grammatical reasoning and justifications for the analysis of linguistic facts; the sketch grammars that Grierson writes do not invoke the colonial imagination of the tribal as a means to explain some unfamiliar feature of the grammar or sound system of the language.

Contemporary linguists also see the importance of the *idea* of the linguistic survey itself and the uses it can be of (refer also Kidwai, 2007). Given a global context in which linguistic diversity is threatened worldwide, the preservation, vitality and documentation of small languages are of utmost concern for linguists from all theoretical persuasions ranging from the ones working on the formal properties of natural languages to those who explore exclusively their social contexts. Linguistic grammatical investigations make users use their language, encourage vitality through this very use and make these languages and the communities that speak them visible for state support and fostering—through producing/adopting scripts for them, including them in school curricula, creation of pedagogical and literary resources, media interventions and so on.

But there are a couple of other sets of reasons too that Indian linguists in particular see value in a linguistic survey. The first is the Indian Constitution itself, which accords citizens specific linguistic rights:

- Articles 29 enshrines a commitment to the maintenance of India's linguistic diversity: 'Any section of the citizens residing in the territory of India or any part thereof having a distinct language, script or culture of its own shall have the right to conserve the same'.
- Article 30 guarantees minorities the right to develop and propagate these languages (and their speakers) through education: 'All minorities, whether based on religion or language, shall have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice'.
- Article 350A provides for instruction in their own mother tongues at the primary stage of education to children belonging to the linguistic minorities: 'It shall be the endeavour of every State, and of every local authority within the State, to provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother-tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups; and the President may issue such directions to any State as he considers necessary or proper for securing the provision of such governance'.
- Article 345 leaves a state free, through its legislature, to adopt Hindi or any language used in its territory as its official language(s).
- Article 120 permits member(s) to use his/her mother tongue in the Indian Parliament.

If the bulk of Indian languages are not recognised as mother tongues by state and central governments, if they do not have scripts, if they are not grammatically described and brought into the education curriculum, communities will fail in their efforts to maintain these languages. A linguistic survey can safeguard the future of smaller languages and force the census as well as the governments to extend the constitutional promises assured to them. Further, it would also create a contemporary resource, constructed by employing modern democratic methodologies and theoretical tools, for state policy to rely on. For state policy on language, as successive censuses have shown, cannot rely on what people report to an enumerator, as claims to be a speaker of a language may often have nothing to do with actually speaking it or wanting to educate one's children in it. People who speak one language often claim another as their mother tongue out of with shame or loyalty, considerations of employment, social existence, and though the job of the government is not to challenge their claims, language and education policy cannot ignore these social factors.

Between 2006 and 2007, University linguists and the Central Institute of Indian Languages tried very hard to persuade the then UPA government to institute a *New Linguistic Survey of India (NLSI)* that would harness the 'creative and intellectual energies of the Indian people through the participation of individuals/communities that speak these languages, in the gathering of the data and the creation of resources that ... [it] will generate'. It aimed to train native speakers as linguists so that the expertise necessary for sustained language vitalisation is available within language communities. In its focus on multilingualism, modern description, the creation of linguistic resources for communities, the *NLSI* would

have been different from the *LSI*, but in its fundamental approach and orientation, there was an undoubted continuity with Grierson. The survey would address people more substantially than Grierson's *LSI* ever did (although several communities cite the *LSI* even today to index their existence); an equally important addressee would be the state. Further, the aim was to describe languages not peoples, as autonomous objects to create a document that everyone from a lay person to a linguist to a government official could use and appreciate.

It was after the failure of linguists to persuade the government and the bureaucracy (ironically the most strenuous objections came from the Registrar General's office) that the *People's Linguistic Survey of India* was born in 2010 and completed by 2012. A total of 50 volumes, in several parts, are at various stages of publication, in several parts and a goodly number of languages. This reviewer was sent four volumes, but I shall for the main concentrate on Volume I, making observations about the three others collectively.

The *PLSI* is impelled to a great extent by the very same ideas and goals as those that Indian linguists have. In Volume 1, authored by Ganesh Devy (the Chairperson of the National Editorial Collective and the series' Chief Editor), 'the abundant respect for the idea of India as a linguistically plural nation' that the Constitution of India displays, is invoked; the grave peril that minority languages of 'phonocide' outlined with great passion, and the role of documentation *via* a linguistic survey as in promoting language vitality and preservation as an exercise in self-representation and participation of the people who speak India's languages. But that is where the similarity ends, I am afraid.

Volume I, *The Being of Bhasha*, is intended to be, by the way of a general introduction to the aims of the *PLSI*, its mission statement, the perspectives with which the researchers involved in it approached it. About half the book comprises writings by Ganesh Devy, which though organised as chapters, are more a series of thought pieces on the state of Indian languages, their political history, the subject of linguistics, texts, literature and culture. I will be frank, owing both to the haphazard organisation of these thoughts, I find the volume to be highly unsatisfactory, both at the level of posing the key issues relating to Indian languages, presenting an outline of survey methods besides the objectives, as well as introducing the volumes that are to follow.

It is clear to me that Devy does not understand what Grierson did at all—whether he is a fan or not is immaterial. Perhaps because he is not a linguist, as he 'wades through the Grierson volumes', Devy 'gets the impression the languages reported in them are in most part regional varieties, of interest mainly for their simple songs and folklore'. The fact that Grierson found only 200 languages as compared to over 500 dialects, Devy finds to be indicative of 'his essential bias'. But actually it is Devy who fails to appreciate what the business of language surveying, grammatical description, data presentation and dialectology are about. Grierson's short texts are his linguistic examples to motivate the grammatical analysis he carries out, and his distinction between language and dialect is one based on the relative power between speech varieties holding at the time of his description. Linguists have long believed that all languages are equal

speech varieties and that 'a language is a dialect with an army and a navy' as the socio-linguist Max Weinrich remarked in 1945. Grierson's meticulous description not only describes the dialect which is so armed, but it also records as many of the defenceless ones, too.

Devy, however, demarcates his survey from Grierson's, both in terms of its people-centred and non-state orientation as well as its objectives of preservation, building networks and community resources. It is a survey that is not to be measured by its satisfaction of linguists' expectations. However, accepting this at face value would not have been an issue, if only Devy did not spend so much time discussing linguistic concepts and issues, for each of which there is a rich discussion in a literature that Devy seems mostly unaware of. From language attrition, loss and survival, to what the nature of linguistic meaning is, Devy has an opinion about the linguistic fact or phenomenon, with almost no scholarship whatsoever. Had this not been a linguistic survey, the rhetorical flourish of assertions like—'But is language "meaning or is it some material object"? Is it a form of transcendental energy of a purely social institution? Or is it all of these at once?'—could just be brushed away with no more than impatience. But for a survey of languages, surely the answer is of crucial importance as an instruction to what is to be described, and at what level, using what tools. But such clarity is nowhere to be found in this volume, because even though Devy concludes that language is a social institution, we are left none the wiser as to what this actually means in terms of what the survey will deliver.

This definitional infirmity has profound consequences for the way what the *PLSI* achieves—there is a mystifying variability and unevenness in its output volume—while some researchers employ a Grierson-lite model of purely linguistic description, others record (ironically) simple songs and folklore and their translations. There is little consistency or uniformity in the former however, since the system of a word-to-word translation as formalised by Grierson a hundred years ago, and therefore unlikely to be useful in the creation of teaching materials, one of the aims of the *PLSI*.

Surprisingly, some of the most repeated concerns that Devy addresses in this first volume—the issue of script and literary composition—are not systematically addressed in the study of all the languages. Some descriptions devote a lot of space to exposing regional variation (= dialects), others not at all. Another goal, preservation of the 'names of speech communities, their origin myths, history, folktales and folksongs, vocabulary, and customary laws and practices' is also not met by all the descriptions. Of the volumes I have examined closely, Vol. 27, Part II *The Languages of Tamil Nadu* is perhaps the most comprehensive in this regard, but I am uncertain of how much it actually will contribute to realising any of the goals of the *PLSI*. It certainly is useful for the state's census of languages, as it contains good descriptions of the grammars, ethnolinguistics and social and cultural products of the minority languages of the state.

Is the *PLSI* a complete disaster? No. Even in their unevenness and lack of clarity, the volumes being published record instances of the articulation of India's minority languages and thus will be always a point of reference. But is it a replacement of Grierson's *LSI*? An emphatic no.

Note

1. http://censusindia.gov.in/2011Census/Language_MTs.html

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