

SUNITI KUMAR CHATTERJI AND BANGLA GRAMMAR*

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1

The evolution of ideas does not always follow a straight, simple course. One idea does not end on a certain day, terminating its life convincingly, nor does another idea begin right away thereafter. There are overlaps and great works often situate themselves in such overlapping spaces. I would say that Suniti Kumar Chatterji's *The Origin and Development of the Bengali Language* (1926), his *magnum opus*, is such a work. It is somewhat anachronistic, as historical and comparative linguistics, of which it is one of the finest specimens, was officially given a farewell more than a decade earlier, in the teachings of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). I don't know if Suniti Kumar was aware of Saussure's book (organized by his students) *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (1916) when it was first published in French. He must have read it later, by which I mean, during or after his expansive research on the historical evolution of Bangla was done. Even if he had an early exposure to Saussure's theories, that could scarcely detract him out of his chosen course, which was to write a definitive history of Bangla. Therefore, *ODBL* stands as a great and glorious anachronism in the history of linguistic ideas, harking back an earlier idea, but one that has enriched the science of linguistics.

The above prefacing is to point at another widely but wrongly held belief that historical and structural linguistics, the so-called 'diachronic' and 'synchronic' studies of language, stand poles apart of each other and there is hardly any common ground between the two. On the contrary, there is a lot to share and exchange. Unless one has a sound knowledge of the structure of a language, one cannot write its history, which has to deal with the sounds, morphs, syntagms located at appropriate levels of the language. Hence a thorough knowledge of the structure of the language is a precondition in the writing of the history of the same. All our historians of language, like, Suniti Kumar Chatterji, Sukumar Sen, Md. Shahidullah, Bijay Chandra Majumdar and others—had a notion of how the language, especially its standard variety, was organized at the appropriate levels. And it is the same structure that goes into making a grammar. Although there are various kinds of grammar according to the orientation of the linguist and the use and target audience assigned to the grammar (Sarkar 2005/2013:25-59) the structure of the language will act as the foundation stone of any grammar that one can imagine.

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Apart from *ODBL*, Suniti Kumar wrote two ‘grammars’, of Bangla. One is his *Bengali Self-Taught* (1927), which was written primarily for non-native learners of the language, and the other is his Bangla work *Bhasha-Prakash Bangala Vyakaran* (1939, *BPBV* henceforward). The target audiences were not the same for the two, hence their nature and scope were predictably different. His *Bengali Phonetic Reader* (1928), a reworking on his more linguistically oriented ‘Bengali Phonetics’ published in *JOSOAS* (1921), contains rudiments of phonology of the language, but this has been repeated and further elaborated in his Bangla grammar later. His *Bengali Self-Taught*, contains an “Outline of Grammar” (pp. 110-144) of course. But the “Outline” is somewhat sketchy, in which the section on syntax occupies about two pages. Bangla vocabulary enjoys the largest share in terms of pages. This was only to be expected, as the book was avowedly meant for a non-Bengali non-specialist audience, and its contents were dictated by the specific needs of that audience. We will not go into the issue whether or how satisfactorily it has been able to fulfill these needs. This sparse outline has also found elaboration later in his *BPBV*. Therefore, we will, focus mostly on his Bangla grammar in order to look for his ideas about how the language is organized, and refer back and forth to his *ODBL* for a comparison. We will see the areas of mismatch between the two and will also look for the factors that lead to this mismatch.

If one goes over the contents of his *BPBV*, one will first of all face the fact that the book does not aim at teaching the spoken language alone. This is somewhat surprising, as the term “Bhasha-Prakash” would have prompted one to believe that the book was meant to bring out the tacit rules that operate in Bangla (by Bangla, we mean the so-called Standard Colloquial Bengali [SCB], in its spoken version). I’m afraid many people still believe that *BPBV* was written as a ‘Khanti Bangla Vyakaran’ (pure Bengali grammar). This phrase refers back to what was repeatedly uttered by the discussants of the issue in a seminar in 1901, held at Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, which debated the necessity or propriety or writing a ‘Khanti Bangla Vyakaran’ (Mishra 1987). Unfortunately, this was not the case. While acknowledging its merits, we will discuss why it was not meant to be one.

From the late years of the nineteenth century, with the advent of the ‘direct method’ of language teaching, the spoken tongue has been foregrounded as a learning target. This was one of the reasons behind the creation of the International Phonetic Alphabet, first promulgated in 1888, which was to provide the correct pronunciation of the sounds of the language to be learned. ‘La methode direct’ was a term created by Paul Passy, one of the leading forces behind the formation of IPA. Suniti Kumar, one of the greatest phoneticians that India has ever produced, was not unaware of this. He himself was

instrumental in providing IPA versions of Bangla texts for the International Phonetic Association. His book on Bangla phonetics, one would notice, incorporates part of its phonology too.

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When, however, we look at the contents of *BPBV*, we find that the book has been written from a much wider point of view rather than merely presenting a description of the spoken standard. Lessons about the older written dialect of Bangla take up considerable space in this book. Sections 1.2 to 1.44 of Chapter 1 (Praveshaka) deal with subjects like “Bhasha likhan” (writing of the language), “Sahityer Bhasha O Chalita Bhasha” (Literary and the spoken standard “Bangala Sadhu-Bhasha O Chalita Bhasha” (Chaste Bengali and Standard Colloquial Bengali and “Bangala Sadhu, Chalita O Pradeshik Bhashar Nidarshan” (Samples of Bangla Chaste, Standard Colloquial and Regional Dialects).

So, at the very outset, we are made clearly aware that Suniti Kumar does not intend this book to be a ‘descriptive’ grammar of the Standard Colloquial Spoken dialect of Bangla, but plans it, instead, as a school grammar, as dictated by the prescribed syllabus of the University (which no doubt he himself had a hand in formulating). In the background remains the fact that the University of Calcutta was to introduce Bangla medium for the school subjects in 1940, a year later than the book was published; hence the study of Bangla as a subject in the higher classes of secondary schools and early years of colleges, also needed to be reinforced. A comprehensive grammar of the language that would cover both the written and the spoken standard was the cry of the day, and who else but Suniti Kumar had the competence to respond to that call ?

This makes us look back and ruminate on the lively debate that was carried on in the precincts of Vangiya Sahitya Parishad some thirty eight years earlier (Mishra 1987 and Das 2000 (1407 BE): 293-298), which we have mentioned above. The call was for writing what is called a “Khanti Bangla Vyakaran” (Real Bangla Grammar). Not all the participants in this clamorous debate possessed the same idea about what “Khanti Bangla” really meant, or what such a grammar would contain, as descriptive or structural linguistics was still an idea in its embryo, but some, like Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Haraprasad Shastri (1853-1931) and Ramendra Sundar Trivedi (1864-1919) had remarkable insights about what the shape of such a grammar would take. They felt that the threat to a “Khanti” Bangla grammar was the dominance of Sanskrit grammatical notions, the model of which was widely followed, and often those of English too, as Shastri said, on the production of Bengali school grammars. They felt that these ‘foreign’ influences hindered the discovery of the ‘real’ Bangla language, as it has evolved over

the century, moving away from its distant predecessor and in consequence, assuming a distinct identity of its own.

It is rather surprising that although it was Suniti Kumar, who most definitely showed Bangla's deviation from Sanskrit, he did not come forward to write a "Khanti Bangla Vyakaran" or a descriptive grammar of Bangla. This is not to say that he did not know what such a grammar would show. By the time he came to write *BPBV*, the idea of Descriptive Grammar was available, as he himself records in his grammar (p. 11). Due to various constraints, which we will mention presently, he did not confine himself in writing a descriptive grammar of Bangla, but proceeded to write a 'school grammar' instead, that would teach the student various rules of writing the language, the history of these rules, and the dialects he brought under consideration was not the spoken standard alone, but the older written dialect (Sadhu Bhasha or Chaste Bangla), along with the spoken ones. This we mention repeatedly, as *BPBV* is still (wrongly) perceived by many as the first descriptive grammar of standard spoken Bangla. It was not and it was never meant to be one.

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What were the constraints that hindered his writing such a grammar? The answer to that is, first, his predominantly historical orientation, which prompted him to put a segment of the history of the language in the proposed grammar. That is why, in the Phonology Chapter (Chapter 2), he incorporated diachronic rules like 'svara-bhakti' or 'viprakarsha', 'apinihiti' and 'abhishruti', 'y-shruti' and 'w-shruti' (2.711[1], 2.714 [4], 2.715 [5] and 2.716 [6]) respectively. These are historical rules, not any longer productive or synchronic rules in the SCB dialect of the language, as their outputs have become part of the living vocabulary of the language, and their inputs or sources have been left behind, as things of the past. For example, svara-bhakti gives '*dhOrom*' from '*dhOrmo*' or '*dOrod*' from Pers. '*dard*'. '*dhOrom*' and '*dhOrmo*' now belong to two (historical) dialects of the language, and one cannot replace the other in the same linguistic context. And '*dard*' is not a part of Bangla vocabulary at all. In accepting loanwords from other languages, Bangla speakers often break up the consonant clusters of the words they borrow. This is a feature of the [+native] phonology of SCB. This is how Sanskrit or 'tatsama' loanwords have become 'ardha-tatsama', and I think similar treatment to other foreign words (those from English, Persian etc.) should also be called 'ardha tatsamas'. The rule, however, does not operate at the SCB dialect now, nor do those of apinihiti and abhishruti, which are Suniti Kumar's own nomenclatures. Apinihiti, of course, is still functional in several non-standard dialects of Bangla.

Abhishruti has further problems. It has been shown as a two-step rule (the derivation *rakhiya* > *reikhya* > *rekhe* would give us such an impression), but it is a combination of

several rules, which has not been shown in its full elaboration. Sarkar (2006 : 100-106) has discussed this and shown that compressing of several rules in such a manner lacks explanatory power and does not claim validity any more. *Rakhiya* becomes *raikhya* by apinihiti in the first leg of the change. Then svvara-samgati (the so-called ‘vowel harmony’) makes it *raikhye*. I believe, in most cases, change is initiated from the end of the word, as Bangla words have, as a rule, an initial stress, which makes the rest of the word weaker in comparison. The anaptyctic /i/ was then made a glide, by another gliding rule. Next, a glide deletion, (the first one in such cases), steps in to remove ‘y’ and the form becomes *raykhe*. Now it is the turn of svvara samgati again that turns it into *reykhe*. Finally, the [i] that was given by ‘apinihiti’ and was made a glide [i > y] is deleted, giving the ultimate form *rekhe*. This complex and step-by-step derivation could not be captured by the way Suniti Kumar and others had given them. It of course has to be said in Suniti Kumar’s favour that the notion of feeding chains of rules (i.e., rules operating one after another to produce a final form) has been noted much later, in Chomsky and Halle’s formulation of generative phonology around 1968, than when Suniti Kumar was working, and he had to do with much simpler tools of historical linguistics then available. We may show the above process of change in the following manner:

1. *rakhiya* > *raikhya* by apinihiti
2. *raikhya* > *raikhye* by vowel harmony or VHA
3. *raikhye* > *raikhe* by a glide deletion rule
4. *raikhe* > *reikhe* by another VHA
5. *reikhe* > *rekhe* by another glide deletion rule.

I have skipped the steps in which a vowel becomes a glide, in order to be deleted by the glide deletion rule. Still, even when thus simplified, there should be at least five rules to derive *rekhe* from *rakhiya*. So Abhishruti does not indicate the full process in which the changes occurred.

At the end of the Chapter, a section on ‘Chanda’ (metrics) finds a place. Once again, it goes to show that what Suniti Kumar had in mind was to aid the student in his/her study of literature, as poetry had a large share in the syllabus. This removes his grammar further away from the norm of a descriptive grammar of “Khanti Bangla”, as it is perceived by some of us.

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The Morphology Chapter (Chapter 3) begins with the notion of the word, and does not utilize the idea of ‘morph’ that was prescribed in Leonard Bloomfield’s *Language* (1933). I don’t think that should be held against Suniti Kumar, as the analysis of morphs (the so-called ‘bound morphs’ in particular) is there, and it is the most fully worked out chapter of his grammar. His determination of suffixes is brilliant as an exercise. But

here too, we find that a lot of Sanskrit grammar has found its entry, what Haraprasad Shastri would have called unlawful entry. In his article 'Bangla Vyakaran' (Shastri 1956), he had prescribed that no Sanskrit Sandhi words were needed to be taught to a Bengali student (Sarkar 1992 : 41-42). What was needed instead was to give the student the full word with its contextual meanings. As 'Samasa' words were also mostly Sandhi words, this dictum was applicable to them also by implication. Bangla sandhi, (mostly incidents of assimilation) was treated by him, as by other grammarians following his lead, rather cursorily. Unfortunately, extensive inclusion of Sanskrit Sandhi and Samasa rules in his Phonology and Morphology chapters has created and encouraged a rigid trend, one could say almost a religious one, in the writing of Bangla school grammars, and no body of syllabus-makers can think in terms of doing away with it, heeding to what Shastri said. The practice continues to reign in the grammatical texts, compelling the students to go through rote learning. That theorizing about Samasa in Sanskrit was not free of gross anomalies, as has been shown by Das (Sarkar, ed. 2003), has not yet been properly taken note of by writers of Bangla school grammars or syllabus formulators.

In the same Morphology chapter he once again distinguishes Sadhu and Chalita forms of verbs and pronouns. In doing so, he had the written Sadhu dialect in mind, as he was certain that a lot of Bangla literary text that the learner would read would be in Sadhu Bhasha, and hence the grammar of Sadhu Bhasha would have to be taught to the students, alongside that of Chalita Bhasha. The treatment of 'case' follows the Sanskrit model, but in spite of that, it captures many features of the language. In the discussion of Bangla conjugation again, forms of Sadhu Bhasha are not ignored. I have some problem with the notion of 'Avyaya' (indeclinables), which I have elaborated in Sarkar (2006 : 125-135). I have suggested that 'Avyaya' as a word category, should not be maintained in Bangla grammar. As treated by Suniti Kumar, the category includes disparate classes of items, hence its postulation, following Sanskrit grammar, is not theoretically sound.

The Chapter on syntax is predictably short, as syntax as an area of study was not then focused or emphasized. Suniti Kumar gives a sensible account of how sentences are formed in Bangla. The Appendix contains a section on metrics once again, which accepts the terminology of Amulyadhan Mukhopadhyay (1939). Later metrical researches have shown that Prabodh Chandra Sen (Sen, 1986) had a better insight into the nature of Bangla meters. The Appendix also contains sections on Semantics, (poetic) figures of speech, blemishes that crop up in writing, and comparisons of Bangla grammar with those of Sanskrit, English, Hindi/Urdu, Persian and Arabic ones, which was no doubt meant for scholars, as students would hardly need the knowledge in order to understand Bangla. Here the polyglot Suniti Kumar shows his admirable sweep over a vast number

of languages, but, unfortunately, goes much beyond what a school grammar should usually contain.

6

Why *Bhasha-Prakash* could not become the first descriptive grammar of Bangla? The answer to this question should be clear by now. There were highly promising attempts by none other than Rabindranath Tagore, as his articles in *Bangla Shabdattwa* (1909/1985) has shown, including his book *Bangla Bhasha Parichay* (1938), which was dedicated to Suniti Kumar, and these provided excellent directions. Suniti Kumar was the first linguist to acknowledge Tagore's contribution to the study of Bengali (historical) grammar, in his Preface of *ODBL* (p. xvi). He also disparagingly mentions the previous Bengali school grammars as "elaborate grammars of Sanskrit masquerading as Bengali grammar" (*ibid.* p. xv). Why then didn't he follow these Tagore models and improve upon them? The answer is clear: he worked within the constraints of history and his self-chosen personal role in it. He could break these constraints, but he preferred not to. He had to write a grammar for the new Calcutta University syllabus of Bengali in the Matriculation examination. This Bengali contained of written corpus, far removed from the spoken standard. The syllabus had poetry (in the Bengali poetical dialect), prose mostly in Sadhu Bhasha, some of which were highly Sanskritized, so his grammar had to take notice of the written Bengali then prescribed as a reading material for the Bengali student. Spoken standard was not, in any sense, his frame of reference at that point of time. We are sure that he himself had a commanding role in the formulation of the syllabus, and there was no one beside him who could write a grammar that the new syllabus needed. His scholarly orientation was historical, so the history of the language has encroached into many areas of the grammar, and his attention to literary texts distracted him away from the spoken dialect. As we all know, till then a grammar was written mainly for the study of the literary language, and a language that had no literature was either considered not to have a grammar of its own, or not needing a written grammar. Although Standard Colloquial Bangla was fast emerging as a language of literature by the time Suniti Kumar was writing this grammar, the major and most highly regarded part of the literature was in Sadhu Bhasha and he felt its overarching pressure while writing his school grammar. It must also be noted that most of Suniti Kumar's Bangla writing was in Sadhu Bhasha, his books in the Chalita are conspicuously few. Sadhu Bhasha, for him as for many others, was the academic register and his grammar bears witness to this historical fact, both in form and content.

It may be noted in conclusion that a descriptive grammar of SCB has been published under the editorship of Islam and the present speaker, (Islam and Sarkar 2012) by Bangla Academy, Dhaka. The book is fully descriptive in its objective, and focuses on the

spoken standard Bangla. The first volume deals with the structure of the language, and the second provides various other perspectives to look at it. The editors haven't claimed that this was the ultimate grammar of SCB, but it should hopefully provide a stable ground on which better descriptive grammars of SCB can be built up, following its lead, as well as rejecting all, or part of, its postulations.

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