

ANVITA ABBI, with technical assistance from Karen Buseman, and with a foreword by Christopher Moseley (2012) *Dictionary of the Great Andamanese Language: English - Great Andamanese - Hindi*. (with CD) Delhi: Ratna Sagar; pp. lxx + 480. ISBN 978-93-5036-125-2.

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With the death of its last fluent speaker, the Bo language, one of the ten Great Andamanese languages, became extinct in January 2010. Boa Sr. had lived on the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal her whole life, surviving not only the devastating tsunami of 2004 by climbing a tree, but enduring the many waves of foreign invasion and disease that preceded it.

Boa Sr.'s language was beyond doubt of great antiquity and contributed to our ever deepening understanding of humanity's linguistic heritage. The story of her passing was covered by most of the world's major press organisations and wire services, catapulting her life—and the wider issue of language endangerment with which it is associated—into the global limelight for a full news cycle.

From 2005, along with the few other remaining fluent speakers of Great Andamanese, Boa Sr. began a collaboration with Anvita Abbi, professor of linguistics at Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi. The plan was to document not only their critically endangered speech forms but also the cultural, historical and ecological knowledge both encoded in and transmitted by these languages. While the deaths of Boa Sr. and Nao Jr. are great losses—personal and scientific—a comprehensive digital audio, visual and textual archive of their voices is now available for future generations, all thanks to the partnership that they initiated.

Few linguists have the opportunity to make a lasting contribution to their field, or to use the platform of their seniority to connect their deep knowledge to a wider audience. Fewer still take such an opportunity by the horns, leveraging a fleeting moment of global visibility to articulate the importance and collaboration that underpins their work. Anvita Abbi is such a scholar, and her magnificent *Dictionary of the Great Andamanese Language* is but one of many significant publications that emerged from this lasting collaboration with speakers of Great Andamanese languages.

Dictionaries are notoriously difficult to review. Even when robustly interpreted, a review of a dictionary runs the risk of being little more than a tedious discussion of lexical items and word choice. In order to avoid this trap, and out of respect for the creativity of this unusually unique document, this review focuses as much on the process as it does the final product of the dictionary.

Readers of this journal will need no reminding that the creation of a dictionary is an inherently collaborative act. Of the various elements that comprise the spectrum of language documentation, the compilation of a lexicon lends itself most readily to being pursued in a genuinely cooperative manner. While studies of grammar, verbal morphology and phonology may appear somewhat abstract to many mother tongue speakers of endangered languages who have no

training in linguistics, the process of (as well as the critical need for) collecting words is often more self-evident.

In fact, unlike grammatical analysis for which training in linguistics is a must and not being a native speaker of the language may even be an advantage, in the collection and compilation of a word list or lexicon, a mother tongue language speaker—regrettably still referred to as an ‘informant’ by so many linguists—is often at a distinct advantage. He or she invariably knows more words than the fieldworker does, and has a more complete vocabulary of the language at his or her disposal. The task of the linguist is then to uncover, compare and segment the lexical items which are collected from interviews and elicitations, and construct a lexicon out of these semantically meaningful units. Acknowledging that lexicographical work is an aspect of linguistic fieldwork that lends itself to partnership with community members, linguists increasingly choose to co-author dictionaries with their language teachers and in collaboration with native speakers of endangered languages (see Turin 2004 for a more complete discussion of this practice).

In this ground-breaking *Dictionary of the Great Andamanese Language*, Anvita Abbi acknowledges her debt to the communities of speakers with whom she has worked since 2001. While none of the living or deceased speakers of Great Andamanese languages are credited as co-authors, Abbi is explicit about her commitment to their plight and articulates the deep respect on which the work is predicated. Abbi refers to the late Nao Jr. as ‘an invisible co-author of this book’ (p. xv) and dedicates the entire work to the Great Andamanese People. The community, their voices, faces, names and narratives are present throughout the work, helping the reader remember at all points that this multilingual dictionary is no rarefied object, disconnected from the speakers who sung it into life and further alienated from them in print and digital form, but rather a cooperation that evolved as a practical response to the histories, hopes and struggles of individuals with names and distinct personalities.

Turning to the structure and substance of the book, the *Dictionary of the Great Andamanese Language* is well conceived and refreshingly transparent. The opening ‘Foreword’ by Christopher Moseley is elegantly formulated and engagingly written. Moseley sets the tone for the ‘interlingual dictionary’ that follows, introducing Abbi’s achievement and her dogged commitment to respectful documentation. He notes, quite rightly, that the potential readership of the dictionary is immense, including botanists, zoologists and ornithologists as well as linguists, anthropologists and interested laymen. Abbi’s approach to multimodality—conscripting sound, image and web tools to communicate her work—makes the dictionary just the beginning of her textured documentation of Great Andamanese. In addition, Moseley flags an important, and unconventional, aspect of the work: the dictionary is a synthesis of a series of closely related speech forms. Such multilingual representation involves considerable thought about lexical choice, variation and orthography on the part of the author and her research team, a point to which we will return momentarily.

Abbi’s ‘Preface’ stands alone as a document that can—and will—be used for teaching in our field. Her passionate advocacy for the plight of the Andamanese islanders, and her urgent call to collect, protect and connect their speech forms will inspire even the most cautious reader. This is, as she notes, the first ever attempt to compile a multilingual dictionary of the Great Andamanese language. And it is also likely to be the most comprehensive work, if not the very last, on account of the severely endangered nature of the language. According to the latest genetic research that Abbi cites and returns to in a later section of the book, the Andamanese are believed to be the descendants of the earliest Paleolithic colonizers of South East Asia, and the survivors of the first

migration from Africa that took place 70,000 years ago. For this reason alone, these languages have a significance far out of proportion to their contemporary speaker numbers.

When Abbi started her research project, there were only nine fluent speakers of Great Andamanese in the community. At present, Great Andamanese is no longer used as a common everyday vernacular, but rather functions as a code language that is used in the presence of outsiders (and spoken for visiting linguists who are interested in its structure). Abbi is careful to point out that Great Andamanese is really a generic term representing a number of speech forms in a family of languages once spoken by the ten different tribes living in the north, south and middle of the Great Andaman Islands. Present-day Great Andamanese is thus a mixture of four northern varieties, with the language represented in the dictionary drawing its lexical stock from Jeru, Khora, Bo and Sare. Over time, on account of relocation and resettlement programs initiated by the Government of India, North Andamanese tribes have intermarried widely. The Great Andamanese language is the linguistic product of these, often brutal, programmes of assimilation. Whether Great Andamanese therefore constitutes a single language or a cluster of tightly integrated speech forms can be debated, but Abbi should be congratulated for addressing these issues head on and documenting the “inter-community variation” in a manner that is at once careful and appropriate.

Addressing cognition and culture, Abbi makes a compelling case for what is lost along with sounds and words when languages die. This correlation is one that linguists and anthropologists have attempted to articulate over the years, tying a community’s social practice to their speech form. Rather ingeniously, Abbi inverts the directionality of the association: “our research indicates that the gradual destruction of the ecological environment in the Andaman Islands has led to the loss of vocabulary in Great Andamense” (p. xiii). Drawing on a particularly rich ornithological lexicon and citing folk tales that tell of humans becoming birds, Abbi invokes the perceptual criteria of the Great Andamanese along with their “ancient world of cognition” to illustrate the importance of learning from indigenous peoples and their languages.

Abbi is also to be commended for her comprehensive description of fieldwork conditions and being clear about the practical challenges involved in seeing such a project through to completion. She cheerfully describes her first research trip in December 2001 as “not easy” (p. xix), something of an understatement for a journey that included dodging crocodiles, snakes and mangrove roots. Fieldwork was beset by difficulties, natural and political: the main period of research took place between 2005 and 2009, and involved visits to the post-tsunami relief camp. The inclusion of such details are of particular importance for linguists-in-training who may be excused for imagining (and perhaps even quietly hoping) that linguistic fieldwork occurs only at ideal socio-cultural intervals, in relaxed and peaceful villages with optimal recording conditions. The reality, as Abbi illustrates, is that much fieldwork on critically endangered languages takes place in moments of great upheaval, transformation and community stress. Abbi embodies the flexibility that makes good linguists into great fieldworkers, and is refreshingly candid about the “threatening attitude” displayed by a number of local officials that led to some of her research assistants leaving the field site. It is clear that the challenges that bedevil field projects can be as much political and social as they are practical, requiring sophisticated interpersonal skills and an endless supply of optimism to overcome.

Helpfully, Abbi raises another important aspect of contemporary fieldwork: the possibility for relationships with research partners to continue after the linguist leaves the field site through phone conversations (thanks to widespread mobile networks) and even digitally-mediated elicitation sessions (through Skype or email exchanges, see Turin 2013 for a discussion of

technology in language documentation). Abbi argues, and I would concur, that the partnership between a linguist and language speakers must be based on mutual respect and long-term trust, both of which are necessary for complex projects of this kind to succeed. Offering excellent examples of how trust can be built and sustained over time, Abbi takes the position that good fieldwork is as much about process as end result: “By this time, documenting the language had become a joint project of the Great Andamanese tribe and mine.”

One of the most interesting sections of the dictionary deals with the hybrid nature and changing name of the language under discussion. Abbi takes a second pot shot at inconsiderate administrators, who through census enumeration and other classificatory tools regularly pressure communities into self-identifying and reporting themselves under an officially recognised name that diverges from the indigenous endonym: the community initially “all called themselves ‘Jero/Jeru’ ... because some government official had instructed them to report this when asked about their mother tongue by an outsider” (p. xxiii-xxiv). At present, however, “because the current language is an admixture of three or four North Andamanese languages”, Abbi uses the term Great Andamanese as a “cover term, not empowering any one particular language to dominate as a reference marker” (p. xxiv). The languages of the Great Andamanese tribes can therefore be said to form a “linguistic continuum”, with each speech form closely related to the neighbouring language on either side, with those at the extreme ends of the geographical spectrum essentially mutually unintelligible.

Noting that a pronounced feature of contemporary Great Andamanese is the “levelling of different linguistic systems,” Abbi is skilled at making a virtue out of a necessity: “the speakers did not hail from the same linguistic group...[and] intermarriages among the members had created the ideal situation of language being mixed and of bilingual mixtures.” While the approach is masterful, Abbi may in the process have compiled a dictionary of a speech form that until recently never existed in this form—a linguistic admixture that is paradoxically both highly archaic and strangely modern at once.

It is notoriously difficult to compile a phonological and grammatical sketch of a heavily eroded language, and harder still to do for a koiné. Given these challenges, the section on grammar is admirably crafted. Great Andamanese is a head-marking polysynthetic and agglutinative language with two types of nouns: dependent and non-dependent. Possessive constructions are particularly intriguing, involving ethno-semantic categories that relate to the relation between the possessor and the possessed. Aside from the semantic typology for the categorization of body parts, Great Andamanese is noted for the “ambivalence of several grammatical categories,” namely: “a phonological word can serve as a noun, modifier or a verb, depending upon the word order or morphological terminations” (p. lxii).

Making use of a dictionary of this complexity can be daunting for the uninitiated. Thankfully, Abbi and her team have made the tool as user friendly and transparent as can be hoped. Lexical entries are sophisticated and comprehensive, including headwords, Great Andamanese word in IPA and in Devanagari (particularly useful for speakers of Indian languages), associated explanatory images, morphological breaks, etymologies, variations in pronunciation, the source of the term, often related sound files, clearly labelled part of speech, robust definitions, scientific names (when known), sample sentences and examples, semantic domains and useful cross references. The lexical entries themselves reveal something of the challenges that the community regularly faces, such as terms to describe ‘accumulated water’, which will be of no surprise for an area ravaged by a tsunami.

As a user, I was not entirely convinced by the inclusion of grammatical forms and morphemes in the dictionary alongside more standard nouns and verbs. For example, when ‘clitics’ and ‘first singular subject’ are included in the lexicon, the user would be forgiven for thinking that Great Andamanese boasts a word for the concept and not just a morpheme denoting the specific grammatical relationship. On a related note, while the many figures, maps and appendices are helpful additions—and excellent images accompany most entries on birds—at other times the colour images are less useful. Since the *Dictionary of the Great Andamanese Language* was not primarily intended as a community resource, the rationale for including images of an ‘Adam’s apple’ or ‘back (noun, of a human)’ was unclear. Some photos are so small that it is not clear what we are looking at (cf. ‘bee, small’: p. 18), while others appear to have been downloaded from the web (cf. ‘bat’, ‘cat’) which makes them less culturally relevant and interesting. Such photos can of course simply be dismissed as a pleasant distraction, but they do risk drawing attention away from the more substantive work that the dictionary represents.

The *Dictionary of the Great Andamanese Language* includes valuable sections on time measuring, calendrical systems, names, colour terms and toponyms, and concludes with excellent appendices covering semantic domains and scientific names, as well as a short bibliography. This reviewer was particularly moved by the book of letters and photographs of speakers which Abbi saw fit to include. Lest the reader think that these 500 pages are the end of the story, we must recall that “this is an interactive dictionary with sound files and pictures” (p. xxii), all housed online <<http://www.andamanese.net>> through a website which was launched in 2006 and is home to 44 songs, a narration, photos and additional sociolinguistic information. In addition, given that not all potential readers are in the position to purchase this book, it is particularly commendable that the author has hosted sections of the Grammar and Dictionary online for free, for all.

Overall, this is a monumental and epic work. Abbi is a sparkling communicator, melding passion with the intellectual rigour of her discipline to create a document that is compelling and refreshing. But it is her skill as a story teller that shines through: Abbi recalls the moment that Nao Jr. began to remember a story in his own language, a painfully slow process of unlearning and recovery. The result was a powerful narrative that had been dormant for some time. While the voices of the Great Andamanese are indeed vanishing, they have found in their last breaths a partner who will ensure that they are neither silenced nor forgotten. The Great Andamanese language may be dying, but its speakers have found a committed spokesperson.

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