

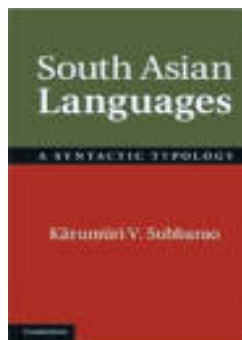
Book Reviews

South Asian Language: A Syntactic Typology.

By Kârumûri V. Subbârão (2012).

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (400 pages)

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South Asian Languages: A Syntactic Typology by K. V. Subbârão promises to be a very significant milestone in the linguistic exploration and study of South Asian Languages in general, and the Indian Sub-continent in particular. The book is an outcome of three decades of dedicated and focused investigation on these languages by the author using primary data. In the book, the author very closely traverses four genetically distinct language families with around sixty representative languages, all spoken in the sub-continent. It is perhaps the first of its kind with such a wide variety of data and close syntactic analysis. Languages of this region comprise four genetically distinct language families—Indo-Aryan Language Families; Dravidian Language Families; Tibeto-Burman Language Families; and Austro-Asiatic Language Families with two sub-families, Mon-Khmer and Munda. Out of these four families, the author has studied sixty languages which form a comprehensive database for a large investigation.

Drawing on the modular approach of the Government and Binding Theory in terms of Government, Binding, C-command, Control, Case, etc., the author skilfully examines these modules in the context of the subjected sixty languages from four genetically distinct language

families in the Indian sub-continent, and projects these generalizations to a wider spectrum of South Asian Languages. Languages differ from each other in terms of a finite set of parameters. As Chomsky (1975) puts it, as a general principle, a language belongs to “the Universal Grammar (UG) as part of ‘pre-existent’ knowledge that makes learning possible (p. 118)”. The volume examines the principle of South Asian Languages in terms of the UG and the parameters (variations) in syntax and morphology that make them distinct from each other. It focuses on the syntactic typology of South Asian Languages in general and a high degree of syntactic convergence in particular with special reference to the notion of ‘India as a Linguistic Area’ (Emeneau, 1956; Masica, 1976).

Chomsky’s response (1975) to the behaviourist model triggered a fundamental shift in the linguistic paradigm with multiple implications for a theoretical explanation thereafter. Since then there has been a steady progress towards substantial accuracy in linguistic predictability and language generalizations. The Government and Binding Theory (Chomsky, 1981, 1982, 1986a, 1986b) and subsequent developments have proved to be the most effective and robust model of syntactic analysis with its modular approach. The data in the volume have been analysed in this modular approach to discuss and demonstrate syntactic nature, convergence and predictions for language contact among South Asian languages. The work identifies deviations in the syntactic properties of these languages in a theory neutral way, and tries to explain them in the theoretical construct of the Government and Binding framework. The author builds upon the seminal work by Emeneau (1956), Masica (1976), Schiffman & Shapiro (1981), and Subbarao (2007), and provides a very

comprehensive and inclusive perspective on the syntactic typology of these languages from the region. The study extends the notion of 'India as a Linguistic Area' to entire South Asia as a Linguistic Area with logical reasoning and empirical data.

All the eight chapters together provide a comprehensive idea about syntactic characteristics, typological features and distinctiveness of languages of the South Asian region in general and the Indian Sub-continent in particular. The most significant contribution of this study is that it comes as a fundamental study on a large scale, with primary data on four distinct language families spread over the region. The study brings out a number of distinctive syntactic features with elaborate theoretical analysis and close observation. The inferences drawn in the volume provide researchers with many theoretical implications to the established research findings in the field suggesting a new and inclusive expansion of the paradigm.

Finally, this volume is a tribute by the author to the discipline he has been active in for over four decades, and is handy for all researchers in the field as a ready reference with immense potential to review and examine some very pertinent issues identified, discussed and underlined about the languages and language families of the region. Undoubtedly, this volume is an academic accomplishment and remains a challenging agenda for all researchers and academicians working in this discipline.

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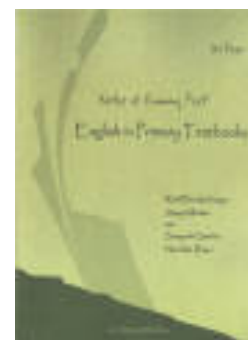
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Sur Pipa: English in Primary Textbooks

Rimli Bhattacharya & Anuja Madan with Sreyoshi Sarkar and Nivedita Basu (2012). Eklavya Publications, Bhopal



Let's Move Beyond Textbooks

It is axiomatic to equate children with noise. Left unsupervised by the teacher, the noise level in a classroom full of students can disturb lessons being conducted in

the neighbouring classrooms. As a child, the most often heard admonishment from teachers and adults was, “Don’t make noise”.

Let us imagine a scenario. Picture a noisy classroom. As the teacher you quietly enter and sit on one of the empty desks along with the students. After a while you are able to discern that the ‘noise’ is actually polyphony of parallel conversations. You gather the threads of a couple of conversations, amongst the many that are taking place in your immediate vicinity. You listen in and intervene; students generously include you in the conversation you choose to enter. You are a deft conversationalist and so are able to integrate ideas, themes and stories into the conversation, picking up connecting threads. The conversation group you are in is now engaging with the thread that you have woven into their conversation. You unobtrusively withdraw from this group, take a prominent position in the class and introduce the theme of that group to all the students and then draw their attention to the lesson in the textbook from which this theme has emerged.

The lesson that this possible though improbable scenario presents is that there is a world of the student that current pedagogical practices do not engage with. Would it not be useful for the teacher, a powerful individual in the context of the classroom, to enter into this world with the agenda of the curriculum manifest through the textbook, rather than to seek to create a new world that bases itself solely on the textbook, and then strives to get children to relate to it?

The book under review, *English in Primary Textbooks* is a rare and welcome attempt to incorporate the field research of actual pedagogical practices in classroom situations into the literature of language teaching in India. It presents the findings of a research project on children’s literature, more specifically on the current set of English textbooks published by the NCERT. This project was undertaken by

researchers teaching English Literature to university students.

When we talk about children’s literature, we often forget that in India, textbooks are the *only* books that most children possess. It is heart-warming that when the researchers behind *English in Primary Textbooks* undertook to do a research project on children’s literature, they chose the current set of English textbooks published by the NCERT. This is especially relevant because these textbooks were published after a comprehensive round of review and analysis that led to the publication of the National Focus Group Position Papers (NFG) and the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) in 2005.

The first section of *English in Primary Textbooks* presents an analysis of the formulation of the policy that guided their work and how it impacted the textbooks. It shows how the textbooks have inadequately captured the essential thrust of the new pedagogical approach articulated in the NFG on English and the NCF.

The second section essentially drives home the point made in the first section, that the textbooks could have been prepared more imaginatively and sensitively. It reviews the books and specifically select lessons are subjected to a microanalysis. The texts chosen for the lessons are written very blandly. Even classics such as the adaptation of Prem Chand’s *Bade Bhaiisaab* (which in the textbook has been unnecessarily retitled as *My Elder Brother* considering the importance given to the multilingual approach in the new policy documents), have been rendered in a monochromatic manner focusing on a single moral lesson to be learnt from the text, rather than a more textured approach that would invite students to participate more actively with their own ‘readings’ or interpretations of the text. The text-based questions lean heavily on testing

comprehension and reading recall. They do not allow students to identify more closely with the text by asking more ‘open-ended questions’, or questions to which each individual student is encouraged to answer in their own way, such that there is no single correct answer.

The first two sections therefore, present the familiar, if slightly depressing story of how even the best policy does not get adequately captured in its implementation. The third section, the most valuable part of the book deals with observing how textbook transactions are conducted in the classroom. In all there are three sets of observations out of which two are constrained by the manner in which teachers dominate the class. In fact in one observation, the teacher in an attempt to correct pronunciation constantly interrupts a Bengali-speaking child who is reading out loud. The third set of observations present a case where the observer is able to participate in the conversations that go on in the class independent of the teacher. The teacher does reprimand the students, but being “visibly anxious about the impression such a situation would have on ‘the observer’, is not particularly harsh to her students.” The observer is therefore able to witness conversations between the students that take the lesson that is being taught in class right into their own lives. The lesson is on Pinocchio and one of the students asks his partner, “*Kal Pinocchio aa raha tha TV pe; tu ne dekha?*” (Did you watch Pinocchio on TV yesterday)? Like in the case of many conversations, this thread trails away and is replaced with a more ‘interesting’ topic. The observer is asked, “*Aap Speed Racer ya Spiderman dekhte ho?*” (Do you watch Speed Racer or Spiderman?). The same student makes a claim that the observer lives in the house above his, and that he has known her since childhood. In fact it is only in this interaction that we witness children communicating with us through the observer showing complete “agency” in their actions.

If in a scenario similar to the imaginary one outlined in the beginning of this review, the textbook is seen as an opening thread to a conversation, or more importantly a contributing thread to an ongoing conversation, we need not be so dependent on its quality. The conversation and the students can soon move beyond the textbook. This is not to say that textbook writers, designers or publishers need to be lax about their job, in fact quite the opposite. Imagine the challenge, the producers of a textbook would face when they think of every reader as a reviewer giving their work a critical reading!

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