On the beauty of Bangla grammar – dissent and exploration
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Priti Kumar Mitra was above all a thinker, a man who was aware of an intellectual history alongside and at the root of change, a scholar who knew that the ideas and visions of individual people are the paving stones of progress. I feel very honoured to be able to contribute some of my own thoughts and ideas to this volume. In the introduction to his book *The Dissent of Nazrul Islam* PK Mitra says: 'Dissent, as understood in this study, is an open-ended disagreement that entails change and new exploration but does not necessarily fix a stop-line.'[1]

My area of study is Bangla grammar and this essay is an attempt to voice some dissent and to point the way towards some new exploration in this field. Becoming a dissenter is a long, slow and tentative process and requires constant re-examination. It requires total immersion in the established system against which the dissent is directed and strict questioning of one's own understanding and thought processes.

As a linguist who has been working on Bangla grammar for almost ten years I can't help being aware that for many educated adult Bengalis[2] Bangla grammar is a difficult, complex and somewhat tortuous topic. In order to change this perception, we need to take a close look at our own attitudes towards the language, towards the teaching of grammar and towards change and progress. The way we teach is a direct reflection of how we ourselves perceive our field. Teaching is simply a way of showing others what we ourselves see.

Part I Dissent

(a) How we see

Bangla grammar, for most Bengalis, is something that is taught in schools and then forgotten about. It has become a mere school subject, and as such it has very little to do with discovering the structure of the Bangla language but everything to do with চর্চা, with practice, with learning something by heart and acquiring certain patterns. Schoolchildren are not supposed to ask why they are being taught grammar and, unfortunately, teachers don't ask why they are teaching it. The result is a rather rigid system which remains in place year after year, decade after decade, and which by its very nature is not open to questioning. Many people have told me that they 'used to be very good at grammar' and by that they mean not they have an aptitude for language structures but that they are able, for instance, to recite the karoks: কর্তা = nominative, কর্ম = accusative, করণ = instrumental, সম্প্রদান = dative, অপাদান = ablative, সম্বন্ধ = genitive, অধিকরণ = locative with all their different, overlapping and numbered, case endings (bibhokti). This is an example of the established school learning method, a way of

[1] Priti Kumar Mitra, *The Dissent of Nazrul Islam,* OUP Delhi 2007, p 10
[2] For the purpose of this article I will use 'Bangla' to refer to the language and 'Bengali' for the adjective বাঙালি and the people of both Bangladesh and West Bengal.

memorising a set of concepts and their interrelationships without questioning their applicability or their relevance. There is, in the study of Sanskrit, a very old tradition of vyākaraṇa carcā, a ritual of recitation of and immersion in the rules of Sanskrit. To some scholars this is an almost sacred duty but is it a meaningful and suitable activity for Bengali schoolchildren today? It is perhaps no wonder that many people come away from this kind of experience with the impression that Bangla grammar is difficult and obscure. Learning about grammar can and should be a journey of discovery, exploration and joy in the beauty of Bangla. This involves a new way of seeing and I will give some suggestions for this further on.

(b) What we see

It has been pointed out many times that Bangla language structures need to be analysed independently of Sanskrit traditions. In response to this modern Bengali linguists have taken a giant leap away from Sanskrit straight into formal Western theories of grammar and are producing meticulous and rigorous analyses of specific language structures. These are highly specialised and, in many cases, tell us more about particular theoretical premises than they do about the language. It is worth wondering whether these formal frameworks are any more fitting for Bangla than the Sanskrit model was. What is more immediately relevant here is that this leap has created an almost unbridgeable divide between linguistic research on the one hand and grammar teaching in schools on the other. Although it is quite understandable that new scientific research is not immediately reflected in what is being taught in schools, both scholars and teachers (including the writers of school books) seem to forget that they are pursuing the same goal, namely a better understanding of Bangla language structures.

School books remain firmly rooted in the Sanskrit tradition, showing the derivations of Bangla words from Sanskrit words and the way words are joined. Sandhi (the merging of adjacent sounds) and Somas (the phonological process of joining two or more words) are two of the main chapters of every grammar book for Bengali school children. Needless to say, these children do not have an inbuilt knowledge of Sanskrit and explaining some particular features of Bangla through Sanskrit makes things complex. The authors of current school books recognise that some of the Sanskrit categories (such as the dual in verb forms and grammatical gender) no longer exist in Bangla but these categories still hover over the whole thing like a ghost who will not rest until we have acknowledged his existence. So what is the underlying principle for this kind of teaching?

In linguistics we distinguish between diachronic (historical) and synchronic analysis. Either of those disciplines offer valid and valuable insights into language but, as an introduction to linguistic thinking, diachronic analysis is very much more intricate than a synchronic approach. Not only does it presuppose an accurate knowledge of older forms of the language, it also requires an acute awareness of how languages change. A historical approach to language is remote from our own, inherent linguistic ability and does not offer Bengali children any practical guidelines for a better understanding or a more competent use of their language. One of our current Western principles of good teaching is to build on what the learner already knows, to start the journey from the

position of the learner. I will give below some examples of how this can be done in the field of Bangla grammar.

(c) What we don't see

Most school books on grammar are divided into two parts: bækoron and rocona. While the rocona parts of these books get more and more elaborate – the latest book[3] contains articles about exam-stress, terrorism in schools and the green house effect – grammatical topics, categories and even the example sentences remain largely unchanged, unquestioned and, in many cases, incomplete or incoherent.[4] Grammar should make language structures visible and comprehensible. Grammar should provide a mould, a shape which fits the Bangla language. If, instead, it has become a rigid, prescriptive system of complex and incomprehensible rules and the joy of discovery is absent then grammarians are failing at their job. They are failing to show the inherent beauty of this language and they are failing to arouse a real interest. Who can get excited at *the king handing out alms with his own hands from the treasury to the poor* to explain the Bangla case system? I have discussed the Bangla case system elsewhere[5], so let us think about some verbal features instead.

Non-finite verb forms (অসমাপিকা) are one of the most pervasive and beautiful features of Bangla sentence structures. In Bangla grammar books these forms are dealt with very briefly, often in no more than one or two sentences, and their most significant feature, apparently, is that they are unable to complete a sentence and therefore need a finite verb form to go with them. This is like defining male human beings in terms of being unable to bear children. There is rather more to non-finite verb forms just as there is more to men. In fact, non-finite verb forms (not unlike men in the propagation of the human species) play a vital role in the structural organisation of Bangla. Without them, Bangla sentences would be lifeless and stale. Just try to imagine the following sentence[6] without its perfective participles and you will see what I mean:

মাঠ পেরিয়ে, প্রান্তর ডিঙিয়ে, দিগন্তের পর দিগন্ত পেছনে ফেলে আসাম মেল দুর্জয় গতিতে ছুটে চলেছে।

Having passed the fields and crossed the wasteland, leaving behind horizon after horizon, the Assam mail train was speeding through the inhospitable landscape.

The perfective participles, precisely because of their non-finite status, create an expectation, a movement and a suspension right from the first verb form to the sentence-final finite verb. The fact that this tension can hold even over the expanse of দিগন্তের পর দিগন্ত is to me an example of the beauty of Bangla grammar. Is this not worth more than a passing mention?

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[3] উচ্চতর স্বনির্ভর বিশুদ্ধ ভাষা শিক্ষা edited by Hayat Mamud, Dhaka 2007

[4] for an example of this see হরলাল রায়, ব্যাকরণ ও রচনা, 10th edition, Dhaka 1995, p 172

[5] Hanne-Ruth Thompson *Panini's Magic: Towards a clearer picture of the Bengali case system* in: Rainbow of Linguistics, Vol 1, Niladri Sekhar Dash, Probal Dasgupta, Pabitra Sarkar (ed), Kolkata 2007

[6] from প্রফুল্ল রায়, অন্য ভুবন, p 7

Young children have a great capacity for learning. They are by nature curious, inquisitive and eager to explore the world around them and, as every teacher knows, seeing a child's eyes light up at a new discovery is a great joy. The element of discovery, of asking questions and of exploration is crucial to a child's learning. However, a serious failure in this process occurs – and I think this has happened with Bangla grammar – when, on the syllabus level, the learning content is detached from the child's own environment.

The typical school book for the teaching of Bangla grammar in Bangladeshi schools at present has the following components:

(a) Bangla phonology
(b) Bangla morphology
(c) historical development of the Bangla language from Sanskrit
(d) differences between shadhu bhasha and colit bhasha
(e) Bangla grammar terminology
(f) Bangla grammatical categories (word classes)
(g) selected semantic features, such as synonyms and antonyms
(h) Bangla verse forms
(i) appreciation of Bangla poetry
(j) composition (rocona)

Clearly, all these topics are taught over a number of years but much of this is remote from the child's own language expertise and experience. In language teaching we have the big advantage over subjects like maths and chemistry that the inherent knowledge of the language is already there. Every six year old Bengali child is a competent speaker of Bangla. This means that we can build on existing skills and encourage children to discover and explore their language in ways which are appropriate to them.

Part II Exploration

(a) exploring grammar

The unease which is felt around the topic of grammar in general and Bangla grammar in particular is the result of a number of misconceptions. Grammar is neither an outdated method of language teaching nor a fixed matrix that languages fit into. In order to understand the relationship between language and grammar, let us take a look at the comparable field of cartography. Here is a quote from Wikipedia:

"Cartography or mapmaking (in Greek *chartis* = map and *graphein* = write) is the study and practice of making representations of the Earth on a flat surface. Cartography combines science, aesthetics, and technical ability to create a balanced and readable representation that is capable of communicating information effectively and quickly.

One problem in creating maps is the simple reality that the surface of the Earth, a curved surface in three-dimensional space, must be represented in two dimensions as a flat surface. This necessarily entails some degree of distortion, which can be dealt with by utilizing projections that minimize distortion in certain areas. Furthermore, the Earth

is not a regular sphere, but its shape is instead known as a geoid, which is a highly irregular but exactly knowable and calculable shape."[7]

The Earth is relatively more stable than languages are, but the basic challenge of having to represent a whole, complex organism through two-dimensional maps/descriptions closely resembles the problems linguists face in designing grammars for particular languages. The great number of partly overlapping, partly contradictory grammar models are nothing more than our more or less successful attempts at accurate representations of the features of a language. No one grammar model will ever be suitable for all languages, and designing a custom-made grammar for one language alone is a tempting proposition. A perfect grammar model for Bangla would replace certain word classes such as postpositions and articles with other categories. It would create a new category for the interplay between finite and non-finite verb forms and rename Bangla tenses. In creating a terminology for our new categories, however, we would not only abandon the communication with other linguists but also lose the comparability with other languages. This may be a minor consideration from a theoretical perspective, but for those of us who also teach this language comprehensibility and explainability rate higher than perfection.

What we do instead is to come up with approximate measures, with terminology that is generally understood and can be adapted to fit an individual language. Let me give you a simple example in Bangla: the determiner টা can be used to make a noun definite কলমটা *the pen,* লোকটা *the man.* But টা also has other, specific uses such as nominalising verbs, adjectives, even conjunctions (এই কিন্তুটা কি? *What is this but?*) and making numbers 'fit for company'. It can, in certain circumstances, be replaced by টি, খানা, জন and a variety of other determiners. It also combines with এক *one* to form an indefinite determiner. I am therefore reluctant to call টা a definite article. In fact I would go so far as to say that Bangla does not have articles, but works with a variety of determiners instead. Other people may have a different interpretation. It is important to recognise and, I hope, reassuring to those who find it intimidating, that grammar is by no means a fixed, complex reality but a tentative method of describing a language and that linguists, just like cartographers, are constantly trying to balance science, aesthetics, technical ability and a few more such factors.

The well-known linguist Pabitra Sarkar, in an article entitled *Tagore, the linguist* says: 'Tagore's nine rules for changing o into ō contain much too many for his formulations to be elegant.' And he is right: aesthetic considerations play an important role in our grammatical descriptions. Whenever things become too complex or abstruse we have to start again from a different angle in the hope of achieving clear and reasonably simple descriptions. So what about teaching grammar?

For foreign learners, a knowledge of grammatical structures is, despite many fashionable alternative methods, one of the mainstays of learning a language. If you want to learn how to bake bread, you can watch other people do it. You can memorise the sequence of assembling the ingredients and mixing the dough. You can immerse yourself in the smell and taste of freshly-baked bread. You can learn to imitate the step-

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[7] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cartography

by-step process. But sooner or later you will want to know, with your head as well as with your hands, about the essential ingredients and the principles of bread making. You will want to bake your own bread, maybe mixing in some seeds or some cheese, but knowing how to do it. The same goes for learning a foreign language. A purely imitative approach gives us pre-fabricated sentence patterns. A knowledge of grammar gives us a short-cut to producing our own sentences even if we have never heard anyone say them.

The purpose of learning about the grammar of one's own language is different. It has to do with language awareness, with discovering patterns in the language and learning to think in new categories. Teaching children about grammar in school should build on the children's inherent curiosity and can, if it is carefully planned and executed, be fun and exciting for both the teacher and the children. It should start with the children's own language and does not, at the beginning, require any difficult and new terminology. The terminology can be added when the children acquire a need for it. Here is a practical demonstration: Let them supply a sentence or give them a simple sentence like

<div align="center">আমি গতকাল একটা হাতি দেখেছিলাম।</div>

<div align="center">*I saw an elephant yesterday.*</div>

After the obligatory elephant-anecdotes, we turn our attention to the language. What can we substitute for আমি (তুমি, তারা, আপনি, তুই, তোমরা) and what happens to the rest of the sentence when we do? This creates an awareness of the link between subject and verb ending. We find substitutes for গতকাল (আগামিকাল, এমাত্র, কখনও না, সে দিন) in order to elicit some tenses. On a more advanced level, text passages or recordings of spoken language can be used to identify, modify or substitute particular items or patterns. And so on. This is a simple but effective way of introducing language awareness into the children's consciousness and allows them a direct and creative interaction with their language. The grammatical categories that emerge will be remembered, perhaps even remembered with pleasure, because the children discovered them in their own way.

(b) the lightness of Bangla grammar

Bangla grammar is a challenging and fascinating field to work on and this is particularly true when you get to the edges, the margins, the outskirts, the প্রান্ত. There is a solid middle field: finite and non-finite verb-forms, noun cases, plural formation and use of determiners, quantifiers, conjunctions, relatives and correlatives, postpositions, negation, formation of adverbs and idiomatic expressions, sentence structure, word-order and word-formation, semantic and modal patterns. All of these can be adequately described from reading and listening, from observation and pattern recognition.

But even in the early stages of my research I had glimpses of a dimension beyond mere structural description. There are areas of language use where logic alone is not sufficient, where other factors come in. Tense use in Bangla is one such area. Particularly in narrative texts we observe a constant variation in tense use, from simple past to simple present, from present perfect to past habitual. Verb conjugation is very regular in Bangla and a row of simple past tense forms গেলো, দিলো, করলো, বললো would

sound rather monotonous. The variation in tenses is thus determined by phonaesthetic rather than functional criteria. Tagore also mentions this feature:[8]

বাংলা ভাষার একটা বিপদ তার ক্রিয়াপদ নিয়ে : 'ইল', 'তেছে', 'ছিল'-যোগে বিশেষ বিশেষ কালবাচক ক্রিয়ার সমাপ্তি। ক্রিয়াপদের এই একঘেয়ে পুনরাবৃত্তি এড়াবার জন্য লেখকদের সতর্ক থাকতে হয়।

Bangla has a problem with its verbs: 'ilo', 'teche', 'chilo' are the verb suffixes for certain tenses. Writers need to be careful to avoid the monotony of this repetition.

From a linguistic point of view, this is a momentous discovery. English has a particularly precise tense system and is therefore not a good candidate for comparison. In Italian and German the difference between the 'simple past' and the 'present perfect' has become reduced to a stylistic variation, with the simple past being the more formal variety. We can see here, by the way, how the need for an agreed terminology can cause problems for an accurate understanding of the phenomena and why linguists are so keen on re-naming traditional categories.

In Bangla, on the other hand, we have a symbiosis of function (grammar) and aesthetics (beauty of sound) which I think is quite unique and requires a more fluid approach to the description of the language. Here is another example: When we are talking about using a particular type of transport in a structure with করে *having done,* we expect a locative form, eg বাসে করে *by bus,* নৌকায় করে *by boat.* This is the kind of grammatical convention/rule linguists expect to find and are happy to put on record. Then we come across গাড়ি করে *by car* or সাইকেল করে *by bicycle* – what is going on here? The locative endings are dropped because we get a better rhythm with two-syllable words! It makes instant sense when we hear it: গাড়িতে করে sounds rather clumsy, doesn't it? But the poor linguist in search of logic and patterns is confused, dumbfounded, stumped. How can we adequately describe a language which does whatever it feels like doing without taking any notice of its own rules?

Particles like তো, গে, ই, রে in speech and writing are explained by Bengalis invariably as occurring 'for beauty of language'. Who can argue with that? The great array of onomatopoeia with their inadequate dictionary translations: ছমছম *espressing an uncanny or eerie sensation,* তিড়বিড় *expressing restlessness,* সুড়সুড় *denoting a tickling or titillating sensation* ফ্যালফ্যাল *denoting bewildered gaze* etc go far beyond an imitation of sounds. The preference for the doubling of words দৌড়াদৌড়ি *running ,* চেঁচামেচি *shouting,* the compounding of verbs বুঝে ওঠা *understand,* উঠে বসা *get up,* বসে থাকা *remain sitting,* থেকে যাওয়া *remain* and the prevalence of repetitive features, all of these call for the acknowledgement that beauty of language is a grammatical category in Bangla.

As linguists we need to rethink our analytical approach. So far we have been operating like a train which runs on prepared rails, focussed, directed, with a fixed destination ahead. For a language like Bangla – are there any other languages quite like Bangla? – we need to get off the train and start walking. We will probably never get to the end of the journey but we will see a lot more, and a lot more closely, along the way. We can look around us rather than just ahead and we will make lots of surprising and delightful discoveries as well as, undoubtedly, wrong turnings. For me as a foreign linguist there

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[8] রবীন্দ্রনাথ ঠাকুর, বাংলা ভাষা পরিচয়, প্রথম দিব্যপ্রকাশ সংস্করণ, Dhaka 2002, p 78

is also, of course, an element of defeat in this. I will never be able to become totally fluent in speaking and I will never be able to write Bangla like a native speaker. There will always be a separateness, a lack of intuition and certainty and the need for caution. But there are compensations for this. Nearly all native speakers of Bangla are immensely proud of their language and aware of its beauty but very few know how this beauty comes about. This requires an understanding of the interplay between grammatical and phonaesthetic features, eyes to see the felicitous balance of form and sound in this language and a tribute to the lightness of Bangla grammar.

Tagore was very aware of this and his observations in শব্দতত্ত্ব and বাংলা ভাষা পরিচয় bear witness to his intense exploration of this language, his close communication and deep empathy with it. He made a distinction between cartographers (linguists) like Suniti Kumar Chatterji and himself as a mere traveller through the fields of language.[9] Perhaps we can see more clearly now that these dividing lines are neither desirable nor necessary anymore because the language itself shows us a new way of seeing.

I started this article with dissent and criticism but I would like to end it with another quote from Tagore's বাংলা ভাষা পরিচয়[10]:

ভাষার ক্ষেত্রে চলতে চলতে যাতে আমাকে খুশি করেছে, ভাবিয়েছে, আশ্চর্য করেছে, তারই কৌতুকের ভাগ সকলকে দেব বলেই লেখবার ইচ্ছে হল।

I wanted to write and share with everyone the enjoyment of the things that made me happy, that amazed me or made me think on my travels through the fields of language.

HRT, London, 19.4.2008 (3842 words)

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[9] ibid, p 6
[10] ibid