



CENTRUM FÜR ASIEN-  
WISSENSCHAFTEN UND  
TRANSKULTURELLE STUDIEN

**SAI**

SÜDASIEN - INSTITUT  
SOUTH ASIA INSTITUTE



UNIVERSITÄT  
HEIDELBERG  
ZUKUNFT  
SEIT 1386

Hans Harder, Nishat Zaidi and Torsten Tschacher

# The Vernacular

Three Essays on an Ambivalent Concept  
and its Uses in South Asia



Working Papers in Modern South Asian Languages and Literatures

Issue 5  
2022

# **The Vernacular**

Three Essays on an Ambivalent Concept  
and its Uses in South Asia

Hans Harder

Nishat Zaidi

Torsten Tschacher



## About the authors

Hans Harder is Professor of Modern South Asian Languages and Literatures, South Asia Institute, Centre for Asian and Transcultural Studies, Heidelberg University.

Nishat Zaidi is Professor of English, English Department, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.

Torsten Tschacher is Lecturer in Tamil, Department of Modern South Asian Languages and Literatures, South Asia Institute, Centre for Asian and Transcultural Studies, Heidelberg University.

The project 'Debating and Calibrating the 'Vernacular' in South Asian Colonial and Post-colonial Literatures and Public Spheres' and the publication of this book have been made possible by funds obtained from the Government of India's Ministry of Education through its Scheme for Promotion of Academic and Research Collaboration (SPARC).



Published by FID4SA-Repository,  
Heidelberg University Library 2022

This book is published under the Creative Commons License CC BY-SA 4.0.  
The cover is subject to the Creative Commons License CC BY-ND 4.0.

The electronic Open Access version of this work is permanently available on FID4SA-Repository: <https://fid4sa-repository.ub.uni-heidelberg.de>  
urn: [urn:nbn:de:bsz:16-fid4sarep-45873](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bsz:16-fid4sarep-45873)  
url: <https://fid4sa-repository.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/4587>  
doi: <https://doi.org/10.11588/fid4sarep.00004587>

Working Papers in Modern South Asian Languages and Literatures; 5  
Series ISSN 2196-8209

Text © 2022 The Authors  
Cover image © 2022 Paula Psoch

## Preface

The present publication emerges out of the Jamia Millia Islamia-Heidelberg University collaborative research project “Debating and Calibrating the 'Vernacular' in South Asian Colonial and Postcolonial Literature(s) and Public Spheres” which was funded by the Government of India’s Ministry of Education under its ‘Scheme for Promotion of Academic and Research Collaboration’ (SPARC). The project involved scholars from India and Germany, with Nishat Zaidi as the Principal Investigator from Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, and Hans Harder as the international Principal Investigator from Heidelberg University.

The project and this publication are primarily founded on the assumption that in the thoroughly multilingual literary and public spheres of South Asia, there is need for a critical discussion of the notion of the ‘vernacular’ in the context of the ongoing rise of Anglo-phonía in South Asia as a whole, and post-liberalization India in particular. The ‘vernacular’ is a rather ambivalent category. It commands a whole range of meanings and has been a contested term ever since the colonial age. Implying a hierarchical set-up and the subjugation of ‘lower’ languages under the ‘high variety’ of English, the ‘vernacular’ in the South Asian context has since the nineteenth century been perceived as a hegemonic category; but simultaneously, the ‘vernacular’ also has received empowering impulses and has been invested with positive qualities like groundedness and expressive strength.

The three chapters of this publication complement each other in elucidating different aspects of the topic. Hans Harder’s introductory chapter, “The Vernacular as a Concept”, examines the term ‘vernacular’ by retracing its astounding trajectory and evaluating its various uses in contemporary parlance and debates. After looking into the term’s etymology, Harder demonstrates that in South Asia, the

decisive shift in meaning happened in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it came to be employed to juxtapose regional languages not to classical ones, but to English. He distinguishes two different but often conflated uses of the term, the spoken vernacular<sup>1</sup> and literary vernacular<sup>2</sup>, and shows that the ‘vernacular’ is always conceived as a relational category.

Nishat Zaidi in her chapter “English and the Vernacular” looks at how the modern ‘vernaculars’ in South Asia were produced in the political economy of print capitalism and institutional rationalization, which in turn were intricately entangled with hierarchies of caste, class, religion, and region. Investigating the role of colonial institutions, language nationalism, and post-independence language politics in making *bhāṣās* into modern print languages, and tracing the way English in its turn has come to be ‘vernacularized’, Zaidi takes us through two centuries of subcontinental language history. She ends with a plea to decolonise the ‘vernacular’ and calls for what she terms ‘decolonial cosmopolitan localism’ as the way forward.

Torsten Tschacher looks at the relationship between ‘Vernacular and Aesthetics’ and investigates how literary vernaculars have been claimed to be invested with specific aesthetic attributes. Dealing in detail with the views of scholars such as A. K. Ramanujan, Sheldon Pollock, Bhalchandra Nemade and others, Tschacher distinguishes between theories that proceed from the ‘vernacular’ as a given and derive a particular aesthetics from it on the one hand, and theories that reverse that relationship and claim that it is a particular kind of aesthetics that produce the vernacular. Tschacher discusses the essentialisations and contradictions both approaches are threatened with, and concludes by highlighting the element of choice that beyond all power aspects involved also has an important role to play.

In short, then, this collection examines the validity of the notion of the ‘vernacular’ and the position of the so-called ‘vernaculars’ in colonial and postcolonial settings, and addresses recent formulations and debates regarding the status of regional languages of South Asia vis-à-vis English. It is a little daring to address such a huge topic in so little words. Of course, the scope of the project cannot be to engage with any particular ‘vernacular’ in detail, or to cover comprehensively every aspect of the debate concerning the ‘vernacular’. But the following chapters should be read as essays, a genre appellation derived from French *essayeur*, ‘to attempt’. They are meant as a crisp and stimulating intervention examining the problematic of the ‘vernacular’ as a central ordering category of discourse, academic and beyond.

Essays should be spirited and engaging. They should come with as few footnotes as possible, and avoid being pedantic. We admit that we have failed with regard to footnotes (not to mention such things as bibliographies and diacritical marks), and also apologize for certain

pedantries such as writing ‘vernacular’ in inverted commas throughout, except in quotations and in cases when it is used in a disambiguated fashion: this was necessary in order to make transparent that we are not settling for any particular meaning of the term ourselves, but look *on* the ‘vernacular’ rather than *through* its lens. We desisted from doing so in the case of vernacularity, however, so as to keep our texts from drowning in quotation marks. We do hope that we can make good for such pedantry on the counts of spirit and engagement.

We acknowledge the grant offered by the Ministry of Education, Government of India under its ‘Scheme for the Promotion of Academic and Research Collaboration’. The authors would also like to acknowledge support of the administration and staff of the two collaborating institutions, the Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia, the host institution, and the Department of Modern South Asian Languages and Literatures, South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University. For their help with this issue, we thank Nicole Merkel-Hilf, Dunya Wasella, and Jennifer Landes. We are especially obliged to Nils Harm, who designed the graphics in Chapter 1, and Paula Psoch, who has drawn the railway wagon of the cover. Last but not the least, we express our gratitude to all the young researchers at the Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia, particularly Meenakshi Yadav and Kashish Dua, who actively participated in all the events of the project.

Delhi/Heidelberg, May 2022

Hans Harder, Nishat Zaidi and Torsten Tschacher

## Chapter 1

# The Vernacular as a Concept

Hans Harder

### Introduction

In South Asian English usage, the word ‘vernacular’ has been around for more than two centuries, and enjoys considerable and perhaps even increasing currency. Most recently, it has been the internet, social media and the rising number of their non-English medium users that have alerted marketing strategists to the importance of the huge ‘vernacular’ segments of Indian society. Sandeep Singh (2019) thus speaks of “India’s vernacular internet boom”, claiming that the concept, despite its derogatory connotations, has never been as popular as now. Shouvik Dash (2021) declares that “vernacular India” will open a “new path” to the internet, and Varun (2018) and Priyanka Singh (2021) point out the important role of the ‘vernacular’ for certain startup ventures and the rising tide of “vernacular content marketing”.

Such market-driven glocalization of cyber communication is hardly astonishing in itself, but instead notable for the delay with which it set in on a larger scale – a delay of two and a half decades if we count from the beginnings of the internet on the subcontinent in 1995. What is more noteworthy is that while some of these authors use the term ‘vernacular’ in a nonchalant way, as an unproblematic container category for non-English public spheres, others express a certain unease with the word, inserting short explanations and disclaimers before using it nevertheless.

We can look at the entries of a few contemporary British English dictionaries to check whether they explain the shadow of doubt that apparently hovers over the term. *Webster’s Comprehensive Dictionary* (2004: 1395) gives such related meanings for ‘vernacular’ (noun and adjective) as ‘indigenous’, ‘local’, ‘of the native land’, ‘said of language’ etc.; or ‘characteristic of a locality’. Only in the etymological note (“<L *vernaculum* domestic, native <*verna* a home-born slave, a native”) do we learn about the hierarchical subjugation at the base of the long history of the term. The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2006: 1834) features ‘vernacular’ (noun and adjective) as denoting the non-official language used



by the ordinary people, or “a style of building, music, art etc that is suitable for ordinary people”. The *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English* (1982: 954) presents only one meaning: “(of a word, a language) of the country in question”, and gives as an example “*the ~ newspapers in India*, those in the various languages (except English) of India.”

At a superficial glance, these explanations have little in them that would alienate potential users of the word, except, perhaps, the distant etymological connection with slavery, and, for very critically alert observers, the implication of the “various languages (*except English*) of India” (emphasis mine). The former connection is little known and not, as I will argue, as outrageous as it may seem at first sight, while the latter implication is almost completely naturalized in Anglophone South Asia today, but may appear outrageous at second sight. Both in their own way indicate the diverse sets of meanings that the term ‘vernacular’ has acquired in its long history and which it still carries along. Its history being rather undocumented so far, its manifold meanings, implications and applications somehow still haunt it, hence the repeated unease expressed by many of its users.

British English dictionaries probably are not the right place to search if we want to get at the complications and ambivalences of the term ‘vernacular’ in South Asia. Even then we already note a sign of its great power of definition to exclude and elide in the bland, matter-of-fact way in which the *Oxford Advanced Learners’ Dictionary* quotes the “various languages (*except English*) of India”. It might point to the unmentioned colonial experience, but in the harmless, matter-of-fact way of stating its meaning in the spirit of a concise dictionary, it can convey but little about the historical force at work here: the reach and the power of the term ‘vernacular’ to collectively name and yoke together a linguistic landscape of diversity as great as the South Asian one. The ambivalence which lingers on in the term when it is applied to the subcontinental ‘native’ languages is related to the colonial legacy and the distinct position of the English language. In South Asia, it is only through the medium of the English language that we have a category to name things perceived as ‘culturally inside’ as seen in their collectivity externally. None of the South Asian ‘vernaculars’ seems to possess any comparable word with which to distinguish itself from these other languages and to include (South Asian) English as one amongst them. So on one level, the word ‘vernacular’ functions as an empowered, world-ordering category that, untranslatable as it is, derives its authority from the centrality of English on the subcontinent. The power of this word to subsume a multitude of languages under its umbrella corresponds to the relative epistemic powerlessness of the languages subsumed by it.

This is the most obvious aspect of the issue. If we now complicate matters somewhat in this chapter and this book as a whole, it is because the overall picture is indeed more complex.

Some English words have undergone interesting semantic twists in South Asia. For instance, the term ‘communalism’ – which, I am told, is not adequately understood in Britain except amongst South Asians and South Asianists – is an *abstractum* of the adjective ‘communal’ which, unlike its reference to local administrative units in a British context, came to mean something like “pertaining to religious communities” in colonial India. Communalism’s antonym ‘secularism’, it has been argued (Nandy 1988), has similarly shifted meanings and taken a different trajectory on the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s subcontinent in



comparison with Euro-American English usage, denoting religious tolerance rather than the (more or less) strict separation of religious and state affairs.

But compared to these two joint terms, the career of the term 'vernacular' is far more spectacular. This is a story of transfer and reversal rather than just a story of semantic shifts. And there is an irony that the English language, once (and still, in certain contexts) itself subsumed under the vernacular category elsewhere, now in South Asia carries the term 'vernacular' to subsume other languages in contradistinction to itself. Here we see the *digvijaya*, the world-domination of a category that started off as humble self-reference in the Roman household and which ended up perhaps in comprising the majority of languages used in the world, and certainly those of South Asia. We will trace this trajectory below, for the term and category denoted involve much power play and ideological baggage. The term has more often than not operated in hierarchical contexts, and distinguished what sociolinguists have termed 'high' and 'low linguistic varieties'. This factor has acted as a repellent for some critics of the term, as we shall see. But notwithstanding such criticism, the South Asian turn in the more recent history of the term takes us immediately and inescapably, into the present-day common usage of 'vernacular'.

If employed without further explanations in Anglophone contexts on the Indian subcontinent, the term is readily understood today as referring to the non-English, spoken languages of South Asia. In this broadest sense, the 'vernacular' or 'vernaculars' in the plural thus have the potential to tie together a huge and very uneven array of hundreds of languages of different origin, status, age, and size. As an umbrella term, 'vernacular' is even more comprehensive than the denomination 'regional languages' for an overlapping category, since 'vernacular' is open-ended and ready to capture the largest linguistic formations, such as Hindu-Urdu, together with the tiniest isolated varieties with very few speakers, such as certain 'tribal languages'. 'Vernacular' in this sense readily comprises varieties of different linguistic stock, such as New Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic, Iranian, Sino-Tibetan languages; it also brings together languages of great formal status and longstanding literary dominance – national and state languages – with unscripted and often endangered languages fighting for official recognition. But this great potential of 'vernacular' of encompassing things very differently placed on the scales of prestige is not what we usually foreground when we use it. More often than not, in South Asia, 'vernacular' serves merely to distinguish certain linguistic contexts (literary or filmic productions in whatever language at hand) from English ones. By extension, 'vernacular' in South Asia also commonly refers to social settings, cultural spheres and particularly architectonical traditions of local or regional origins – again in contradistinction to spheres or traditions connected with the colonial power or the globalized English-speaking world.

However, this generalizing use of 'vernacular' as the collective, all-comprising Other of English on the Indian subcontinent, and thus as a comparatively powerless ensemble, has not remained uncontested. Sheldon Pollock's model of vernacularization does not apply to all the linguistic varieties mentioned above, and of course not in contradistinction to English, but to Sanskrit and other classical languages, and only to those that came to articulate regional authority or dominance (Pollock 2006). Partly along these lines, Ritipuspa Mishra has recently pointed out that the perception of powerlessness conceals the power

with which certain ‘vernaculars’ were invested by colonial policies, and which they continue to command by the formation of linguistic states in postcolonial India (Mishra 2020). Indeed, in the plural, the ‘vernaculars’ can also be used as a short-hand phrase which signals certain regional languages that command authority by being seen as indigenous, and simultaneously relegate other varieties without official recognition to a realm below them. Accordingly, in this view, in the modern, ‘live’ South Asian languages, the ‘vernaculars’ occupy a middling space between ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ ones.

Now let us set out to retrace the astounding trajectory of the ‘vernacular’ and to evaluate its various uses in contemporary parlance and debates. To delineate the contours of this term we must address questions of definition, etymology, linguistics and also the politics of naming. The questions that arise are: Does the etymology of the term ‘vernacular’ prejudice its use? How does it figure in Orientalist writings on the South Asian language situation and in colonialist nomenclature? How formal are ‘vernacular’ languages? In what sort of relations and on what scale does it make sense to speak of the ‘vernacular’? Is the term *bhāṣā* a viable alternative to ‘vernacular’? And how to tackle the hegemonic aspirations the term carries if we decide to use it for lack of better alternatives?

## Etymology

‘Old school’ questions of etymology are necessary since its etymology is put forward as an argument against the term ‘vernacular’. Ranajit Guha argued that “the Latin *verna* inheres in the phrase ‘vernacular’ like memory in a microchip” (Guha 2009: 475). Equally, Nirmal Selvamony (2020) recently bases his rejection of ‘vernacular’ as a term and ‘vernacularity’ as a concept on the etymology of the term from Latin ‘homeborn slave’, which according to him implies its concurrent relegation to subalternity of whatever it names in rigidly ranked contexts.

Yes, indeed, the Latin adjective *vernaculum* stems from *verna*, a ‘slave born in the house’ as against one acquired from outside, or bought on the slave market. However, *vernaculum* apparently stepped out of the shadow of *verna* and shed the connotation with slavery in classical Latin itself, as even Ranajit Guha admits when he writes that the ‘vernacular’ erased servitude “to some extent” (Guha 2009: 475). Let us then find out in some detail if the connection with slavery was lost in the history of the term, and to what extent.

The author we can turn to for a very early instance of downplaying the connection, and for how the term was used for language, is Varro, living a century before Christ (116-27 BC), known for his tract *De lingua latina* (‘On the Latin Language’) (Varro 1938). Here the term appears seven times in connection with lexical items (*vernaculis verbis*, V.I, *vocabula ... vernacula*, V.XII), and it denotes Latin in contradistinction to Greek words (V.XII, V.XXI) and language (VI.V). With reference to style, Varro distinguishes three kinds of things and words (*et res et voces*), “one [being] native, born from the home” (*unum vernaculum ac domini natum*),<sup>1</sup> i.e. characterizing word combinations of native, local Latin origin as against combinations imported from outside (*lingua peregrina*), or hybrid combinations of the two

---

<sup>1</sup> R.G. Kent (Varro 1938, 2: 585) translates „one [kind being] native, born here among us”.

(X.III). This triple distinction between Latin, foreign and mixed lexical items mirrors the established classification in Sanskrit grammatical traditions which distinguish between *tatsama*, *tadbhava* and *deśīya* words in post-classical Indic languages, at least insofar as the *deśīya/deśī* component is concerned.<sup>2</sup>

Relevant for our present purpose is that in the way Varro uses the term, there is not even a trace of its connection to the slave, or slavery. This also seems to hold true for its other, non-linguistic uses in Latin in general. The *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis*, a 17<sup>th</sup> century dictionary of later and medieval Latin, gives the meaning of *vernaculum* as “whatever has been born at home, has grown at home; a thing that originates from someone and which he does not let out”.<sup>3</sup> Ivan Illich, in his tract on vernacularity, seems to refer to this entry when he states that, “*Vernaculum* as a Latin word was used for all that was raised at home, spun at home, cultivated at home, or produced at home, as opposed to that which was obtained by a formal exchange” (Illich 1981).<sup>4</sup> Sheldon Pollock stresses that the “classical sense” of the term had already left behind its slavish connotations.<sup>5</sup>

So the adjective *vernaculum* became dissociated from *verna*, ‘slave’, in classical Latin itself, and in almost all cases the term was transmitted into the modern European languages in the independent, generalized meaning of the adjective *vernaculum*, not of the noun *verna*. If in Latin ‘vernacular’ in its linguistic sense denoted the Latin language in relation to foreign languages and Greek in particular, it now came to figure in a new opposition, denoting the spoken languages – also called *idioma*,<sup>6</sup> *lingua vulgaris* or *lingua rustica* – as opposed to Latin, Hebrew and Greek, the *tres linguae sacrae* or three sacred languages.

The adoption of the term from Latin into modern European languages seems to have been very uneven. In French the noun *vernacule* features in Rabelais’ *Pantagruel* (VI, 58) in the sense of Gallic mother language in 1532,<sup>7</sup> and the form *vernaculaire* becomes a regular lexical

<sup>2</sup> In fact, Selvamony also notes this resemblance (Selvamony 2020).

<sup>3</sup> C. du Fresne et al., *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis*, VIII, L. Favre, Niort 1883-1887, p. 283 “vernaculum quidquid domi nascitur, domestici fructus; res quae alicui nata est et quam non emit”

<sup>4</sup> *Vernaculum* en tant que mot latin était utilisé pour tout ce qui était élevé à la maison, filé à la maison, cultivé à la maison, fabriqué à la maison, par opposition à ce qui était obtenu par un échange formel (Illich 1981).

<sup>5</sup> Pollock (2006: 22): “To be sure, a pejorative connotation haunts the Latin etymon – it refers to the language of the *verna*, or house-born slave, of Republican Rome – which has little political-cultural relevance to pre-modern South Asia. However, in a more common, indeed classical, sense the Latin *vernacularis* is ‘local’, ‘native’, ‘inborn’, even ‘Roman’ (in contrast to *peregrinus*, ‘foreign’). Apart from the fact that the cosmopolitan culture could be conceived of as native (another of its radical differences from the Sanskrit order, deriving from Latin’s very different history), the sense of local does map well against the South Asian idiom. In many South Asian languages the conceptual counterpart to the cosmopolitan is *deśī*, the ‘placed’, or ‘[a practice] of Place.’ [...] the very ubiquity of the self-same term *deśī* across South Asia is a sign of the *cosmopolitan* origins of the literary vernacular itself.”

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Ostler (2005: 315f.), with reference to the Romance languages: “Three hundred years after the Goths and Germans had divided up the territories of the empire, it had become extremely difficult for the people of Spain, France and Italy, when they did meet, to understand one another’s speech. The learned, the only ones who would be conscious of the problem, came to call anyone’s ordinary speech an *idioma*, to be contrasted (316) with the universality of *grammatica*, which was the normal word for Latin in the Middle Ages.”

<sup>7</sup> Cf. <https://www.cnrtl.fr/etymologie/vernaculaire>, accessed 24.9.2021. Interestingly, *verna* “home-born slave” appeared in a separate form *vernacle* in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, but apparently without any connection to *vernacule*. This latter, *vernacule*, is rendered as ‘langue maternelle’, mother tongue (1532, Rabelais, *Pantagruel*, VI, 58, éd. V. L. Saulnier, p. 34). In the passage in question, “nostre vernacule Gallicque”, our Gaulois vernacular, is contrasted with Latin.

item afterwards. Not so in German, where it only features as a (rare) Latin word. Johann Gottfried Herder uses it in italics in his famous essay on the origin of languages (Herder 2015: 104), albeit not directly to point out similarities between Varro's concept of *lingua vernacula* and his, Herder's notion of national language, but to stress the importance of the language of a family or clan which, for him, lies at the root of *Nationalsprachen*. Around 1900, Sigmund Freud in his essay 'Das Unheimliche' quotes the entry in the Grimm brothers' German dictionary (1877) for 'heimlich' / homely that gives *vernaculus* as a Latin equivalent (Freud 1919: 9). In German, 'vernacular' is a foreign word that has remained foreign until the present.<sup>8</sup> In Italian, too, the word *vernacolo* or its derivative *vernacolare* is hardly part of the common lexicon. It retains its connection with the *verna*, homeborn slave, but not in its linguistic sense which is given as "dialetto limitato ad un paese" (dialect limited to a region),<sup>9</sup> and it appears to have been first used in this sense in 1805.<sup>10</sup>

In English, the *Oxford English Dictionary* has the earliest use of 'vernacular' for the year 1601 where it already has the sense of someone who "writes, uses, or speaks the native or indigenous language of a country or district."<sup>11</sup> From the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, judging from the samples assembled in the dictionary, "vernacular" is most often used in a linguistic sense and means the 'native' or 'indigenous' language as opposed to Latin and Greek. Alternatively, it refers to dominant modern languages and the literature written in or translated into them, such as Luther's Bible, or to regional dialects and local idioms. Historic uses include also the sphere of disease in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, now obsolete, and since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (first mention 1857) that of architecture, at present probably the most common use of the term in British and American English.

Almost absent from the quite substantial list of references for the English uses of 'vernacular' is the meaning 'of a slave', marked as rare and with only one mention in an article on Ancient Rome in an academic historical journal of 1803-4.<sup>12</sup> So we can substantiate the contention made above for Latin, that in the English career of the term 'vernacular', its slave aspect is little more than a long-buried and inert semantic foundation on which a series of other layers are laid. Or we could use the metaphor of the palimpsest here for what is erased and what peeps through the erasures. So this aspect of 'vernacular' does not seem sufficient to prejudice the use of the term today, anywhere, particularly as such genealogies of semantic items are not uncommon and that we do not avoid terms like 'modern' or 'baroque' because they originally had negative connotations. Further, the uses the *Oxford English Dictionary* documents for 'vernacular' indicate a trend that seems to hold true for other languages too: the term 'vernacular' hardly ever came to be perceived as *vernacular* in any of the languages that adopted it, but instead remained as a borrowed term from educated, polite Latin which retained a highbrow flavor. Furthermore, 'vernacular' was not used to subjugate other linguistic varieties from above, but was instead used as a self-designation that on one level did subjugate the language one was writing in to Latin or other

<sup>8</sup> As Schittig (2019: 18) confirms for the field of architecture.

<sup>9</sup> *Dizionario etimologico italiano* (1953: 741).

<sup>10</sup> *Dizionario etimologico italiano* (1957, V: 1426f.).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/222608>, accessed 24.9.2021.

<sup>12</sup> *The Annual Review & Hist. Lit.* 1803-4, 2, 326. This and the other entries are to be found at <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/222608>, accessed 24.9.2021.

classical languages, but on another also spoke of the new self-consciousness of those 'new' languages and could acquire an emancipative sense.<sup>13</sup>

## Colonial genealogy

Far more important for our present examination and evaluation are the 'vernacular's' colonial genealogies. The decisive turn which lead to present-day usage on the South Asian subcontinent occurred in colonial times when, from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Sanskrit and other languages of India became the object of attention of Orientalist scholars, educationists and administrators. It is here that a fundamental reversal in the use of 'vernacular' occurred – though this reversal was never unilinear or unequivocal. First let us look at how 'vernacular' was used by a few important European, English-writing Orientalists, and then at the use of 'vernacular' in administration. The lines between Orientalist and administrative positions were, of course, blurred, but the distinction is still useful.

In the preface to his Bengali grammar of 1778, Nathaniel Halhed, Orientalist and long-time employee of the East India Company, left little doubt about the colonialist aspirations of his work, which was undertaken to facilitate communication between British masters and their Indian subjects. Halhed declares his grammar to be in the service of "the cultivation of a right understanding and of a general medium of intercourse between the Government and its Subjects; between the Natives of Europe who are to rule, and the Inhabitants of India who are to obey".<sup>14</sup> In his preface, Halhed speaks only once of the "vernacular language of Bengal" as a "native and peculiar dialect" so far hardly recognized in Europe (p. ii), having hinted at the relationship between (uncultured) Latin and (cultured) Greek, and eulogizing the breadth and depth of Sanskrit as the "Parent of almost every dialect from the Persian Gulph to the China Seas" (p. iii). His nomenclature wavers between language, dialect and tongue – even Sanskrit figures as a "wonderful dialect" in one instance (p. v) – and all three terms are used for Bengali, though invariably in a position subordinate to Sanskrit. Regardless, it is clear that the term 'vernacular' for Bengali is used exclusively in opposition to Sanskrit.

H.T. Colebrooke, in his 'On the Sanscrit and Prákrit Languages' (1803), also mostly speaks of languages and dialects, and he only writes of 'vernaculars' when he speculates about the historical role of certain Prakrits that were not spoken anymore, or about Marathi ("Mahrátta language", "Mahrátta dialect") that had expanded beyond its original bounds but had not yet become the "vernacular dialect" in those parts (Colebrooke 1803: 227). Colebrooke uses 'vernacular' only for such linguistic varieties as are in oral use among the common population, differentiating them from Sanskrit and other written varieties not, or no longer, being practiced in speech. Half a century later in 1861, and perhaps due to his background in German academics where, as we have seen, 'vernacular' remained an alien

---

<sup>13</sup> This much can at least be said for the uses in these modern languages. What would remain to be checked in order to get the full picture is whether, and if so, how routinely the word is used in medieval and early modern Latin to refer no longer to itself, but to these languages.

<sup>14</sup> Or again at the end of the preface, where Halhed claims that "policy requires that her [Britain's] new subjects should as well feel the benefits, as the necessity of submission" (Halhed 1778: xxv).

term, Max Müller in his *Lectures on the Science of Language* (Müller 1994) avoids the word altogether. He speaks of languages, dialects of the Vedas, those of the third century BC, the “Pracrit dialects of the plays”, and the “spoken dialects, such as Hindi, Hindústáni, Mahratti, Bengali” (p. 188) in his description of the family relations (father, sister etc.) within the Indo-Aryan branch of languages.

These examples cannot replace a thorough investigation of the way Orientalist scholars of South Asian languages used the term ‘vernacular’; but they do suggest that the word was not abundantly used, and that when it was it did not serve to juxtapose South Asian languages and English, but to distinguish formal and informal languages, or more and less formal varieties within the group of modern ‘live’ languages.

Even in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, scholar-administrator George Abraham Grierson, editor of the *Linguistic Survey of India*, the one person who could be expected to have had the greatest impact on Anglophone linguistic usage on the subcontinent, seems to retain the antonym of ‘vernacular’ as Sanskrit, and not to transfer it to English. Grierson’s *The Modern Vernacular Literature of Hindustan* (1888) is a compilation of authors, works and specimens from literary traditions between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Many of these items belong to such linguistic varieties as Braj and Avadhi that came to be subsumed under the label of Hindi, partly as a result of his agency. Grierson’s use of ‘vernacular’, which posits the proto-modern and modern languages and literatures as against and below Sanskrit, seems to display a somewhat romantic predilection for the supposed naturalness of works in those other, later languages (Sarma 2010: 191n). In *The Languages of India* (1903, originally published as a part of the Census Report of 1901), Grierson extends his use of vernacular even to Vedic Sanskrit, when he claims that

[...] the earliest specimens of the actual Aryan vernaculars of India are to be found in the hymns of the Rig Vēda. Most of these hymns were undoubtedly composed in the actually spoken language of their authors, a natural, unartificial language, as compared with the more artificial language subsequently developed in Brahminical schools and called Classical Sanskrit (Grierson 1903: 55).

Here and elsewhere in this text, Grierson sticks to the meaning of ‘vernacular’ as spoken, colloquial, informal language, with its opposites as codified, stilted, cleansed language – classical Sanskrit and certain literary Prakrits in this context. And if the *R̥gveda* is – or at least once upon a time was – ‘vernacular’, i.e. built from the raw material of spoken language, Bengali, a language Grierson counts among his 147 distinct ‘vernacular’ Indic languages, is considered to be too unnatural to qualify as a ‘vernacular’ in the written form that had become common due to the joint forces of pundits, grammarians and missionaries.<sup>15</sup>

However, despite Grierson’s apparently clear sense of ‘vernacular’ as spoken language, his uses of the term show some of the imprecision symptomatic of the larger picture. The

---

<sup>15</sup> “Up to the last few years very little was known about the actual speech of the forty odd millions who are recorded as having Bengali for their vernacular. Even European grammarians, most of whom were missionaries and ought to have known better, were the obedient slaves of the Pandits of Calcutta, and only illustrated the artificial book language in their works” (Grierson 1903: 75). The figure of 147 languages was raised, in the Survey, to 179 languages and 544 dialects.

juxtaposition of language and dialect, so essential to Grierson's scheme of classification, blurs the sense of 'vernacular', because in this scheme, what is a language but a superposed variety that is necessarily artificial in many ways in comparison to the 'natural' dialects? The idea of 'naturalness' is further complicated if the notion gets extended to 'vernacular literatures': if composition and refinement – and, in many cases, the transition to scripturality – are the marks of literary production, how can any such language of formal composition still be treated as identical with any spoken idiom?

So here we can observe a bifurcation of the use of 'vernacular' with regard to South Asian languages – a bifurcation surely not of Grierson's making, but already inherent in the notion of the 'vernacular' itself long before it was applied to them. On the one hand, 'vernacular' denotes the spoken language of the house, locality, or region; and on the other it signifies a non-classical or non-interregional medium of literary production which, with some amount of formalization, then becomes a middling category between the most and least prestigious languages. The use of 'vernacular' for informal and locally spoken language builds on the connotations of the term with home and orality, whereas in the case of the 'vernacular' which has become the medium of literary production, these connotations are somewhat loosened. Since this distinction is of some consequence for the further course of our deliberations, I will henceforth use vernacular<sup>1</sup> for the first, 'spoken vernacular', and vernacular<sup>2</sup> for the second, the 'literary vernacular'.

If Grierson thus furnishes examples for an ambiguous use of the word 'vernacular', switching between vernacular<sup>1</sup> and vernacular<sup>2</sup>, and provides instances of investing the literary vernacular<sup>2</sup> in South Asia with a positive sense, no more than the scholars discussed before him is Grierson responsible for transposing the term into its new and now current opposition with English. This transfer of sense seems to have happened long before him: and that not in the scholarly domain, but in educationist and administrative circles. It ran parallel to the developments in the academic realm just outlined, but appears to have been hardly connected to them.

An important point was Thomas Babington Macaulay's so-called 'Minute on Education' (1835), (ill-)famous as the intervention that was for a long time deemed to have settled the dispute between the so-called Orientalist and Anglicist factions among colonial educators about the primacy of South Asian languages or English in educational institutions in favour of the latter.<sup>16</sup> Macaulay speaks of "vernacular dialects" as in need of refinement, and argues that Indians were only able to profit from education in a language which is "not vernacular" or "foreign" to them, i.e. English (Macaulay 1999 [1835]: 171, 165). The term 'vernacular', however, is not central to his argument and appears only in these two instances in his minute. More commonly, Macaulay refers to 'dialects' spoken by the 'natives', 'mother-tongues' of the 'people', etc. In fact, the 'vernacular' languages are only of secondary importance in his argument, his main concern being whether higher education institutions of English or Sanskrit and Arabic should receive official funding. In one instance, he

---

<sup>16</sup> Cf., however, Lynn Zastoupil's and Martin Moir's remark in their introduction to the document: "Recent historical research tends to show that the minute in itself was less decisive in a number of respects than was once supposed, despite its undoubted impact on the spread of English teaching in Bengal presidency" (Macaulay 1999 [1835]: 162).



includes Arabic and Sanskrit among the languages “not vernacular” to the Indian population (165), and thus seems to go along orientalist nomenclature as discussed above. In another instance, however, he calls Arabic and Sanskrit the “sacred dialects” of the “natives” (168). So while Macaulay maintains the distinction between the classical languages (“sacred dialects”) and the ‘vernaculars’ of popular daily use, he simultaneously shifts non-vernacular Sanskrit and Arabic to the ‘native’ side of the juxtaposition, with *English* on the opposite side.

In educational quarters, his use of ‘vernacular’ to mean the ‘native languages’ of the subcontinent as against *English*, stuck, irrespective of whether one bought into Macaulay’s derogatory evaluation of ‘vernacular’ knowledge and literature.<sup>17</sup> Thus John Clark Marshman (1794-1877), a missionary, educator and pioneer of Bengali journalism, predicted that English would become the “classical language of India”, but ‘vernaculars’ would persist and be cultivated.<sup>18</sup> Marshman does not tell us what was to happen to the thus dethroned earlier classical languages of India – whether they would linger on in a realm of fading glory or rather fall back into the large pool of the vernaculars themselves; but remarks such as his certainly paved the way for looser, not strictly linguistic uses of ‘vernacular’ to incorporate the domains of use of those classical languages, and indeed themselves by extension. By conflation of the categories of ‘vernacular’ and ‘native’, the ‘vernacular’ could now at times unite under one umbrella not only the modern languages of the subcontinent, but even ‘classical’ Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian – a “curious twist” indeed, as Partha Chatterjee observes.<sup>19</sup>

But this was rather exceptional, and the focus, of course, remained on the non-classical languages of colonial India. In Macaulay’s and Marshman’s diction we encounter two early instances of using the term ‘vernacular’ for a set of non-classical languages of the subcontinent in juxtaposition to *English* rather than Arabic, Sanskrit and Persian. It is this use of ‘the vernaculars’ as a common denominator for modern South Asian languages which proliferated throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and became common in administrative nomenclature. And hence we get ‘vernacular education’ (as in the English Education Act 1835), the Vernacular Press Act 1878, etc.

---

<sup>17</sup> In statements such as this: “I am quite ready to take the Oriental learning at the valuation of the orientalists themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabic” (Macaulay 1999 [1835]: 165).

<sup>18</sup> “English will, doubtless in the course of time, become the classical language of Bengal, and every native of respectability will endeavor to give a knowledge of it to his children, but at the same time, the vernacular language of Bengal ... and of other provinces throughout India, will continue to be used and to be cultivated to an increasing degree.” Cf. Benjamin D. Basu’s 1924 *History of Education in India*, p. 125; quoted here according to Chatterjee, Partha and Raziuddin Aquil (eds) (2008: 10).

<sup>19</sup> “In a curious twist to the idea of the vernacular, all Indian languages – including hitherto ‘classical’ languages such as Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian – were turned, in relation to English, into vernaculars. English became the dominant language of the modern, reducing the worlds inhabited by all Indian languages into vernacular non-modernity” (Chatterjee 2008: 10).

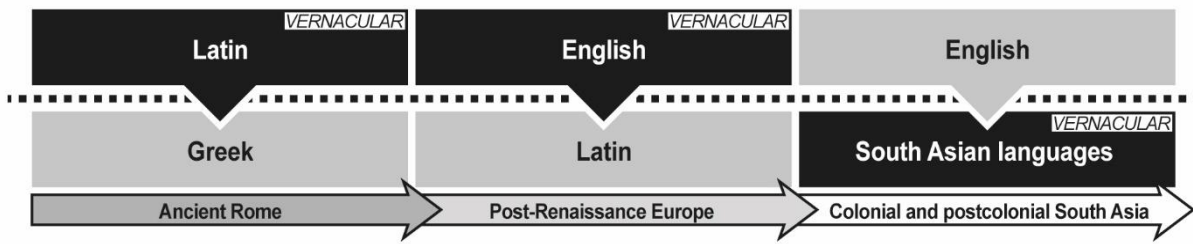


Fig. 1: From othering the Self vis-à-vis the Other towards othering the Other vis-à-vis the Self

Let us sum up the shifts in the uses of vernacular and deploy the notion of 'othering' as we do. As Figure 1 illustrates, in ancient Rome the term *vernaculum* with regard to languages designated the own language on a horizon of inferiority in relation to the Greek language. In Renaissance and post-Renaissance Europe, modern European languages adopted the term to perform the same gesture, that is using it as a self-designation out of a sense of subjugation to the Latin language. Both these are cases of the Self *othering* the own position by looking at that position from an external, superior point of view. In colonial South Asia, however, the English term 'vernacular' implies no self-designation anymore, but now calls the *other* 'vernacular' while *itself* assuming the superior point of view.

## Recent uses

Developments in colonial times largely explain the current usage of the word 'vernacular' in English as it is used on the Indian subcontinent, and also account for the ambivalence inherent in that use. But the story does not end here, since the word 'vernacular' has never been restricted only to this sense, neither in South Asia nor elsewhere, and it has undergone further twists and turns in the more recent South Asian and international debates which reverberate on its current common usage too. How else could we explain the increasing use of the term in recent academic discourse by authors who are acutely aware of critical postcolonial concerns, but still very self-consciously employ the word 'vernacular' to designate certain linguistic and cultural spheres neutrally, and even invoke the particular strength and value of these spheres? This trend seems to be connected with a general re-valuation of the local and regional in the context of globalization.

In the field of language and literature in South Asia, we must first mention Sheldon Pollock's extremely influential model of vernacularization on a macro-historical scale, a model built on the notion of literary vernaculars<sup>2</sup>. As Torsten Tschacher elaborates in detail in Chapter 3, Pollock traces the process in which regional languages of the subcontinent gradually (if never completely) replaced the Sanskrit 'cosmopolis' – and, how Pollock dismisses in passing, as do many others, Salman Rushdie's claim to the pre-eminence of literary production in English as the real asset of postcolonial India (Pollock 1998: 69).<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> "The prose writing – both fiction and non-fiction – created in this period [the fifty years after Independence] by Indian writers working in English, is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the eighteen 'recognized' languages of India, the so-called 'vernacular languages,' during the same time; and, indeed, this new, and still burgeoning, 'Indo-Anglian' literature represents perhaps the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books. The true Indian

Many have worked with Pollock's scheme of vernacularization. Tyler Williams, Anshu Malhotra and John Stratton Hawley (2018), for instance, follow Pollock's specification that 'vernacular' implies a literary tradition along models borrowed from the 'cosmopolitan', thus clearly referring to our vernacular<sup>2</sup>, the literary vernacular. Their book demonstrates how 'vernacular' can figure in various oppositions beyond Sanskrit, e.g. Imre Bangha's *madhyadeśī bhāṣā* versus Apabhraṃśa, or Arthur Dudley's Urdu versus Persian. Also Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam (2001: 226), in one instance, use 'vernacular' as a neutral, descriptive term to juxtapose Marathi and Telugu not to Sanskrit, but to Persian.

When it comes to the juxtaposition of South Asian 'vernacular' to English, a similar re-evaluation is at work. In her work on the colonial Hindi public sphere, historian Charu Gupta repeatedly reminds us of the "robust" qualities of the vernacular Hindi vis-à-vis the English colonial literary output (e.g. Gupta 2020; also Gupta et al. 2020, with the present author as one of her co-authors). Makarand Paranjape (2018) poses "critical vernaculars" against Anglophone cultural discourses. S Shankar (2012: 11ff.), grappling with Rushdie, puts forward the high value of a certain "vernacular realism" which he wishes to disentangle from the current notion of 'vernacular' languages, and which he also detects in English writings, but finds more often couched in the 'vernaculars'. Chatterjee and Aquil (2008) delve into "vernacular histories", as they problematize but ultimately also reassert that term. Historian Brian Hatcher also uses the term 'vernacular' in a value-neutral sense when he defines vernacularization – quite different from Pollock – as the process through which "alien [i.e. English-language] discourse and practice became affiliated to indigenous traditions" in 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal (Hatcher 1996: 7). The present author also has used the term to distinguish the sort of urbanity expressed through 'vernacular' South Asian literature as "vernacular urbanism" from the Anglophone sphere of South Asia and the globalized megacity discourses to which it is related (Harder 2016).

Beyond such language-related academic discourses in literature and history, the 'vernacular' is now often used in neutral or positive senses in anthropology, art history, cultural studies and related fields. Thus anthropologist Frank Korom (2021: 187) uses it as a replacement for the term 'folk'.<sup>21</sup> Literary scholar Simonti Sen designates the particular standpoint of certain colonial Bengali women travelers as "cultural vernacularism" (Sen 2005: 161). Cultural anthropologist Willem van Schendel uses the term "vernacular elite" (apparently coined by Raunaq Jahan) for the social group that acted as a driving force behind the struggle for Bangladeshi independence, an elite which adhered to Bengali culture as opposed primarily to Urdu-related culture in Pakistan (van Schendel 2020: 174). Monica Juneja, in art history, contrasts 'vernacular' with 'metropolitan' art practice. Pollock's 'cosmopolitan vernacular' has also been twisted into "vernacular cosmopolitanism" by Homi Bhabha, apparently as an equivalent of what he calls "subaltern secularism" (Bhabha 1996: 204f.). Such assertive and positive uses may seem astonishing in the light of the ambivalences that linger on in the term 'vernacular'. They indicate interesting semantic shifts as they show how 'vernacular' has started to replace other terms

---

literature of the first postcolonial half-century has been made in the language the British left behind" (Rushdie 1999: x).

<sup>21</sup> "However, because the term 'folk' has become antiquated over time, I shall opt for the term 'vernacular' throughout this chapter, which carries a strong sense of locality and indigeneity [...]" (Korom 2021: 187).

that have accreted disparaging connotations: 'folk', 'indigenous', and particularly 'native', a word that when used for South Asians by the British, had already become very contentious in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>22</sup>

The field in which the term 'vernacular' seems to have most solidly established itself in current general English usage beyond South Asia is architecture. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives its earliest use in this area as 1857, and it eventually found its way into official use today. Thus the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), a France-based international heritage organization founded in 1965 after a preservation convention in Venice, highlights in its 1999 charter the importance of "vernacular built heritage" as an expression of cultural identity. According to Eric Mercer (1975), the term 'vernacular' when it is applied to houses has three different, but related meanings:

[...] first, vernacular houses are of traditional form, are built in traditional ways with traditional materials, and use traditional ornament; secondly, they are common within, and peculiar to, one or more limited parts of the country; thirdly they are small and mean in comparison with some of their neighbours. (quoted according to Johnson 2010: 11)

In his critical monograph on the topic, Matthew Johnson outlines how the notion of polite architecture, i.e. planned and privileged house building, "framed and defined the vernacular in its turn" (Johnson 2010: 197). However, Johnson refuses to conceive of 'vernacular' and 'polite' architecture as in a neat opposition to each other, and he stresses that such an opposition would retrospectively straightjacket the architecture of historical England within imposed modern categories, and argues that both existed in constant interaction with one another. Christian Schittig extends the sense of 'vernacular' to various types of traditional architecture worldwide, as he stresses the aspect of "building by ordinary people without the help of a professional designer" as the decisive criterion (2019: 18). Brosius and Michaels recently employ the term 'vernacular' to denote certain kinds of local/regional heritage and apply it to building traditions in Nepal; they argue that the sense of the word 'vernacular' has its advantages over other categories:

We consider the term 'vernacular' as a suitable alternative to the sometimes-problematic concepts of 'original' and 'authentic': vernacular means that even global flows and ideas can be attended to, as long as they have been incorporated into a local vision and version of, in this case, built as well as practiced heritage. (Brosius & Michaels 2020)

In the wake of the study of 'vernacular architecture', South Asian building styles have quite commonly come under the umbrella of the 'vernacular'. For instance, Nangia (2009) defines the 'vernacular' as follows:

The 'vernacular', in India, denotes low cost, traditional village and small town settlements, where construction is carried out without the help of architects

---

<sup>22</sup> Thus in Urdu poet Akbar Allahabadi's satirical, self-deprecating verses, as I have shown elsewhere (Harder 2012: 172).

and professionals, where building activity is regulated by a long tradition that stretches back for many centuries, in many cases.

It is in this sense of built heritage that the term 'vernacular' in relation to South Asia currently comes up just as often as the linguistic sense of the term in random Google searches.

### The 'vernacular' and formality

After this lengthy stock-taking of the wide semantic spectrum of the term 'vernacular' in various fields, focusing on South Asia but also incorporating non-South Asian contexts and debates, it is now time to take a more analytical approach to the concept, an approach that may eventually allow us to put into perspective some of the various meanings of 'vernacular', and particularly the spoken vernacular<sup>1</sup> and literary vernacular<sup>2</sup>.

One aspect that has come up in various constellations already is the idea that the 'vernacular' is less formal than the superposed variety. In order to question this assertion, and instead of a lengthy argument about the highly complex and very formal styles some South Asian 'vernaculars' developed in pre-colonial times, let us look at the following visual:

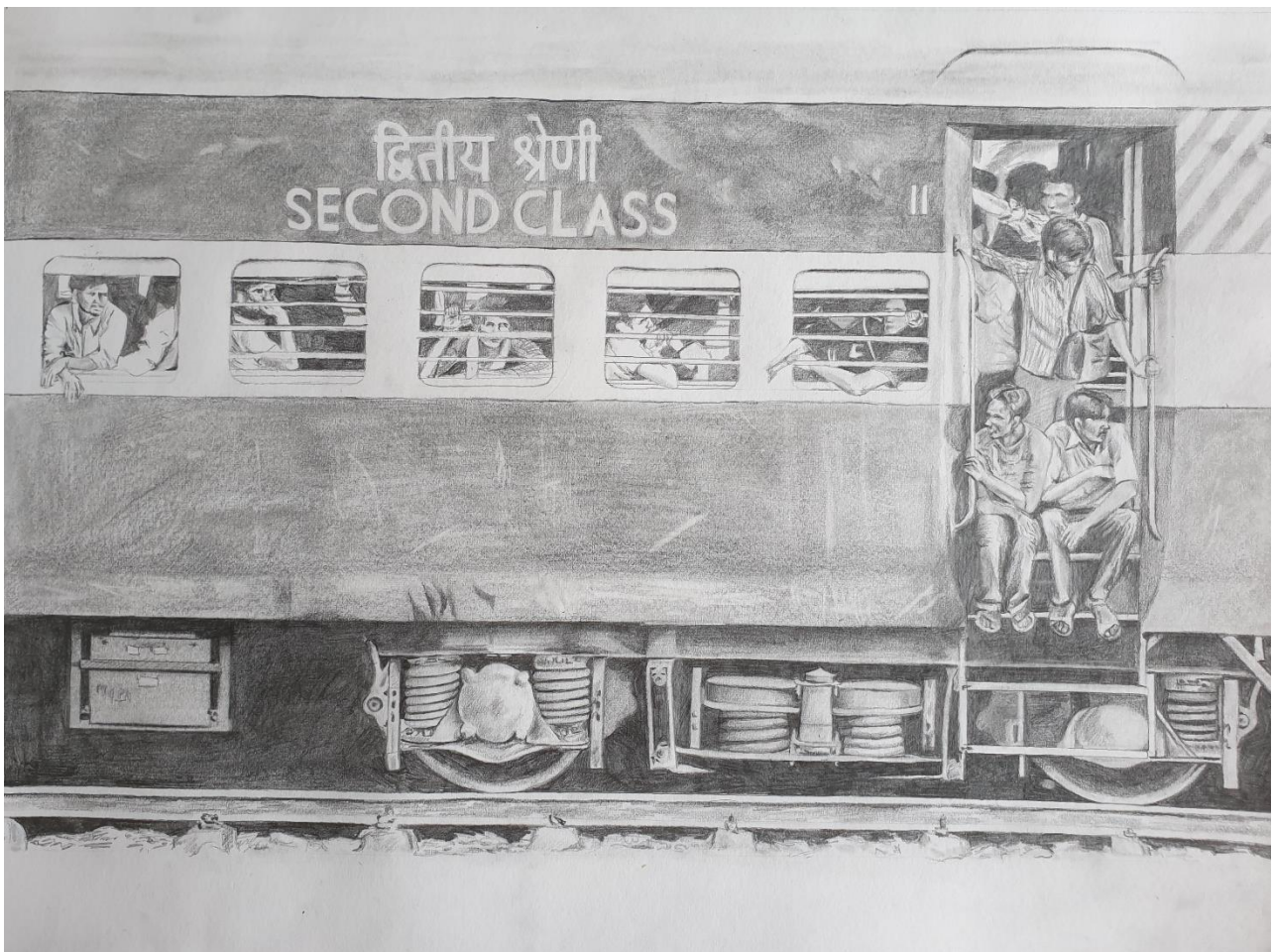


Fig. 3: A *Dvitiya śrēṇī*/Second Class Indian Railways wagon. Drawing: Paula Psoch.

The inscription *Dvitiya śreṇī*/Second Class on this Indian Railways coach is, formally speaking, a bilingual message that puts side by side the two official languages of the Indian Union, Hindi and English. Both language items are arranged in seeming symmetry – if we ignore that Hindi stands on top of English – and without suggesting a hierarchical relationship among them. But if we enter the linguistic spheres of each language we find both terms quite asymmetrically arranged in different registers. *Dvitiya śreṇī* combines two formal, educated lexemes from Sanskritized Hindi to form an official-sounding expression quite distinct from common speech (where, perhaps, *dūs'rā darjā* or right away *second class* as a loan from English would be more common and more readily understood). The English *Second Class*, by contrast, is as solidly formal as colloquial English – with the fact that the lexemes *second class* are Latin-derived being only a faint remembrance of linguistically-minded persons and not in the least triggering anything like a classical aura comparable to *dvitiya śreṇī*.

We run into trouble if we approach this inscription with the dominant binary of English vs vernacular, because in terms of vernacular<sup>1</sup>, spoken language, these expressions seem to turn the relations between Hindi 'vernacular' vs English on their head. The term *dvitiya śreṇī*, in this example, is 'vernacular', yes, if we apply our received colonial vernacular<sup>2</sup> notions and perceive it as the Hindi answer to English second class; but no, if we hold up the vernacular<sup>1</sup> notion that 'vernacular' should relate to spoken language. One could maliciously, but not so mistakenly add that in fact, following our vernacular<sup>2</sup> notion, *dvitiya śreṇī* showcases the effort to shed second-class 'vernacular' status by appropriating classicist lexemes far removed from colloquial speech. Summarizing these observations, we could say that 'formal' English is in this case more *vernacular* than 'vernacular' Hindi!

We can get relief from such awkward contradictions if we thoroughly disentangle two ways of understanding the 'vernacular'. The above contradiction, of course, results from the clash of two separate meanings of 'vernacular', one radical: vernacular<sup>1</sup>, spoken language – and the other frozen: vernacular<sup>2</sup>, a more or less standardized variety that has evolved on the basis of spoken language. The attribute 'vernacular' is used differently in both cases: in the former, it describes the state or function of a language, whereas in the latter, it sticks like a label to a language as an essential, unalienable qualifier.

If the label of the 'vernacular' were to be discarded generally from certain languages as discreet wholes and instead allowed to designate specific *functions* of those languages, problems like the one outlined above would not arise. The process languages undergo when they grow, proliferate and spread involves 'vernacular' phases and dimensions as well as ones of formalization. It is common sense that (almost) all languages have their roots in 'vernacular' varieties; and it should be equally obvious that most retain certain 'vernacular' functions while developing other, more formal ones. Indeed, the history of any language could be seen as itself mirroring the polarity between 'vernacular' and 'formal'. Vernacularity<sup>1</sup> would thus no longer label whole sets of languages as 'vernacular' in opposition to others, but allow us to see the dynamics of linguistic development. Such a notion would make room for Vedic language as 'vernacular',<sup>23</sup> Government Hindi as 'no-longer-vernacular', and open the door for seeing Hinglish for sure, but also English, in certain

---

<sup>23</sup> With Vedic Sanskrit becoming a bit of an oxymoron, since *sams-kṛta*, the 'well-arranged', is in itself the very opposite of the 'vernacular' as the informal language of the house.



contexts, as ‘vernacular’. Rather than accepting a particular linguistic variety as our code of reference, it would look at interactional and communicational fields as defining contexts, and thus perhaps do more justice to a thoroughly multilingual world region like South Asia.

But of course such thinking is unrealistic. It is denied by common usage and would hardly have a chance to establish itself beyond certain academic corners. What is more important than wishful thinking about cleaner, more analytical categories for academic descriptions is to observe how such categories operate in the field with all their imprecision and messiness.

### The ‘vernacular’ as a relational category

In order to track how the rather imprecise term ‘vernacular’ operates in the field, I will argue that (a) attention must be paid to the *scale* on which the term ‘vernacular’ is used, and (b) that the ‘vernacular’ needs to be understood as a *relational* category operating in a context of oppositional *binaries*. In order to illustrate these points, let us look at another image. Here is an example from historical South Asian architecture, Fateh Khan’s tomb in Gaur (Bengal, Sultan period) [fig.2], regarded as one of the rather famous examples of ‘vernacular’ Bengali architecture.<sup>24</sup>



Fig. 2: Fateh Khan’s tomb. Gaur, West Bengal, at the border to Bangladesh. © Hans Harder

<sup>24</sup> Cf., for instance, <https://obsidianspace.in/2020/07/20/bengal-roofs-or-bangladaar-style-of-architecture/>.



Keeping in mind the evaluative criteria for 'vernacular architecture' developed by Mercer and others, and judging merely from the artisanal perfection which went into its execution, we can surmise that the mausoleum was planned, designed and 'authored'; if we look at its design, we also notice that it has been modelled on a regional Bengali style of bamboo houses. So if we view it in the context of traditional local architecture, the building most certainly belongs to 'polite' architecture; if, however, we compare it more generally with Islamic tomb architecture worldwide, we will have to call it 'vernacular' architecture. It thus depends on the perspective we adopt whether the building's 'polite' or 'vernacular' aspects are highlighted, facilitating in turn the conclusion that the building as such potentially hosts both attributes. In other words, it is the *scale of observation* we apply to Fateh Khan's tomb that decides whether it is 'polite' or 'vernacular'. And we can very well imagine that there were points in history when in general perception it was first and foremost regarded as 'polite' architecture, whereas in other historical circumstances – as in contemporary comparative architectural history – the vernacular aspects have come to the forefront.

As for buildings, so for languages: such shifting assessments abound in language-related uses of the term 'vernacular'. Thus, Varro referred to Latin as 'vernacular' vis-à-vis classical Greek, whereas post-Renaissance usage referred to modern European languages as 'vernacular' in relation to Latin. Grierson saw Bengali dialects as 'vernacular' vis-à-vis standardized, scripted Bengali, or even Vedic Sanskrit as 'vernacular' in relation to artificial classical Sanskrit. And to make things more complicated, how would one use the 'vernacular' as a category in pronounced diglossic situations like in Tamil, where the spoken language would be the 'vernacular' in relation to the modern written standard, modern written standard in relation to older varieties of Written Tamil, and perhaps those older varieties in relation to Sanskrit?

What this hypothetical, but not unreasonable example of Tamil demonstrates is that the 'vernacular' is basically a *relational* category. What we call vernacular always depends on the given context and the scale of observation we apply. It expresses one side of a conceived interrelation between two fields, or levels, and the scale on which this interrelation is situated allows for interpretation and adjustment. Thus, in keeping with its early Latin meanings – home and world, *ghare-baire* – 'vernacular' usually operates in a *binary* constellation: we get 'vernacular' vs scripted/formal/classical/ polite/globalized. As some of the authors using 'vernacular' themselves don't hesitate to admit, such uses tend to be oversimplifying (Johnson 2010; Korom 2020) and call for extensive calibration (Pollock 1999); they may be handy as short-hand references, but create tensions in their turn. In this regard 'vernacular' and its opposites can be compared with other short-hand oppositional pairs like popular vs classical music (western or Indian), popular vs elite/high culture (or literature), folk art vs (just) art, little vs great tradition, etc. In these cases, the problem is that many of the linguistic varieties, cultural items, or architectural structures under discussion do not exclusively belong to either side of the binary, but more often than not can themselves be seen as products of an interaction between the two. This does not, however, delegitimize the binary categories as such; it just reminds us that they must not be conceived as neat oppositions, but rather as polarities.

What is perhaps more inconvenient, however, is that such polarities are rendered obscure when more than two levels of observation are involved. In our survey we have seen that with regard to languages, 'vernacular' had acquired some stability in situations that lent themselves to being observed in terms of binaries, but we can observe that the concept becomes slippery and arbitrary in cases that involve more than two levels, and 'vernacular' becoming a fall-back-upon category to retrogressively only capture the next-lower level, be it on a global, national, or regional scale.<sup>25</sup> So, in any given situation, 'vernacular' appears as a relational term in a binary set-up, with some flexibility – one might also say indeterminacy, or even confusion – regarding the scale to which it is applied.

## Vernacular and *bhāṣā*

Given such ambivalence, can we not replace the label 'vernacular' for languages altogether and instead resort to traditional South Asian terminology? *Bhāṣā* is the term that suggests itself and which can boast of a certain currency. In day-to-day usage, of course, *bhāṣā* is today understood as the generic term for any sort of 'language' in many of the languages otherwise referred to as the South Asian 'vernaculars' – and not only New Indo-Aryan ones.<sup>26</sup> There is no better way of demonstrating the prevalence of this generic meaning than by pointing out that *bhāṣā* can be further differentiated in Hindi, for instance, by referring to *varnākyūlar bhāṣā*.<sup>27</sup> There wouldn't be any need for such specification hadn't *bhāṣā* become the blanket term it is.

Historically, however, *bhāṣā* originated as a Sanskrit word to denote the spoken idioms, often in opposition to Sanskrit itself. As such it came to be adopted into the 'vernaculars' as a self-reference. As Colebrooke states,

[...] in common acceptation, *Bhākhā* denotes any of the modern vernacular dialects of India, especially such as are corrupted from the *Sanskrit*: these are very numerous. (Colebrooke 1803: 229)

We find plenty of evidences for such usage in pre-modern literature in those languages. For instance, Tulsidas in his Avadhi *Rām'carit'mānas* justifies himself for writing in '*bhāṣā*' and not in Sanskrit, and he declares that he does not care whether people laugh about his efforts (Tul'sidās 2069: 12-14).<sup>28</sup> Likewise, Bengali poet Śrīkar Nandī (1<sup>st</sup> half 16<sup>th</sup> c, Beng.)

<sup>25</sup> 'Region', interestingly, is also ambiguously used as a sub-global or sub-national category of territorialization.

<sup>26</sup> Certainly also Dravidian languages, including even Tamil with its history of linguistic purification, where *pāṣai* still exists by the side of *moḷi*.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Uday Prakash's long story 'Wāren hestīṅgs kā sāṃḍ' (Prakāś 2011: 252): हालहेड वर्नाक्युलर भाषा में प्रिंटिंग प्रेस लगा रहा है। (*hāl'heḍ varnākyūlar bhāṣā meṃ priṅṅṅ pres lagā rahā hai*): "Halhed is installing a printing press in vernacular *bhāṣā*."

<sup>28</sup> Tul'sidās (2069 Samvat: 12-14): कबित रसिक न राम पद नेहू। तिन्ह कहँ सुखद हास रस एहू॥ भाषा भनिति भोरि मति मोरी। हँसिबे जोग हँसे नहिं खोरी॥2॥ (*kabita rasika na rāma pada nehū / tinha kahā sukhada hāsa rasa ehū // bhāṣā bhaniti bhori mati mori / hāsibe joga hāsem nahim khori*): "Those who are neither lovers of poetry nor inclined to worship Rama's feet, [may enjoy] this work as a pleasant comedy. [Given that] I speak in *bhāṣā* and my mind is naïve, my work is laughable; if they laugh about it, there is no harm in that." And: स्याम सुरभि पय बिसद अति गुनद करहिं सब पान। गिरा ग्राम्य सिय राम जस गावहिं सुनहिं सुजान॥10(ख)॥ (*syāma surabhi paya bisada ati gunada karahim saba pāna / girā grāmya siya rāma jasa gāvahim sunahim sujāna*): "All drink the most beneficent clear milk of the black cow."

apologizes for writing in what he calls *deśī bhāṣe*, i.e. in Bengali and not in Sanskrit.<sup>29</sup> Similar references can be found in many other works.<sup>30</sup>

Such usage spread to include other formal or 'high' varieties such as Arabic in the works of a number of Sufi authors in Bengal, as they grew self-conscious and sometimes did not even feel the need to apologize for their choice of language anymore. Thus in his *Nabī baṃśa* Saiyad Sultan (16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century) wrote: "In whatever language [*bhāṣe*] the Lord has created man / that language is his priceless jewel."<sup>31</sup> In his *Nur jāṃāl* poet Haji Muhammad (16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century) stated: "These matters [i.e. precious religious knowledge] have been expounded by *pirs* and here is a fragment of that knowledge for people to seek at any cost and at any time. Do not feel sick to see it in Bengali language" (as translated by Roy 1983: 77). And, most impressively, Abdul Hakim (17<sup>th</sup> century) asserted in his *Nur nāmā*:

Whatever language a people speak in a country, God understands that language. God understands all languages, whether the language of Hindus or the vernacular language of Bengal or any other. [...] Those who, being born in Bengal, are averse to Bengali language [*Bangabāni*] cast doubt on their birth.<sup>32</sup> The people, who have no liking for the language and the learning of their country, had better leave it and live abroad. For generations our ancestors have lived in Bengal, and instruction in our native language is, therefore, considered good. (as translated by Roy 1983: 78)

Recent scholarship draws upon the sense of *bhāṣā* we get from such sources, and *bhāṣā*/*bhasha* is now being used as a technical term or loan word in English publications also. For instance, many authors in Williams et al. (2018), a volume dealing with early modern, pre-colonial literary traditions mostly in North India, largely subscribe to Sheldon Pollock's vernacularization scheme and use *bhāṣā* to distinguish regional from 'cosmopolitan' languages; some tend to employ *bhāṣā* and 'vernacular' interchangeably in opposition to Sanskrit or Persian. G.N. Devy has influentially used the concept of *bhāṣā* as a middling category between Sanskrit and/or English on the one hand, and dialects as well as tribal languages on the other, as he argues that the dialects form the necessary local base of the *bhāṣās*. Significantly, he avoids the term 'vernacular' altogether (Devy 2009). Rashmi Sadana equally uses *bhāṣā* for the literary languages only in opposition to English (Sadana 2012: 177f.).

---

Likewise, the wise sing and listen to the glory of Sita and Rama in the rural language." [I thank Gautam Liu for help with these translations.]

<sup>29</sup> Sukumār Sen (1997: 5f.): Śrīkar Nandī (1st half 16th): দেশি ভাষে এহি কথা করিয়া প্রচার। সঞ্চরউ কীর্ত্তি মোর জগৎ ভিতর॥ (*deśī bhāṣe ehi kathā kariyā pracār(a) / sañcarau kīrtti mora jagat· bhitar(a).*)

<sup>30</sup> Sukumār Sen (ibid.) quotes the Bengali authors Madhabacharya (mid 16<sup>th</sup> century), Ramchandra Khan (mid 16<sup>th</sup> century), Kabishekhar (mid 17<sup>th</sup> century), Daulat Kazi (mid 17<sup>th</sup> century), as well as Bharatchandra Ray (1st half 18<sup>th</sup> century).

<sup>31</sup> যারে যেই ভাষে প্রভু করিল সৃজন। সেই ভাষ হয় তার অমূল্য রতন॥ (*yāre yei bhāṣe prabhu karila sṛjan(a) / sei bhāṣ(a) hay(a) tār(a) amūlyā rattan(a).*)

<sup>32</sup> যে সবে বঙ্গত জন্মি হিংসে বঙ্গবাণী সে সব কাহার জন্ম নির্ণয় না জানি (*ye sabe baṅgeta janmi hiṅse baṅgabāṇī / se sab(a) kāhār(a) janma nirṇay(a) nā jāni.*) Literally: "I cannot decide why [*kāhār*] all those are born who are born in Bengal and hate the Bengali language."

Etymologically, *bhāṣā* places the emphasis on *spoken* language, not on the language 'of the house'; but it nevertheless shares some of the dynamics of 'vernacular'. As in the case of 'vernacular', it appears that an earlier meaning of *bhāṣā* as 'spoken language' through various semantic shifts, was transformed into the notion of a set of non-classical (but literate) languages. Thus like 'vernacular', the term *bhāṣā* in English usage in South Asia and in relation to South Asia has recently been transferred from its traditional environment. So in the examples above, Devy and particularly Sadana transpose *bhāṣā* from an opposition of the modern South Asian languages to Sanskrit/Arabic to an opposition of these languages to English. And again like 'vernacular' – our vernacular<sup>2</sup> – *bhāṣā* is being used to denote a middling category between certain high varieties at the upper end, and dialects on the lower end of the hierarchy.<sup>33</sup> Such parallelisms make one wonder whether *bhāṣā* can really act as a conceptual alternative to 'vernacular', or whether it merely functions as a non-English substitute for 'vernacular'. But this would deserve a separate investigation.

What we can state is this: the term *bhāṣā* carries as many hierarchical implications as 'vernacular', or perhaps even more if we consider that in Latin, *lingua vernacula* appears as a self-reference of Latin in a relation of subjugation to Greek, whereas in Sanskrit, *bhāṣā* was mainly used to denote its lower others, certain spoken languages on the subcontinent. As such, the *bhāṣās* apparently triggered just as many apologetic remarks by authors using them as did the 'vernaculars' in Europe. *Bhāṣā* is on one level emancipative since it replaces an external reference in English by colonial administration by a reference originated in South Asia. It thereby counters the gesture of othering involved in the colonialist vernacular<sup>2</sup> denigrating sense (vide Macaulay) which opened the way for subsuming even Sanskrit and Arabic under the category. But at the same time it re-invokes older hierarchies, which may cause contestations. Likewise, the provenance of *bhāṣā* from the Sanskrit lexicon may cause resistance – not perhaps so much in Dravidian contexts as in languages such as Urdu, Sindhi, etc. with the tendency to posit Arabic and Persian as their high-culture points of reference. So to what extent *bhāṣā* can assert itself as a viable word for a viable category beyond the sphere of precolonial literary production, and whether *bhāṣā* will eventually replace the term 'vernacular' remains to be seen.

## Summary

The survey and discussion above, despite all its sketchiness, demonstrates the complexities inherent in the 'vernacular' as a concept. The following chapters of this book elucidate these complexities in more detail. Hence, I conclude this genealogy and analysis of the term 'vernacular' by summarizing some of the findings and end with a remark on the problematic nature of our exercise.

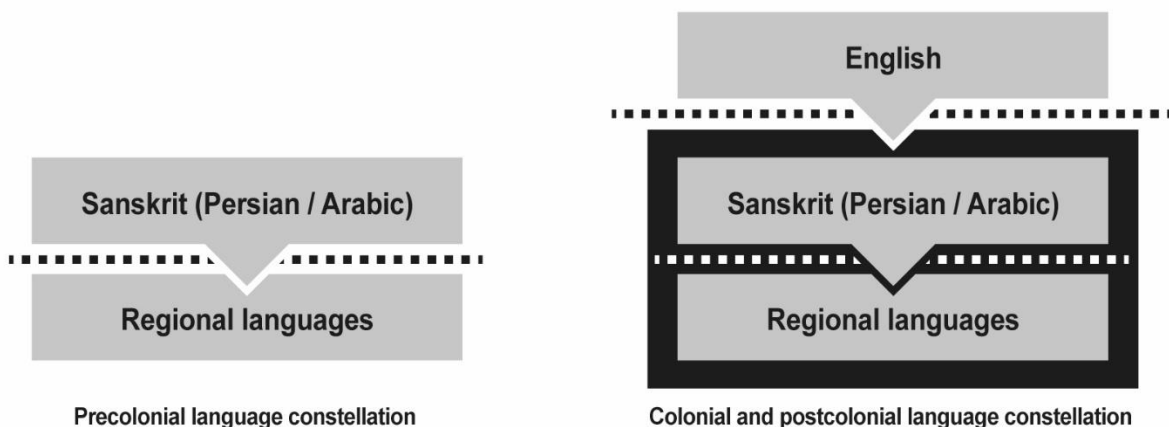
The consequent use of 'vernacular' as an attribute for informal spoken language – vernacular<sup>1</sup> – would disambiguate the term and give it semantic coherence. Such use exists in linguistic terminology, and we have seen that it is the sense in which some linguistically minded Orientalists used it in the past for specific phases of South Asian languages. It has

<sup>33</sup> Such use directly mirrors the common Hindi terminology and the opposition between *bhāṣā* and *bolī* (cf. Puniyani 2021: हमारे देश में लगभग 18 मुख्य भाषाएं और 700 से ज्यादा बोलियां प्रचलित हैं).

the advantage of eliminating the ethical ambivalences inherent in the term and making it fit for application to all kinds of languages. However, this is not the dominant, common-sense use of 'vernacular' in present-day South Asia, where 'vernacular' has come to denote the regional languages (and previously could even include the region's classical languages) in relation to English – the colonial variant of vernacular<sup>2</sup>. Processual vernacular<sup>1</sup> does not warrant the distinction between regional languages and English; but there is no way of denying that this is a distinction which remains important whether one likes it or not, and which accounts for the continuing relevance of the term. It would thus be wishful thinking to assume that the use of processual vernacular<sup>1</sup> has any chance to assert itself as the general understanding of the term.

The term's relational function in a binary structure has been shown to be a given ever since its earliest deployment in linguistic analysis. In the sense of vernacular<sup>2</sup>, it usually denotes the relatively less formal linguistic varieties that, however, are scripted, and have undergone a process of standardization to become the vehicles of literature. I have suggested to characterize such denotations as 'frozen' uses of 'vernacular', meaning that the term now captures linguistic registers more or less close to, but not identical with, the spoken language. As such, it came to be applied to whole sets of language-literatures in juxtaposition to classical, no longer commonly spoken ones, such as Latin (Greek, Hebrew) in Europe, and Sanskrit (Prakrits, Persian, Arabic) in South Asia.

We have seen how such juxtapositions are feasible in situations that lend themselves to binary logic, but create ambiguities in situations that involve more than two levels of observation. This issue is at the heart of the ambivalences troubling the current use of 'vernacular' for South Asian languages. The colonial situation in South Asia has been described as a hierarchizing doubling of cultural codes. In the field of language, the British presence on the subcontinent had the effect of disrupting the established binaries in the linguistic field (e.g., *bhāṣās* vs Sanskrit/Arabic/Persian) in subjugating them to another superposed binary between their collectivity and English.



The boxes in these two diagrams (Fig. 4 and 5) represent the regional languages, our *bhāṣās* or 'vernaculars<sup>1+2</sup>' in juxtaposition to 'classical' languages. The effect of the progression from Fig. 4 to Fig. 5, brought about by the colonial situation, is a new ambivalence of the position of Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian: while they may still be regarded as 'classical' languages in relation to the regional languages, they find themselves on the 'native' side of

the set-up (vide Macaulay) – and, once ‘native’ and ‘vernacular’ are sufficiently conflated, potentially even in the latter category. In that sense, figures 4 and 5 illustrate the vernacularization of South Asian languages *in their entirety* vis-à-vis English, standing for the pre-eminence of English in South Asia as well as its international and global relevance.

This colonial hangover, however, is mitigated by two factors. One is the global dimension of the phenomenon, which affects not just South Asia, but also other parts of the world and indeed also involves the Global North, particularly the European Union. Thus South Asian vernaculars may increasingly regard their ‘vernacular’ status as a condition shared with many other speech communities across the globe.

The other factor is the ongoing re-evaluation of the ‘vernacular’ as a category which stresses the inherent strength of the local or regional and their sense of belonging as contrasted with the less contextual superregional or global. In recent scholarship, ‘vernacular’ has accreted a new dynamic and found a neutral or appreciative use as a substitute for terms like ‘native’, ‘indigenous’, ‘folk’, ‘traditional’, or even ‘authentic’. Such shifts happen when some terms – particularly ‘native’ – show signs of overuse, or acquire pejorative connotations, while others – like ‘popular’ and ‘ethnic’, the latter replacing ‘indigenous’ in the realm of cultural studies and beyond – rise with emancipative pretensions. ‘Vernacular’ belongs to the latter group and apparently does a better job than ‘native’, a category originally almost synonymous with ‘vernacular’ when applied to languages, but then caught up in polemical negotiations of identity and thus worn out to the extent that it can now solely be used as a self-reference and turns into an insult once used for others. Similar problems pervade terms like ‘authentic’ and ‘original’, and ‘vernacular’ apparently comes in handy to avoid their truth claims. The positive appreciative trend in the uses of ‘vernacular’ as a cultural label has, of course, to be set into the context of rapid globalization. Indeed, recent uses of the term by some scholars with reference to the South Asian language situation may be interpreted as attempts to cash in on these developments.

Finally, I must admit that while the above reflections by and large aim to retain a descriptive and dispassionate mood, they nonetheless have a penchant for those languages, literatures and traditions that are commonly cramped together as South Asian ‘vernaculars’. Nothing else would probably be expected from an author whose job it is to research and even teach some of them. However, reasserting the ‘vernacular’ in the medium of its contemporary ‘other’, the English language, remains a somewhat paradoxical gesture, or even an outright impossibility. Being a scholar of non-English languages and literatures of the Indian subcontinent, my concerns are not always identical, and sometimes quite incompatible, with those of Postcolonial Studies. But in as far as the present chapter does betray any emancipative agenda, it seems to run into the same impasse that haunts much of Postcolonial Studies. Perhaps this haunting may be regarded as an integral part of the postcolonial (language) situation. Enlarging the canon beyond English-language works through translation, or analyzing the workings of a power category such as ‘vernacular’, we may be able to accommodate sets of phenomena formerly excluded; but we cannot represent them without losing them in translation. Shedding ‘vernacular’ status, ultimately, has to be performative, and can only be done in the ‘vernacular’.

## References

- Bhabha, Homi 1996. 'Unsatisfied: Notes on Vernacular Cosmopolitanism'. In García-Moreno, Laura and Peter C. Pfeiffer (eds): *Text and Nation. Cross-Disciplinary Essays on Cultural and National Identities*. Columbia: Camden House, 191-207.
- Brosius, Christiane and Axel Michaels 2020. 'Vernacular Heritage as Urban Place-Making. Activities and Positions in the Reconstruction of Monuments after the Gorkha Earthquake in Nepal, 2015-2020: The Case of Patan.' *Sustainability* 2020, 12(20), 8720; <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12208720>. Accessed 5 May 2022.
- Chatterjee, Partha 2008. 'Introduction: History in the Vernacular'. In Aquil, Raziuddin and Partha Chatterjee (eds) 2008. *History in the Vernacular*. New Delhi: Permanent Black; 1-24.
- Colebrooke, H. T. 1803. 'On the Sanscrit and Prākṛit Languages'. *Asiatic Researches* VII, 199-231.
- Dash, Shouvik 2021. 'The Next Billion: 25 Years In Vernacular India to Give Our Internet a New Path'. <https://www.news18.com/news/tech/the-next-billion-25-years-in-vernacular-india-to-give-our-internet-a-new-path-2783649.html>. Accessed 20 September 2021.
- Devy, G. N. 2009. 'The Being of Bhasha'. In *The GN Devy Reader*. Delhi: Orient Blackswan 2009, 1-55.
- Dizionario etimologico italiano*. 1953. Compiled by Dante Olivieri. Milano: Casa editrice Ceschina.
- Dizionario etimologico italiano*. 1957. Istituto di Glottologia. Firenze: Università degli Studi.
- Du Fresne, Charles 1883-87. *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis*. Niort: L. Favre.
- Grierson, George Abraham 1903. *The Languages of India: Being a Reprint of the Chapter on Languages [...] to the Report on the Census of India, 1901*. Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, India.
- Guha, Ranajit 2009. 'The Authority of Vernacular Pasts'. In *idem: The Small Voice of History: Collected Essays*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 474-8.
- Gupta, Charu 2020. 'Malleability of the Vernacular: Personal Anecdotes'. *South Asian Review* 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02759527.2020.1725223>. Accessed 8 December 2021.
- Gupta, Charu et al. 2020. 'Introduction' (with Laura Brueck, Hans Harder, Shobna Nijhawan). In *Literary Sentiments in the Vernacular. Gender and Genre in Modern South Asia*. Special Issue of *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* (43, 2020) (Ed. Charu Gupta, Hans Harder, Laura Brueck and Shobna Nijhawan), 803-16. DOI: 10.1080/00856401.2020.1786788.
- Halhed, Nathaniel Brassey 1778. *A Grammar of the Bengal Language*. Hoogly: Serampore Mission Press.
- Harder, Hans 2012. 'Towards a Concept of Colonial Satire in South Asian Literatures'. In *Indian Satire in the Period of First Modernity*. Eds Monika Horstmann und Heidi Rika Maria Pauwels. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz; 165-83.



Harder, Hans 2016. 'Urbanity in the Vernacular: Narrating the City in Modern South Asian Literatures'. *ASIA* 2016; 70(2): 435-466.

Herder, Johann Gottfried 2015. *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (1772). Reclam: Stuttgart.

ICOMOS Charter of the Built Vernacular Heritage 1999: <https://www.icomos.org/en/participer/179-articles-en-francais/ressources/charters-and-standards/164-charter-of-the-built-vernacular-heritage>. Accessed 8 December 2021.

Illich, Ivan 1981. *Le Travail Fantôme*. Paris: Editions du Seuil.

Juneja, Monica 2019. "'Have you ever touched the river?'" Relational art practice between the metropolitan and the vernacular – emplacement, mutuality, re-materialization'. Unpublished paper presented at the conference "The Unforeseen – On the Lure of Risk in the Participatory Arts", Berlin, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, November 16, 2019.

Korom, Frank 2021. 'Vernacular Religious Movements'. In Abdul Momin Chowdhury (ed.): *History of Bangladesh. Sultanate and Mughal Periods (c. 1200 to 1800 CE). Vol. 2: Society, Economy, Culture*. Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 287-320.

*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. München: Langenscheidt-Longman, 2006.

Macaulay, Thomas Babington 1999 (1835). 'Minute recorded in the General Department by Thomas Babington Macaulay, law member of the governor-general's council, dated 2 February 1835'. In Zastoupil, Lynn and Martin Moir (eds). *The Great Indian Education Debate: Documents Relating to the Orientalist– Anglicist Controversy, 1781– 1843*. Richmond: Curzon, 161-72.

Misra, Pritipuspa 2020. *Language and the Making of Modern India: Nationalism and the Vernacular in Colonial Odisha, 1803-1956*. Cornwall: Cambridge University Press.

Nandy, Ashis 1988. 'The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance'. *Alternatives* 13, 1988, 177-194.

Narayana Rao, Velcheru, David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam. 2001. *Textures of Time. Writing History in South India, 1600-1800*. Delhi: Permanent Black.

Olivieri, Dante. 1953. *Dizionario etimologico italiano*. Milano: Casa Editrice Ceschina.

Ostler, Nicholas 2005. *Empires of the World: A Language History of the World*. New York: HarperCollins.

*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*. Berlin: Cornelsen & Oxford University Press, 1982.

Paranjape, Makarand 2018. *Debating the Post-Condition in India. Critical Vernaculars, Unauthorized Modernities, Post-Colonial Contentions*. London: Routledge.

Pollock, Sheldon 1998. 'India in the Vernacular Millennium: Literary Culture and Polity, 1000-1500'. *Daedalus* 127, 3, *Early Modernities*; Summer 1998; 41-74.

Pollock, Sheldon 2006. *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Prakāś, Uday 2011. 'Wāren heṣṭiṃgs kā sāṃḍ'. In *idem: Das pratinidhi kahāniyā*. Nayī Dillī: Kitāb'ghar Prakāśan, 224-267.

Puniyani, Ram 2021. क्या गंगा-जमुनी तहजीब कल्पना मात्र है? Trans. Amarish Hardenia. secularperspective@googleposts.com, Oct 15, 2021.

Rushdie, Salman 1999. 'Introduction'. *The Vintage Book of Modern Indian Writing* (ed. Salman Rushdie). London: Vintage, ix-xxii.

Sadana, Rashmi 2012. *English Heart, Hindi Heartland. The Political Life of Literature in India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Sarma, Ira 2010. 'George Abraham Grierson's Literary Hindustan'. In Harder, Hans (ed.). *Literature and Nationalist Ideology. Writing Histories of Modern Indian Languages*. New Delhi: Social Science Press, 176-208.

Sen, Sukumār 1997. *Bāṅgālā sāhityer itihās*. Vol. 1. Kal'kātā: Ānanda.

Sen, Simonti 2005. *Travels to Europe: Self and Other in Bengali Travel Narratives 1870-1910* (New Perspectives in South Asian History, 9). New Delhi: Orient Longman.

Shankar, S 2012. *Flesh and Fish Blood. Postcolonialism, Translation and the Vernacular*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Singh, Priyanka 2021. 'Why Brands Are Harnessing the Power of Vernacular Content Marketing?' <https://writers.com/digital-marketing/vernacular-content-marketing/>. Accessed 20 September 2021.

Singh, Sandeep 2019. 'India's Vernacular Internet Boom Serves As Relief For Anxious Startup Investors'. <https://inc42.com/datalab/the-business-opportunity-in-the-vernacular-content-market-of-india/>. Accessed 20 September 2021.

*The New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language*. Köln: Bellavista, 2004.

Tul'sidās 2069 Saṃvat [2012-13]. *Śrīrām'carit'mānas*. Ed. Hanumān'prasād Poddār. Gorakh'pur: Gītā Pres.

van Schendel, Willem 2020. *A History of Bangladesh*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Varro 1938. *De lingua Latina / On the Latin Language*. With an English Translation by Roland G. Kent. 2 vols. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Varun 2018. 'Top 10 startups in India, working in vernacular domain' <https://www.theindianwire.com/startups/top-10-vernacular-startups-in-india-69461/>. Accessed September 20, 2021.

Williams, Tyler et al. (eds) 2018. *Text and Tradition in Early Modern North India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

## Chapter 2

### English and the ‘Vernacular’: Genealogy, Praxis, Politics

Nishat Zaidi

*mağribī zauq bhī hai, waḥa ‘ kī pābandī bhī  
ūñṭ par caḥ ke thīṭar ko cale haiñ haẓrat.*

He has Western tastes, devotion to faith he does not lack  
This gentleman has set out for theatre on camelback.<sup>34</sup>

This couplet by the famous Urdu poet Akbar Ilahabadi (1846-1921) voices the tensions between the English language and the ‘vernacular’ experienced by native elites who viewed the English influence as a source of jarring oddities in the life of the ‘vernacular’. Another example of this tension between English and the vernacular, or between authority and difference is the representation of Kim in Rudyard Kipling’s novel *Kim* (1901). Gyan Prakash has termed it a “classic illustration of how colonial discourse dislodges its constitutive oppositions in the process of bringing them into existence” (Prakash 1992: 153). The novel introduces Kim thus:

There was some justification for Kim – he had kicked Lala Dinnath’s boy off the trunnions – since the English held the Punjab and Kim was English. Though he was burned black as any native; though he spoke the vernacular by preference, and his mother-tongue in a clipped uncertain sing-song; though he consorted on terms of perfect equality with small boys of the bazaar; Kim was white. (Kipling 1901: 2)

One cannot ignore Kipling’s juxtaposition of English and the ‘vernacular’ as oppositional categories, alongside a dismissive reference to the ‘mother-tongue’ – all embodied in the persona of Kim. Prakash argues that Kim inhabits the zone of liminality formed on the “borderlines of black and white, fact and fable, English and the vernacular” – a zone where

---

<sup>34</sup> Akbar Ilāhābādī (1912: 26):

مغربی ذوق ہے اور وضع کی پابندی بھی ہے  
اونٹ پر چڑھ کے تھیٹر کو چلے ہیں حضرت

All translations are mine except where indicated.

"produced in liminality the relationship between these categories is transformed," not resulting in the erasure of hierarchies between these binaries but in their entanglement and imbrication: "the imbalance of power between the white and the black does not disappear but acquires a different balance after the two have been imbricated" (1992: 154).

In an attempt to unravel these very imbrications, this chapter engages with the Indian career of the term 'vernacular,' first under the spectre of colonial rule, and later in the postcolonial context, especially in its Manichean pitting against English. Most debates surrounding the concept have drawn from the long European genealogy of the term and the concomitant Western discourses concerning language and identity, as discussed in chapter 1 of the book. This chapter examines the deep and complex imbrication of the term in the ideological politics of the Empire, colony and nation to argue that the term 'vernacular' served to delimit the geographical boundaries of languages in order to qualify them as local and indigenous in opposition to English which was imposed as a cosmopolitan language. In doing so, the 'vernacular' produced an additional layer of hierarchy in the already complex linguistic terrain of India. The chapter further posits that the appropriation of English in post-independence India has given a new spin to the concept of vernacularity and vernacularized certain varieties of English itself, thus locating it in the realm of the glocal. It investigates the language hegemony incited by the politics of the 'vernacular' in which the minority/majority complex continues to haunt the language politics intertwined with the politics of the state as reflected in the Bhojpuri and Maithili movements. Finally, this chapter argues for the need to decolonise the so-called 'vernacular' and calls for decolonial cosmopolitan localism as the way forward.

Aamir Mufti, in his seminal study *Forget English* (2016), has argued that it was through the invention of 'Indian Literature' that India was transformed from a geographical space with complex histories and multiple cultures into a unified, unique civilisational and cultural entity by the Orientalists. According to Mufti, the British 'discovery' of Sanskrit dislodged the primacy of Indo-Persian on the one hand and imposed order on a linguistic and cultural complexity of "seemingly infinite proportions" by producing, through European methods of classification and codification, the modern Indian 'vernaculars' (Mufti 2016: 105). Mahmood Mamdani in his critique of the nation-state has also argued that colonial political modernity set out to build the European avatar of modernity in the colonies first through the civilising mission that entailed the "coloniser's forced imposition" of modernity's laws, customs, educational practices, language, and community life. Furthermore, it switched to a new colonial method that involved "drafting native allies and claiming to protect their way of life," as he says. "In the colonies, there would be no native majority built to resemble the coloniser, instead there would be assorted minorities, each preserved under the leadership of a native elite" (Mamdani 2020: 2f.).

Following the arguments of Mufti and Mamdani, I argue that any political discourse concerning identity that is based on linking the 'vernacular' and English to the opposite poles of indigenous and foreign or local and cosmopolitan, is misleading. As I will spell out in this chapter, the 'vernacular' was the product of the same imperialist agenda that English is deemed to symbolise. Its production was situated within the vortex of the political economy of print capitalism and institutional rationalisation, and it was intricately entangled with hierarchies of caste, class, religion, and region. The attempted transformation of indigenous languages, many with rich literary cultures, into the print-friendly, rational, civilised 'vernaculars' that represented the geographical and cultural specificity and ethnic identity of the specific language-speaking groups, served the colonial agenda of

maintaining and promoting “assorted minorities” under the leadership of the native elites. The post-colonial polity did little to redeem this, resulting in several fissures and conflicts. I further argue in the chapter that since the ‘vernacular’ is located in the realm of liminality, and has emerged as a transversal site of identity and politics with globalisation and the rise of digital technology, it is time to redeem the term from the state-controlled discourses, and install it in the realm of the social.

## English and the ‘Vernacular’: Beginnings of the Debate

In the first chapter of the book, Hans Harder has already elaborated many facets of the conceptual framework of the vernacular and also touched upon Sheldon Pollock’s notion of ‘vernacularization’. Contrary to many scholars who have treated vernacularisation in India as a nineteenth century phenomenon, Pollock has argued that in the early centuries of the second millennium, India and Europe witnessed a transformation in cultural practice, social identity formation and political order which had far reaching consequences. He has called this transformative process ‘vernacularization’, whereby universalistic order formations and practices were supplemented and replaced by localised forms, and local languages were transformed into vernaculars:

In vernacularization, local languages are first admitted to literacy [...], then accommodated to “literature” as defined by pre-existing cosmopolitan models [...], and thereby unified and homogenized; eventually they come to be deployed in new projects of territorialization and, in some cases, ethnicization. [...] As unmarked dialect was turned into unified standard, heterogeneous practice into homogenized culture, and undifferentiated space into conceptually organized place, vernacularization created new regional worlds. [...] The alternative world that vernacular literature creates becomes an alternative only given the presence of a "superposed" or dominant cultural formation of a transregional sort. [...] And it becomes a world [...] only by appropriating signs of superposition in everything from lexicon and metric to rhetoric, genre and aesthetic. (Pollock 1998: 41f.)

This chapter, much as it endorses Pollock’s notion of ‘vernacularisation,’ is not primarily concerned with Pollock’s thesis concerning the Sanskrit cosmopolis or the debates about the process or origins of vernacularisation (critiqued by scholars like Tieken).<sup>35</sup> The predominant concern of this chapter is the material history of the term ‘vernacular’, and the politics embedded in it since the time it was introduced in India.

The term ‘vernacular’ gained currency in India under colonial rule in the 1830s. Before this, the Orientalists had used it loosely, but not systematically, to refer to non-Persian, non-Sanskrit, Indic languages. Its appearance in administration was all the more significant since debates concerning language were central to the colonial administration, encompassing the Orientalists and the Anglicists (Bayly 1999; Cohn 1997). After Macaulay’s ‘Minute on Education’ (1835), the term ‘vernacular’ made its first concrete appearance in colonial India

---

<sup>35</sup> “The development [...] was much more differentiated than Pollock argues. Furthermore, vernacularization seems to have started much earlier than assumed by him, for its origins can be traced to well before the beginning of our era. Moreover, on closer consideration vernacularization in reality seems to have been a kind of Sanskritization, as the vernacular languages were accommodated again and again within the literary tradition of Sanskrit. Vernacularization proper probably only started in the colonial period.” Tieken (2008: 339).

when in a resolution dated 4 September 1837,<sup>36</sup> the Governor-General declared "it to be just and reasonable that those Judicial and Fiscal Proceedings on which the dearest interest of the Indian people depend should be conducted in a language which they understand [... He] is therefore disposed [...] to substitute the Vernacular languages of the country for the Persian in legal proceedings and proceedings relating to the revenue" (Howell 1972: 40).

This resolution was later endorsed and passed in November as Act No. 29 of 1837 (Howell, 1972; Mir 2006). It paved the way for the removal of Persian from law courts and its replacement with 'vernacular' languages, which, in the case of the Bengal Presidency, meant Bengali and Oriya. Urdu/Hindustani was designated as the official language of courts and revenue proceedings in those areas where it predominated. This was a landmark act, as it determined the direction that colonial language policy was to take, in conjunction with administrative and education policy, throughout India from 1837 on.

Coming two years after Macaulay's infamous *Minute on Education* (1835), the act might appear a reversal of his professed position regarding the inferiority of eastern knowledge systems and languages. However, if the two are read in tandem, there emerges an embedded pattern in which they are part of a single larger colonial schema regarding the instrumentalisation of language to promote the colonial agenda. The Act of 1837 ensconced the vernaculars as distinct from the classical languages on the one hand and English on the other. This combined Macaulay's stance with the indigenisation project initiated by the Orientalists.

Thus, the promotion of vernaculars was by no means a reversal of Macaulay's promotion of English as a vehicular language. Questioning the popular juxtaposition of the Orientalists and Anglicists as those who opted for the Westernisation of indigenous societies as opposed to those who believed in preserving the indigenous forms, Aamir Mufti has argued that,

Orientalism, despite its rhetoric of "preservation" of Asiatic forms, in this sense itself represented as much of a logic of sociocultural *transformation* (and in fact Westernization) as Anglicism did, requiring the *Orientalization*, as it were, of the social and cultural forms under its purview (Mufti 2016: 23).

The compatibility between Act 29 of 1837, foregrounding the use of 'vernacular' languages in the courts of law, and Macaulay's dismissal of 'the native literature of India and Arabia' two years earlier, is further borne out by the accommodation of both the positions within Macaulay's *Minute on Education*.<sup>37</sup> Macaulay's promulgations about the promotion of English are based on two premises. The first of these is, that English stood in the same relation with the local languages of India as Greek and Latin with English back in England in the days of Moore and Ascham:

---

<sup>36</sup> Between 1835 and 1837, a heated debate on the merits of English vs. the Vernacular was carried out through articles and letters published in Calcutta newspapers like *The Bengal Hurkaru and Chronicle*. If the arguments in favour of the vernacular education included points such as that the forced imposition of English would hamper the spread of education, that vernacular languages should be the medium of instruction but vernacular literature should be avoided, the arguments in favour of English education claimed the lack of suitable literature in the vernacular as well as the need to "teach English to those who can cultivate it to a good purpose, and the vernacular languages to all" (p. 275). In fact, the author of the letter to the newspaper *The Bengal Hurkaru and Chronicle* who signed his name as C.E.T goes on to argue that "the English and the vernacular literatures are connected together as a river is with its fountain, and a tree is with its fruits" (p. 274). See 'Mode of Educating the Natives'. *The Calcutta Monthly Journal*, November 1836: 271-314.

The first instance to which I refer is the great revival of letters among the Western nations at the close of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century. At that time almost everything that was worth reading was contained in the writings of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Had our ancestors acted as the Committee of Public Instruction has hitherto noted, had they neglected the language of Thucydides and Plato, and the language of Cicero and Tacitus, had they confined their attention to the old dialects of our own island, had they printed nothing and taught nothing at the universities but chronicles in Anglo-Saxon and romances in Norman French, – would England ever have been what she now is? What the Greek and Latin were to the contemporaries of More and Ascham, our tongue is to the people of India. The literature of England is now more valuable than that of classical antiquity. (Zastoupil and Moir 2013: 167)

In short, to Macaulay, the greatness of England was linked to the rise of English from vernacular to vehicular status, owing to its contact with Greek and Latin. This transitional view of language implied that orienting the South Asian ‘vernaculars’ to English could lead to the rise of their status, just as English had risen to vehicular status.

Secondly, Macaulay’s objects of English education were not the common masses of the subcontinent but only a handful of native elites: “a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, – a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” (*ibid.*: 171). It is to this class that he proposed to outsource the responsibility to “refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population” (*ibid.*: 171). Urdu poet Akbar Ilahabadi satirised these elite collaborators in his poetry when he wrote,

*qaum ke gam men dinar khāte hain hukkam ke sāth  
ranj līdar ko bahut hai magar ārām ke sāth.*<sup>37</sup>

Our leaders, in pain for the nation, are guests of the rulers for dinner; / In their suffering situation, it’s strange they’re not looking thinner. (Transl. Case 1964: 18)

The process of vernacularisation was thus envisioned as an integral part and a natural corollary of the spread of English education, which would pave the way for the modernisation of indigenous elites.

Macaulay’s iterations reinforced the general view upheld by colonial administrators regarding local languages, often termed variously as ‘uncouth’, ‘not standardised’, ‘barren’ and ‘unadapted to the conduct of judicial proceedings.’<sup>38</sup> Concomitantly, Macaulay’s ‘Minute’ bolstered the need to orient vernaculars to the superior frame of English which would in due course purge the local tongues of their flaws. Similar views of language as an instrument of civilization were embedded in the Government of India Act 29 of 1837,

<sup>37</sup> Akbar Ilāhābādī (1912: 167):

قوم کے غم میں ڈنر کھاتے ہیں حکام کے ساتھ

رنج لیڈر کو بہت بے مگر آرام کے ساتھ

<sup>38</sup> For more discussion of the responses of the district level officials to the open letter from the Court of Directors regarding the feasibility of use of the ‘vernacular’, see Mir (2006), and, for a longer treatment of the Act No 29 of 1837, Mir (2010: 51).

authorizing the replacement of Persian by the vernacular languages in the Courts of Justice and the Revenue Department. In a letter sent to the court of directors of the East India Company, the Governor of Bengal in July 1836 had argued that the use of vernaculars in the law courts would help people to enjoy “the inestimable advantages of having the public’s business transacted in a manner which secures their confidence, because it is plainly intelligible to them” (quoted in Mishra 2020: 36). In Farina Mir’s words,

[...] utilitarian and liberal ideologies informed the conception that colonial governance in India had to be efficient and just, and that the colonial state’s subjects had to recognise its power as legitimate. Language, specifically that used for local administration, was seen to be crucial in realising these governmental ideals. (Mir 2006: 397)

In other words, the language question in colonial India was immersed in extra-linguistic considerations right from its inception. The debates surrounding the use of English and the vernaculars were twin aspects of the same administrative agenda that aimed at promoting the political interests of the colonial regime.

### Language Ideologies and the 'Vernacular'

The question worth asking at this juncture is whether this conflation of the greatness of a land with its language and literature in Macaulay’s ‘Minute on Education’, or of government policy on language with justice, confidence and intelligibility to the common masses in Act 29 of 1837, was only a result of the autonomous utilitarian calculation of colonial administrators, or whether it had deeper ideological underpinnings. In other words, what kind of ‘linguisticism’<sup>39</sup> shaped their approach toward Indian languages? Dodson has linked the two documents of colonial administration mentioned above, as well as the approach of early British administrator-scholars<sup>40</sup> like William Jones (1746-1794), H. T. Colebrooke (1765-1837), Charles Wilkins (1749-1836), Francis Whyte Ellis (1777-1819), and William Carey (1761-1834), to the late-seventeenth and eighteenth-century European discussions of linguistic difference, which, as he argues, was already invested with a ‘sense of national hierarchy’ (Dodson 2005: 812).

The arrest and detainment of a prominent radical linguist, John Horne Tooke (1736–1812), and his fellow radicals in the Tower of London on charges of High Treason had triggered a debate in England on the accessibility of the language of law. The reason was that Tooke had used linguistic analysis to probe and discredit the legal terminology of the act under which he was arrested. Even S. T. Coleridge (1772-1834) deployed an etymological analysis to subvert the professed intent of the Act. Susan Manley (2007) has argued that the debates in England concerning the popular access to an understanding of law as a pre-requisite for good governance were founded upon John Locke’s (1632-1704) notion of language

<sup>39</sup> A term originally coined by Skutnabb-Kangas, linguisticism refers to “the ideologies, structures, and practices that are used to legitimate, effectuate, and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources between groups defined on the basis of language” (Skutnabb-Kangas 2016: 58).

<sup>40</sup> “Through the publication of grammars and multi-lingual dictionaries during the late eighteenth century through to the mid-nineteenth century, these British orientalist built up a powerful vocabulary and imagery to characterize Indian languages, which could then be deemed as being representative of certain features of its speakers’ ‘culture’ or ‘civilization’. Moreover, these characteristics were constructed so as to be evaluative, such that the status of a language and its speakers may be judged to be ‘religious’ or ‘scientific’, ‘weak’ and ‘degraded’, or perhaps ‘copious’ and ‘powerful’” (Dodson 2005: 813).



hierarchy as expressed in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). Rejecting the common philosophical perception of innate ideas, Locke argued that language had a human origin, and that its creation and continued use were “primal expressions of our humanity [... They] have a history that reflects the experience and thought of their speakers” (Aarsleff 1994: 271). Locke further underlined the importance of the etymological study of language as, according to him, it had the potential to unravel “the trains of thought that had been in the minds of speakers in the course of the progress of the mind” (Aarsleff 1994: 272f.). Eighteenth-century writer Condillac in his *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge* (1746), Tooke’s *Diversions of Purley* (1786), and Wilhelm von Humboldt in his *On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and Its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species* (1836) underlined this approach to language as representative of its speakers’ minds. Yet another grammarian, James Harris (1709–1780), the author of *Hermes, a philosophical inquiry concerning universal grammar* (1751), argued for a distinction between rational language and “the affect based language of sensory experience” which was always “tied to the local and was unable to transcend its fleshy life to do the political work” (quoted from Mishra 2020: 38).

Both Locke, in his emphasis on pure language,<sup>41</sup> and Harris by highlighting sensorial language as primary, posited ‘indigenous’ language as the natural language intimately bound to people’s collective thought. And it hardly needs mentioning that embedded in this approach there was an assumed visceral connection between the vernacular speech and the speaking community. This connection often served as the base of nationalism: Benedict Anderson has demonstrated the frequent isomorphic relationship between nationalism and language, as he speaks of nations as communities “imagined through language” (Anderson 1991: 8).

In short, the debates in England on the role of language shaped the approach of colonisers, both Orientalists and Anglicists, towards the local languages of the colonised countries. There was a general consensus that for a ‘just’ and ‘efficient’ administration, some knowledge of the ‘vernacular’ was imperative for the British officials to interact with their subjects and make the British administration approachable to the masses. After all, the idea of the ‘vernacular’ in England had acquired the connotations of the mother tongue, the national language and also the pure or natural language. It was also acknowledged that, although the colloquial languages of the colonised suffered from several shortcomings in comparison to vehicular languages like Persian, classical languages like Sanskrit, or even English as the civilising language, they could nonetheless be reformed and purged of their deficiencies through emulating English. In fact, the guiding principle behind Macaulay’s proposal for English education was a desire to create a class who could be entrusted with the task “to reform, modernise, and empower Indian vernaculars” (Mishra 2020: 42).<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> “This, I think, will be agreed to, that if a gentleman be to study any language, it ought to be that of his own country, that he may understand the language, which he has constant use of, with the utmost accuracy” (Locke 1693: Para 167).

<sup>42</sup> Macaulay’s views are further corroborated by the views of indigenous intellectuals regarding language. Shibli Nu’māni (1857-1914), for instance, voices similar views regarding the role of native elites in refining their languages: “The fact of the matter is that language is rooted in masses who are unconcerned with its health or accuracy. The elites refine this same language, purge it of its impurities and in the process leave out a large number of words and phrases, (often because their erroneous use is so common that if they are used correctly, they will not be intelligible or their popular usage in Urdu is different from their etymological roots in other languages)” (Nu’māni 1971: 40). *The Bengal Hurkaru and Chronicle* wrote in response to a letter from a reader who signed off as “A Civil Servant” “In every age and country, the progress of knowledge has been

Since, to the colonial administration, languages were intrinsically linked to cultures, grammar and literature were seen as prerequisites for standardization and modernisation of languages. The monumental *Linguistic Survey of India* (1903-1928) by the colonial administrator-scholar George Abraham Grierson was partly driven by such an agenda. The influence of comparative philology can be clearly detected in Grierson's aim to construct an exhaustive and detailed descriptive catalogue of languages and dialects of India, as he points out in his note on the Survey:

The literary or government language of any tract is widely different from the language actually spoken by the people. In some cases, this is only a question of dialect, but in others the polite language learned by Europeans, and by natives who wish to converse with Europeans, is actually distinct both in origin and in construction from that used by the same natives in their home. (Grierson 1967 [1903]: 125)

Much as his descriptive approach differed from Macaulay's prescriptive pronouncements nearly a century before him, the criteria of scientificity and civilisational level dictated the classificatory logic of Grierson as much as they had influenced Macaulay. In short, it was "the growing popularity of comparative philology" combined with "an evolutionary historicist understanding of the relationships between languages of the world" that entrenched a link between "an inadequate colonised vernacular and a much more successful and well-endowed vehicular English" (Mishra 2020: 40).

## Colonial Technologies of Vernacularisation

English, which was a 'vernacular' language of England, became a vehicular language first in Britain and then in the colonies under English occupation. The relationship of English to Indian 'vernaculars' was no less fraught than, for instance, that with Irish. Irish was recognised as the 'vernacular' language of Ireland, religious education was sought to be imparted in Irish, yet it was not deemed fit for administrative and civilising purposes (Crowley 2017-18: 331-334). Likewise, the local languages of India were accepted in the domains of law courts and revenue, but were deemed deficient for higher administration and for the purpose of imparting education in science and technology. To declutter the highly complex linguistic map of the Indian subcontinent and to rationalise local tongues, the colonial administration made several efforts. In this section I would highlight some of the strategies deployed by the colonial regime, ranging from governmental practices and policies to institutions, which played a crucial role in transforming local speech varieties into regional vernaculars. Here, it would be worth mentioning that most of my examples are drawn from north-Indian languages, in particular Hindi and Urdu with which I am most familiar. South Indian languages in some cases followed a different trajectory, which I have pointed out, but not dealt in detail with.

---

downwards, from the upper to the lower classes, and it is obvious that it must always be so. Those who are above the pressure of immediate want have alone the leisure to complete their education, to continue the cultivation of their minds in afterlife, to place on record, by publication of various kinds, the knowledge which they have so acquired. They have alone the wealth and influence necessary to organise the means of general enlightenment, and their example is alone extremely efficacious." *The Calcutta Monthly Journal* (November 1836: 279).

## A. Enumeration

In pursuit of able and efficient administration, enumeration, along with maps and museums (Anderson 1991: 163-186), was introduced in all the provinces of British India between 1868 and 1872, and in a more regulated and systematic manner from 1881 onwards at ten-year intervals. The process of quantification and codification was to help the colonial administrators document, classify and categorise diverse, dispersed and highly entangled records on caste, race, land, language, occupation, region and religion. While Bernard Cohn (1987) first drew attention to the role played by the census in the formation of discrete identities in colonial India, census records have mostly been studied by scholars from the perspective of caste and religion, not language (Kaviraj 1992; Appadurai 1993).<sup>43</sup> Asha Sarangi has drawn attention to this gap in the context of identity formation among Hindi-Urdu linguistic communities in the United Provinces (Sarangi 2009). Examining the role of enumerative practices in classification, categorisation, and collectivisation of languages and language communities, Sarangi posits that “both the colonial state and Indian nationalists used enumerative discourses and practices in further determining the boundaries of linguistic identities of social communities, and their political production from the late nineteenth century onward” (Sarangi 2009: 198).

A broad survey of colonial censuses from 1872 onwards makes it clear that linguistic identity reflected the mind of the speakers and their social classes to the colonial state, and it shared close ties with the spatial specificity of the language-speaking community. The survey also unravels the processes through which spatial boundaries of language were rigidified by distinguishing between languages and dialects. The 1872 census, for instance, geographically classifies languages thus:

In Oude, Oordoo is the common language, but in some districts Persian and in other Hindee words prevail [...]. In the portion of the Punjab east of the Indus, Hindee or Punjabee is spoken with varying dialect. A form of Thibetan is used in the Kangra highland of Lahoul and Spiti. Beyond the Indus, Pushtoo is spoken in the frontier villages to the North, and Beloochee to the south.” (Grierson 1885: 125)

The 1891 census listed a comparative numerical strength of Persian script writers as against the Nagari or Kaithi writers. The 1901 census gave further impetus to the task of delimiting linguistic boundaries, especially in the case of the ‘Hindi’ language area, when it issued an advisory note to enumerators: “Urdu should be recorded separately and all other indigenous languages and dialects should be shown as Hindi” (1901 Census: NWP and Oudh, as quoted in Sarangi 2009: 201).

Besides such subsuming, the linking of language and particularly script to communal identity was also an important feature of the census. The 1901 census hints at this when it points out: “Table viii shows clearly that Hindus prefer to read the Nagari, the Mussalmans the Persian character [...]. It may however be noted that the ability to read and write Nagari only is almost invariably accompanied by a lower degree of education in a wider sense than

---

<sup>43</sup> While all the above scholars have attributed the identity formation in Modern India to the colonial census, Sumit Guha has questioned this thesis of sudden colonial rupture as he argues: “The warm, fuzzy continuum of pre-modern collective life was not suddenly and arbitrarily sliced up by colonial modernity. Local communities had long dealt with intrusive states that had penetrated along, and augmented, the fissures in local society” (2003: 162).

the ability to read and write the Persian character" (as quoted in Sarangi 2009: 201). Commenting on this, Sarangi draws attention to the interpretive tactics involved in colonial enumerative practices:

The difference of character (script) is identified as difference of languages, and the difference of languages characterises the difference between social communities, i.e Hindus (Nagari) and Muslims (Persian). Each of these differences of script and language are further associated with differences and distinctions of cognitive linguistic preferences. (Sarangi 2009: 203).<sup>44</sup>

While one may argue that the census practices were merely descriptive and not prescriptive, and that the census only consolidated already existing fissures, one cannot deny the crucial intervention made by the colonial census in promoting certain local languages as vernaculars of the region with English at the helm as the model vehicular, cosmopolitan language. In arbitrarily describing and categorising existing practices, it attached attributes of geographical boundaries, caste and communal identities to various languages, thereby producing multiple vernacular minorities, the political impact of which lasted beyond the colonial rule in the subcontinent.

#### B. Print Technology and the Making of the Modern Indian Vernacular

No discussion of the 'vernacularisation' of local languages in the subcontinent can be complete without delineating the key role which the printing press played in admitting local tongues into the fold of 'literacy' and then to 'literature.' It revolutionised the pre-existing knowledge production and dissemination processes by redrawing the relationship between the text, the author and the audience. Despite staggered beginnings (Karapura 2007), colonial initiatives to print books written in Indian language bore results when the Danish Baptist began their printing press first at Tharangambadi or Tranquebar, (By Bartholomew Ziegenbalg in 1712) and later at Serampore (by William Carey in 1799). Joshua Marshman (1769-1837), William Ward (1769-1823) and William Carey (1761-1834) printed Bibles in different Indian languages, textbooks prepared by the teachers of the college of the Fort William, newly edited classics, newspapers and literary journals. This was followed by a swift and sharp increase in the number of printing presses in different parts of India, some owned by Christian missionaries like The Bellary Press (1825), The London Missionary Society Press (1840), The American Mission Press (1845), but also others owned by Indian proprietors like Sikandara Press at Agra, Durgaram Mehta's Press at Surat, Savanur Press at Dharwad, Munshi Naval Kishore Press at Lucknow, and the Sanskrit Press of Baburam Sharma at Mirzapur. However, it would be wrong to assume that the printing press impacted all local languages of India simultaneously or in a uniform manner. For instance, while Bengal had several printing presses publishing literary and pedagogical material in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, Orissa got its first Indian owned press only in 1866, namely the Cuttack Printing Press which published the periodical *Utkal dīpikā*.

The printing presses played a pivotal role in restructuring the pre-existing linguistic and literary map and re-shaping the native languages and literatures along the model of English literary taste and language ideologies. Sisir Kumar Das has posited that they marked a departure from the pre-existing scribal traditions, a decline in manuscript tradition with

---

<sup>44</sup> Farina Mir and others have pointed out similar arbitrariness with regard to colonial language policy in Punjab, which was annexed by the East India Company in 1849. Unlike its regular policy of promoting the local vernacular, the colonial state did not make Punjabi the official language of Punjab (Mir 2006). Also see Viswanathan (1989).

their glorious illuminations, as well as a slow decline of several local performance traditions through which literature was disseminated in the pre-print era, such as *avadhanīs*, *kabir laṛāi* or even *muśā'ira*, and imperiled the livelihoods of professional groups like Kathaks, Bhats, Charans, Kirtanias, Lavanikars and Ojapalis (Das 1991: 35-37).

Though the first printed book in an Indian language (Tamil), titled *Cartilha*, published from Lisbon in 1554, used Roman script, slowly printing presses in South India began using characters of Indian scripts like Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu, and so on. The same happened with some delay in the rest of India. Charles Wilkins is credited along with Panchanan, an inhabitant of Triveni in Hugli, with having shaped a set of Bengali types for the first time in 1778. Printing in Indian languages mandated imparting them a uniform lexicographical structure, which in the hands of scribes varied widely. The contributions of Charles Wilkins, Panchanan, Carey, Gilchrist and many others are significant in this direction. In fact, on 20 June 1803, Gilchrist wrote to the college council of Fort William College that he had made significant improvements in Oriental typography “on the European principle of separating words by spaces and joining the letters of each vocable, as much as possible” (Das 1978: 83). Some of the ways in which Indian scripts were moulded and modified to make them suitable for printing requirements are the following:

- the Western system of punctuation was introduced, for example inserting spaces between two words and arranging the lines of verse, as opposed to the Indian practice of writing which did not distinguish between the writing style of prose and verse;
- the paragraph was developed as an ordering device;
- the typographical technique of indenting to separate two series of sentences was new to the Indian writing system;
- a (more or less) scientific system of transliteration was developed;
- Romanisation was introduced;
- and marks and diacritics were used to distinguish sounds of Indian languages.

In this way, print technology proved vital to the process of the standardisation of Indian vernaculars, in particular north-Indian vernaculars [the existence of Tamil, Telugu, and Kannada (and in Ceylon, Sinhala) as separate, standardized languages pre-dates the colonial period], thus distinguishing them from dialects on the one hand and delimiting them from other vernacular languages with whom they shared fuzzy boundaries, on the other.

### C. European Sahibs, Vernacular Munshis: Fort William College and its Impact

Speaking of the two phases of Calcutta Orientalism, first the Sanskritic phase led by Warren Hastings (1772-1785) and the second, vernacular phase led by Lord Cornwallis (1786-1793; 1805), Amir Mufti credits the founding of the Fort William College as the “single most important institutional setting for an understanding of the inventiveness of Calcutta Orientalism in its second, ‘vernacular’ phase” as it “embodied this first transition in its history from the decade of Jones” (Mufti 2016: 121).

In response to the need of the young British officials to acquire knowledge of Indian languages and literatures which could enable them to carry out their duties efficaciously, the Government under Lord Wellesley founded Fort William College in the presidency of Bengal on 18 August 1800 (Das 1978: 1). To realise its objective of integrating Western scientific temper with knowledge about India and Indian languages, the college produced textbooks in living Indian local languages that included translations from works of classical

literature, as well as grammars and lexicons by European and Indian scholars. These scholars were grouped into the categories of Professors (almost entirely European) and the Munshis (almost entirely Indian). The Western-educated European professors like John Gilchrist (Hindustani), Henry Thomas Colebrooke (Sanskrit), John Baillie (Arabic), Edward Warring (Hindustani), and the Baptist missionary, William Carey (Sanskrit and Bengali) supervised the works of Indian traditional scholar-Munshis like Mir Amman, Mir Sher Ali Afsos, Lalluji Lal, Mrityunjay Vidyalankar, and Ramram Basu. The tensions between European goals and Oriental means that were at work in the conception of the college can be gauged from the Statutes of the College which clearly state: "In as much as the College of Fort William is founded on the principles of Christian religion, [... it] is intended not only to promote the knowledge of Oriental literature [...] but also to maintain and uphold the Christian religion in this quarter of the Globe" (as quoted in Das 1978: 7).

The college published about 132 books, mostly pedagogical in nature, which apart from large works of prose in Indian languages by native scholars such as *Baḡ-o-Bahār* (Mir Amman), *Kathāsarit Sāgar* (Lalluji Lal), *Prabodh candrikā* and *Rājābalī* (Mrityunjay Vidyalankar), also included lexicons, grammars and works on rhetoric. For instance, John Baillie wrote his *Arabic Syntax* in 1801, Gladwin wrote his two elementary grammars of Persian in 1802, Colebrooke and Carey published grammars of Sanskrit in 1805 and 1806, H. H. Wilson authored his *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (1815-18), Gilchrist published his *Strangers' East India Guide to the Hindustani* (1802) and *Hindi Dictionary* (1803); William Carey wrote grammars of Bengali, Marathi, Telugu, Kannada and Punjabi and even prepared dictionaries of Bengali (1815) and Marathi. Of the many prescient features of these grammars, one was the assertion that Indian 'vernaculars' were derivatives of and, therefore, inferior to Sanskrit, which was affirmed as the fountainhead of all Indian languages. This paved the way for their re-structuring under colonial patronage. Furthermore, the bilingual dictionaries with English alongside 'vernaculars' affirmed the lack of scientific and civilizational progress of Indian languages in relation to Europe, as in the case of Peter Breton's 1825 medical vocabulary (Dodson 2005: 817-818). Altogether, they went on to represent the collective state of the Indian civilization.

In short, the college played a vital role in polishing and standardising many local languages of India, which were spoken in many dialects, thereby attempting to bring order to the chaotic diversity of the Indian linguistic scene. However, one of the most significant contributions of the Fort William College in the direction of vernacularisation of Indian languages was what Mufti terms as "the shattering of the linguistic continuum between varieties of *khari bolī* practice" which, he argues, was achieved by "positing, with the certainty and effectiveness inherent in the state-Orientalist truth-claim, the existence of distinct and vastly different, indigenous and alien, practices of speech and writing marked by religious difference" (Mufti 2016: 125). Whether or not Fort William College was solely responsible for the Hindi-Urdu linguistic separatism, has been discussed in much detail, and with indecisive outcomes;<sup>45</sup> at any rate, the set-up at the college was in line with what later developed into the Hindi-Urdu-controversy.

---

<sup>45</sup> Much ink has been spilled over whether or not the foundation of Hindi-Urdu separatism is owed to Fort William College. Christopher King (1994: 26) argues that the ingredients for the bifurcation of *Khari Boli* into two forms were already clearly in evidence at the end of the eighteenth century. According to Amrit Rai (1984: 11) "[...] Fort William College did not initiate a language policy that subsequently led to the division of the natural language Hindi/Hindavi into its two present forms, modern Hindi and modern Urdu. [...] [T]he cleavage already existed when the British came upon the scene. By contrast, Alison Safadi (2013: 54) holds that

Summarily, what Alok Rai has termed as the “infinitely varied common tongue” (Rai 2000: 24) of North India was organised to produce a nationalist narrative of indigenous language with its roots in the Sanskrit tradition. Professor William Price (1813-1821), who joined the college later as the head of the Hindoostani Department, and under whom the tilt shifted to Hindi from Hindustani, distinguished these two on the basis of script and vocabulary, one drawing largely from Sanskrit and the other from Persian. Even though Price does not directly associate them with Hindus and Muslims, he does refer to ‘pundit,’ ‘muhammadan prince,’ and ‘hindu zamindar’ (as quoted in Das 1978: 51). Such a view, initiated by Orientalists and colonial administrators, was readily lapped up by the reformist leaders within both communities, who formed their own language associations. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan pointed out,

When this Hindi movement spread to Benares, I was talking to Shakespeare who was posted as Commissioner in that city. I was talking about Muslim education. Mr. Shakespeare was astonished at the tenor of what I was saying. At last he said to me: “This is the first occasion I have heard you speak solely about the progress of the Muslims: before this you always spoke about the welfare of all Indians.” I replied: “Now I am convinced that the two people will not be able to cooperate sincerely in any venture. This is only the beginning; later because of the educated classes, this hostility will increase. Those who live long enough will see it grow.” (as quoted in Qureishi 1962: 281)

So notwithstanding the above-quoted disagreements about the role played by Fort William College in sowing seeds of linguistic separatism between Hindi and Urdu, what certainly cannot be denied is that the large repertoire of literary works of Khari Boli, original as well as translations, produced in two separate scripts, Devanagari and Perso-Arabic, at the college, accelerated the communalisation of the linguistic sphere, which was echoed in the arena of nationalist politics.<sup>46</sup> Other than Sanskrit and Persian, Bangla, Marathi, Punjabi, and Oriya emerged as modern Indian languages with standard grammars of their own under the aegis of the college<sup>47</sup>. Though short-lived, the college became the bedrock for the production of modern Indian languages under the watch of English. It thus served as one of the sources of formation of political subjectivities.

#### D. English and ‘Vernaculars’ in Education Policy

That the promotion of English and the promotion of the vernaculars were complementary, and not contradictory impulses is further borne out by the education policy of the British in India. “Bentick’s decision opened the doors of Western literature and science to India, and

---

“[...] to suggest that there was any notion of divide and rule along Hindu-Muslim lines in the first few decades of the nineteenth century is to write history backwards.”

<sup>46</sup> For a detailed bibliography of Fort William College publications, see Frances Pritchett’s website <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00urdu/baghobahar/BBFORTWM.pdf>. Also see Sisir Kumar Das’s *Sahibs and Munshis* (Das 1978).

<sup>47</sup> F.W. Ellis, Collector of Madras, had dismissed William Carey’s claim regarding Sanskrit origin of all Indian languages, and argued that the languages of South India are historically related to one another and form a language family, but are not descended from Sanskrit although they contain many Sanskrit and Prakrit words. He planned the College of Fort St. George which served as incubator for new and unprecedented ideas. Mackenzie Collection, which the great surveyor Colin Mackenzie and his establishment of scholars were making to investigate the history of South India along with the College produced a distinctive set of historical ideas about language, literature, religion, law and land that were alternatives to the views coming out of Calcutta. For more on this see Trautmann (2006). I thank Torsten Tschacher for pointing this out to me.

ironically, it led to the promotion of vernacular languages and vernacular education," writes the education historian Suresh Chandra Ghosh (2000: 38).

Long before Macaulay's Minute, Governor Mountstuart Elphinstone and his Bombay Native Education Society had considered teaching English of secondary importance. In their 1825-26 report, they had proposed that the ideas of Western literature and science "will be most easily rendered comprehensible to them [Indian natives] by means of mother-tongue of each scholar" (as quoted in Parulekar and Bakshi 1955: 92). Not surprisingly, the English Education Act, adapted by William Bentick in 1835, had to be revisited within a few years of its passing as Governor-General Lord Auckland's government gauged the difficulty of spreading education among the masses through English. His reconciliatory gesture, articulated through his Minute issued on 24 November 1839, underlined that good textbooks and trained teachers could facilitate the teaching of 'useful European knowledge' of science and technology and other western education through the 'vernacular' Indian tongues (Zastoupil and Moir 2013: 315f.). The English Education Act was thus amended to allow for the proliferation of Indian 'vernacular' languages and the translation of English literature to Indian languages to make it more accessible to the Indian masses.

The emphasis on 'vernacular education' gained momentum in the 1840s when a sub-committee of the General Committee of Public Instruction (GCPI)<sup>48</sup> at Calcutta began to review its policy of diffusing English education among the Indians. In 1844, under Henry Hardinge, 101 'vernacular schools' were to be set up in Bengal. According to William Adam's Report on Education in Bengal and Bihar, published in 1835, there were an estimated 100,000 elementary schools in the villages of the region. Likewise, Munroe counted 12,498 schools in Madras Presidency in 1926 (Datta 1975: 71). The colonial desire to produce India's civilizational progress through the dissemination of Western science led to a revamping of curricula content in schools. The orientalist expertise in Indian languages and cultural forms proved useful here. In 1843, James Thomason of Thomason Engineering College, now called IIT Roorkee, the British Lieutenant-Governor of the North-Western Provinces (current Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand), proposed to have a model school in every tehsil teaching in the 'vernacular' medium. Finally, *The Dispatch* of Charles Wood of 1854 brought closure to the series of historical documents on education.<sup>49</sup> It spoke of mass education "suited to every station in life" and used downward filtration theory promoting primary education in the 'vernacular,' middle in 'Anglo-vernacular' and higher education in English.<sup>50</sup>

The hierarchical relationship between English and 'vernaculars' was reinforced by the dominance of English at the highest levels of Indian education, and the 'vernacular' in primary and secondary schools. Lachman Khubchandani (2003), eminent author on

---

<sup>48</sup> Members of this sub-committee included E. Ryan, H. T. Prinsep, F. Millett, J.C.C. Sutherland, and Prosonocoomar Tagore. See the 'Report of the Sub-Committee, Appointed at the Meeting of the General Committee of Public Instruction, Held on the 29 July 1841, for Collecting and Arranging the Information Necessary for the Preparation of the Scheme of Vernacular School Book', Appendix VI of the *General Report of the Late General Committee of Public Instruction for 1840-41 and 1841-42* (as cited in Dodson 2005: 820).

<sup>49</sup> For the various documents on education such as Charles Grant's *Observations*, Section 43 of the Charter of 1813, the Minute of Lord Minto, Lord Moira, Sir Charles Metcalfe, Sir Elphinstone, Sir Thomas Munroe, Lord Macaulay and Lord Auckland. See Zastoupil and Moir (2013).

<sup>50</sup> The Dispatch of 1854 argued that "the vernacular languages must be employed to teach the far larger classes who are ignorant of or imperfectly acquainted with English [...]. We look, therefore to the English language and to the vernacular language of India together as the media for the diffusion of European knowledge." Garg (2001: 166).



language education in India, has drawn attention to the fundamentally elitist framework of colonial language policy which followed basically three patterns: i) in rural areas, primary education was imparted through 'vernacular' languages; ii) for the educated urban elites, there was English medium education even at the primary stage; iii) in between, there was a two-tier system with the 'vernacular' at primary level and English at higher stages. Sayyed Nurullah and Naik (1943) have also demonstrated that while the colonial education policies promoted a hierarchical educational structure, its ready endorsement by the Indian elites resulted in promoting an education system that produced Anglicised 'classes' and 'vernacular' masses.<sup>51</sup>

#### E. Translations: Producing Vernacular Knowledge in English Moulds

The modalities of print combined with the introduction of the Western system of education resulted in the urgency to produce books and translations in the mould of the new epistemologies. Translation became a site where 'vernacular' languages were standardised and their structure and vocabulary refined through the mediation of print technology. Apart from the work of Euro-American missionaries who zealously participated in vernacular translation activities to promote their proselytising activities (Dube 2004), a lot of secular western literature was disseminated into different parts of India through translations. The Minute of Governor-General Lord Auckland, dated 24 November 1839, underscored the importance of translations. In paragraph 11 of the Minute, the Governor-General stated that, "Another class of recommendations is that all the leading facts and principles of our literature and science be transferred by translations into the vernacular tongues." He even went on to cite Hodgson from his preface to the pamphlet *Pre-Eminence of the Vernaculars; or the Anglicists Answered*, published by the Serampore Press in 1837, where he had argued in favour of a "college for the rearing of a competent body of translators and of schoolmasters, in other words for the systematic supply of good vernacular books and good vernacular teachers" (Zastoupil and Moir 2013: 315). Thus, the primary objective of incentivising translations from European languages into Indian vernaculars was to serve the pedagogical needs paved by the Government education policy that mandated education in vernacular languages up to middle school. This, however, was not a one-way effort. Concerted efforts were also made by the English-educated indigenous intelligentsia, keen on promoting European learning and scientific temper among masses through 'vernacular' education.<sup>52</sup>

Delhi College, established in 1820s, used Urdu as a medium of instruction and taught not only literatures, eastern and western, but also science, maths, law, medicine, philosophy and other subjects in Urdu (Haq 1962; Minault 1999; Pernau 2006). To facilitate this, the college undertook a large-scale translation project of Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit texts and texts of European sciences into Urdu. To further boost this, the college actively participated in the formation of Delhi Vernacular Society (1840s), which undertook many more such translations of books on calculus, analytical geometry, hydraulics, double refraction and

<sup>51</sup> The establishment of the Hindu College may be cited as a case in point.

<sup>52</sup> Many Urdu writers and poets likewise produced large scale translations of English popular fictional works such as novels of G. W. M. Reynolds (1814-1879). Mention may be made of Zafar Umar's (1884-1949) Urdu adaptation of Maurice Leblanc's *The Hollow Needle*, or translations by Tirath Ram Firozepuri (1885-1954). Likewise, in Bengali, the first English literary text to be translated by the Vernacular Literature Society was *Robinson Crusoe* (*Rabinson krusor bhraman'byttānta*) in 1852 by John Robinson, in which the novel was adapted to the Indian context. Likewise, Ramnarayan Vidyaratna, among many other texts, also translated the French novel *Paul et Virginie* (1787) into Bengali as *Pal o bhārjiniyār itihās* in 1856.

polarisation of light, history, law, Abercombie's mental philosophy, and so on. Under its illustrious principals, Felix Boutros and his successor, Dr Aloys Sprenger, and teachers Master Ramachandra (Minault 2003), Nazir Ahmad, and Zakaullah (Habib 2002), the college became a prominent seat of learning. Apart from the Vernacular Translation Society of Delhi, there was the Calcutta School Book Society (1817), the Gujarat Vernacular Society (1848), Vernacular Literature Society, Calcutta (1851), as well as the Punjab Book Depot, an arm of Anjuman-i-Panjāb (founded in 1865).

The translation of key western scientific and philosophical texts formed the primary concern of the colonial translation projects. Dodson has outlined the difference between the translation practices of Felix Boutros, Superintendent of Delhi College and James Robert Ballantyne of Benares College (Dodson 2005: 828-830). While Boutros advocated transliteration of Western terms in Indian languages, underlining the lack in Indian languages to provide a corresponding term, Ballantyne was opposed to it, arguing it would produce gibberish. He, instead, believed that all science books should first be translated into Sanskrit, even though he agreed that Sanskrit had to be improved to accommodate this knowledge. However, in later years, Hindi translations carried out by the Nāgarī Pracārīnī Sabhā mostly followed the formula of Boutros. Thus, while Delhi College produced a large number of books of useful Western knowledge in Urdu, the pundits at Benares College produced these books in chaste and Sanskritised Hindi in Nāgarī script, such as Bapui Deva Shastri's books on algebra and world geography, while his Sanskrit *Elements of Plane Trigonometry (Trikoṇamiti)*, was translated into Hindi in 1859 by Veni Samkara Vyasa (Dodson 2005: 830). Another of the College's pandits, Mathura Prasad Misra, translated Mann's *Lessons in General Knowledge* into Hindi.<sup>53</sup>

Apart from serving the utilitarian motives of Fort William college's need for textbooks, or undertaking translations of religious texts like *Svargārohan parva* (1800), which is the Assamese translation of one Book of *Mahābhārata*, or the Tamil translation of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the translators mostly took an interest in tales and stories.

These translations redefined the generic and aesthetic concerns of literatures in Indian languages that came in contact with English. A case in point is Khwaja Altaf Husain Hali (1836/37-1914), the pioneer of Urdu modernity, who was not literate in English. His exposure to English literature and English literary aesthetics was solely through their translations in Urdu, which he read during his employment at the Government Book Depot in Lahore from 1870 to 1874, where his role was to edit and amend translated textbooks. He describes his encounter with English literature as transformative and stated that the prestige of Persianate literature had "declined in (his) heart" (Shackle and Majeed 1997: 6). He became critical of classical Urdu poetic forms like the *gāzal* and promoted purposiveness in Urdu poetry (Saksena 1997: 206-208).

Translation of Western knowledge was perceived as a gateway to progress by the Indian intelligentsia. While travelling to England, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan observed, "[i]n future also, unless we have all knowledge in our own language, we will remain as unskilled, illiterate and uneducated as we in Hindustan unfortunately are" (Hasan and Zaidi 2011:

<sup>53</sup> Other translations included Shastri, B.D., *Bijagaṇita: the Elements of Algebra* (Bombay 1850); *Vyaktagaṇita: Elements of Arithmetic* (Benares 1875); *Bhugolavarṇana: Geography of the World, Consisting Chiefly of the Geography of India* (Mirzapore 1853); Jasan, R. (trans.), *Bhūgola-Candrikā: Geography of the World* (Benares 1859); Mishra, M. P., *A Trilingual Dictionary; Being a Comprehensive Lexicon in English, Urdu, and Hindi, Exhibiting the Syllabication, Pronunciation and Etymology of English Words, with Their Explanation in English, and in Urdu and Hindi in the Roman Character* (Benares 1865), etc.

104). Bharatendu Harishchandra, a pioneer of modern Hindi literature, also voiced similar views in his long poem “Hindī kī unnati par vyākhyān” (“A Commentary on the Progress of Hindi”) which he recited at the Hindīvardhinī Sabhā in June 1877:

*Nij bhāṣā unnati ahai sab unnati ko mūl  
bin nij bhāṣā jñān ke mitat na hiyā ko sūl  
amgrejī parhī ki jadapi sab guṇ hot pravīn  
pai nij bhāṣā jñān bin, rahat hīn ke hīn.*<sup>54</sup>

The progress of every kind depends on the progress of one’s own language / Without the progress of one’s own language, the heart remains riddled with thorns. / Education in English makes one equipped in all skills for sure. / But without the knowledge of one’s own language, one remains a pauper.

All this is not to say that translations were politically neutral zones where western knowledge was transmuted into Indian languages for pedagogical and utilitarian purposes. On the contrary, translations served as an eminently charged arena where indigenous social hierarchies were defined and caste, class and other differences articulated through a careful moulding of the structure and vocabulary of the vernacular languages. In thus shaping the vernacular languages along the model of English language and epistemology, translations also became a site of assertion for the English educated Indian elites.<sup>55</sup>

### Modernising/Anglicising Vernaculars, Vernacularising English

One significant impact of this dual process of indigenization in colonial culture – the Sanskritisation of tradition on the one hand and the moulding of the local tongues into ‘modern vernaculars’ on the other – was the new imaginary of the nation. India was imagined as a cultural entity and singular historical subject, first through arbitrary translations of Persian works into English and secondly through a privileging of Sanskrit over other indigenous languages and literatures. Thus, Muhammad Qasim Farishta’s (1560-1620) dynastic history of Mughal rulers, *Gulistān-i-ibrahīmī* (1620), first published in 1768, was translated in two volumes by Alexander Dow as *The History of Hindostan* (1768). Likewise, most of the early histories of Indian literature produced by the Western scholars either conflated Indian with Sanskrit or only included a few North Indian languages at the cost of south Indian or other local languages. Albrecht Weber’s *History of Indian Literature* (German original 1852), Ernst P. Horowitz’s *A Short History of Indian Literature* (1907), Maurice Winternitz’s<sup>56</sup> three-volume *History of Indian Literature* (German original 1908-22), Herbert H. Gowen’s *History of Indian Literature* (1931), Garcin de Tassy’s two-volume *History*

<sup>54</sup> निज भाषा उन्नति अहै, सब उन्नति को मूल, / बिन निज भाषा-ज्ञान के, मिटत न हिय को सूल।  
अंग्रेजी पढ़ि के जदपि, सब गुण होत प्रवीन, / पै निज भाषा-ज्ञान बिन, रहत हीन के हीन।  
(Harishchandra 1877: 731).

<sup>55</sup> In this connection the argument of Abhishek Tah with regard to Bengali translations may be extended to translation practices in other Indian languages, too. Tah argues that the translations carried out under the aegis of colonial institutions “paved the way for the upper-class urban elites to mould the Bengali language in their way (by excluding the colloquial register and language of the masses) to represent their ethos and class hierarchy and identity [...]. Translations produced by these institutions, in many ways, were the tools through which the various contesting views on the form and diction of the language of/in print got articulated.” Tah (2021: 73).

<sup>56</sup> Though published in English under Maurice Winternitz, his real name was Moritz Winternitz.

of the *Literature of Hindu and Hindustani* (French original, 1839-47; revised, enlarged and published in three volumes in 1870-71), George A. Grierson's *Modern Vernacular Literature of Hindustan* (1889), etc. may be cited as examples.

More than ignorance, this obfuscation was rather deliberate, as Francesca Orsini has argued in her discussion of a large-scale import of books in Indian languages to London by the German-British book importer and publisher Nicholas Trübner (1817-1884). This is catalogued in Trübner & Co.'s monthly *American and Oriental Literary Record*, launched in London in 1865. Drawing attention to the "staggering number of books" in Indian languages like Sanskrit, Hindi, Urdu/Hindustani, Marathi, Gujarati, Telugu and Tamil that arrived at the Paternoster Street in London every month, Orsini writes, "even in the age of Amazon, this has just no equivalent today" (Orsini 2019: 31). However, as Orsini notices, there is a near absence of any mention of these books in the histories of Indian literature or world literature written by western scholars. Orsini attributes it to what Shu-Mei Shih has termed as "technologies of recognition," where the West is the agent of recognition and rest its object, that awaits recognition from the West (Orsini 2019: 30).

In this manner, colonial mediations in the realm of language resulted in the rapid transformation of language and literary dynamics in the society under the spectre of English. One of the most significant outcomes of colonial mediation and the dissemination of European literature in the subcontinent was the altered notion of literariness. "The concept of modernity in literary history was also related to the relation that each Indian language and literature developed with English. Sanskrit and Persian literary models were labelled as traditional and medieval, and those found in English, irrespective of any period, as modern," writes Sisir Kumar Das (1991: 30). The impact of the colonial administration on principles of modernity like rationalism, secularisation, democracy, and individualism altered the literary culture of Indian languages in a significant way.

To illustrate this shift of writing norms, let us look at some well-documented nineteenth-century developments in Urdu literature. The liberal, utilitarian understanding of literature and literariness inspired a tectonic shift from poetry to prose. This received a further boost through the proliferation of print culture and the spread of vernacular education among the masses. Inspired by Mir Amman's prose written in a "simple and elegant style" (Saksena 1980:244) and under the influence of English literature, new prose forms evolved, such as the essay. Sir Syed's periodical *The Mohammedan Social Reformer*, or the *Tahzīb al-akh̄lāq*, patterned after Addison and Steele's *Tatlar* and *Spectator*, published essays by leading renaissance figures of the so-called Delhi Renaissance. Another institution that aimed to promote scientific temper among Indians was the Scientific Society, later known as the Aligarh Scientific Society (1864) (Khan 2000).

This desire to modernise the Indian education system and to publish all European knowledge in one's own language naturally had an impact on the growth and spread of these languages. In Urdu, Sir Syed, along with others like Maulana Shibli, Muhammad Husain Azad (a graduate of Delhi College), Altaf Hussain Hali, Deputy Nazir Ahmad and many others pioneered modern Urdu prose, freeing it from the ornate style of their predecessors.

A more significant outcome of the modernisation and shift towards prose in Urdu was the emergence of new aesthetics. Traditional *ghazal* poetry was denounced as decadent, and a

more rational *nazm*<sup>57</sup> form of poetry received a further boost. Hali played a pioneering role in this regard. Under the influence of Colonel Holroyd and Syed Ahmad Khan, he began to work towards weaning Urdu poetry from its themes of love and turning it towards facts and events. With this objective in mind, he wrote his *Muqaddama-i šī'r-o śā'irī* (1890), a critical treatise on poetry that attempted to formulate a new poetics based on the idea of purposiveness in literature. Hali's denigration of the Urdu poetic tradition is even more vocal in his *Musaddas-i-madd o jazr-i-islām* (*The Ebb and Flow of Islam*, transl. Shackle and Majeed 1997). Hali's mentor, Sir Syed, in his congratulatory letter to the poet, wrote, "It would be entirely correct to say that with this Musaddas begins the modern age of [Urdu] poetry" (Shackle and Majeed 1997: 35). This emergence of new aesthetics was not confined to Urdu. The transition of languages into modern Indian 'vernaculars' coincided with the transformation of their aesthetic principles, whereby not just the linguistic features, but also literary values were recast under the influence of the English language and literature (Das 1991: 30-46). Literary works reveal their socio-cultural context not only through their content but also through their form. Given that the shift in aesthetic values was primarily advocated by the Indian elites, it may be deemed as a manifestation of the readjustment of Indian elites to the profound structural transformations underway.

The second outcome of the process of vernacularisation was that the territorial delimiting of languages enforced through the census and the various education policies paved the way for the transition of local idioms into regional languages,<sup>58</sup> resulting in the conflation of linguistic and regional identity. Though the local speech forms were always rooted in respective spatial contexts,<sup>59</sup> those spatial contexts were constituted more as social categories, with language forms often penetrating each other, than political ones. They were neither in sync with the state-determined standard vernacular languages subsuming other forms as dialects, nor with the state-determined boundaries of the provinces. Wood's Dispatch of 1854 further forced colonial officials to draw geographical boundaries of languages. Many languages with entangled histories were desynonymised in the process. The case of Hindi and Urdu has already been discussed. Likewise, in the case of the Bengali-Oriya controversy, questions pertaining to actual geographical boundaries (for instance, whether Midnapore should be an Oriya territory or Bangla) and the ability of Oriya to serve as a pedagogical tool were debated, as some like Kantichandra Bhattacharya believed that Oriya was not an independent language but a dialect of Bangla.

The superimposition of regional identity on linguistic identity sparked nationalist aspirations in different linguistic regions. One may cite Tamil nationalism of the 1930s or Telugu

---

<sup>57</sup> Unlike the *gazel* form in which each couplet is thematically independent and there is no logical progression as one moves from one couplet to the next, the *nazm* form is more tightly structured around one theme which the poet introduces, develops and concludes in accordance with poetic laws in a logical fashion. It requires controlling one's thoughts and feelings.

<sup>58</sup> Not surprisingly, the Constitution of India has preferred the term 'regional languages' over 'vernacular' languages. Refer to Part XVII, Chapter II, "Regional Languages."

<sup>59</sup> This was more clearly defined in South India where the idea that languages have bounded territories is old. Already around 1000 CE, for example, Tamil grammars specify the territory where they apply as ranging from Kanyakumari to the Venkata Mountain (i.e. Tirupati), and from the western mountains to the eastern ocean, and there are similar claims in Kannada and Telugu grammars. For more see Sheldon Pollock's *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men* (Pollock 2009) [I am grateful to Torsten Tschacher for drawing my attention to this].

or Marathi nationalism as examples of this.<sup>60</sup> The politicisation of the linguistic sphere that happened during the colonial rule continued unabated in the post-colonial period, giving rise to civil conflicts. The Reorganisation of States Act of 1956 was passed by the parliament on the recommendation of the Fazl Ali Commission (1955), by which 26 states and union territories were reorganised into 14 states and 6 union territories, based on linguistic identity. This resulted in a number of language riots in post-independence India. Pritipushpa Mishra has called this territorialisation the 'landing of languages.' Faisal Devji has discussed this with reference to the resultant foreignisation of Urdu, and drawing from Yves Lacoste, has used the term 'geographicity' for the process (Devji 2014: paragraph 15).

Drawing attention to the Latin *verna* inherent in the phrase 'vernacular', "like memory in a microchip", and linking it to the history of subjugation, Ranajit Guha posits that even though the English usage of the term reduced it to the "indigenous" and thereby attempted to redeem it, it did not leave its Latin trace. "For in India 'vernacular' established itself as a distancing and supremacist sign which marked out its referents, the indigenous languages and cultures, as categorically inferior to those of the West and of England in particular" (Guha 2002: 474f.). Notwithstanding the legitimacy of Guha's argument that the term, in its "every utterance", inherently upholds the supremacy of the English language and people, by the same token it also wields authority over other indigenous speech forms 'below' it.

Pritipuspa Mishra has observed that the hegemonic power of the 'vernacular' has played a significant role in territorial and political alignments in modern India. The 'vernacular', therefore, cannot be deemed simply as the marker of the local, powerless, and indigenous. As Mishra has demonstrated, the power of the 'vernacular' is derived from its claim to indigeneity, which often is more a construct than a reality. Hans Harder, in the previous chapter, has described this process in his discussion of the making of vernacular<sup>2</sup> into a 'middling category'. Mishra also posits that the vernacular has a dual existence, the institutional and the quotidian. It is as "a hegemonic, institutional marker of identity, recognized by the postcolonial Indian State" that the power of the vernacular unfolds (Mishra 2020: 9).

One may cite a number of examples to support Mishra's argument. Nagaland, for instance, is a small state with a population of 1,216 thousand (in 1991) but functions with nearly thirty languages. Naga Pidgin, better known as Nagamese, operates as the de facto lingua franca in the state. In a sociolinguistic survey of Nagaland, Nagamese ranks the highest at 44.4 per cent, followed by English at 34.3 per cent, Naga languages other than one's mother tongue at 12.8 per cent, and Hindi at 12.4 per cent (as quoted in Khubchandani 1998: 66). Despite such intense use of Nagamese for inter-group communication in all oral situations, however, many Naga groups show strong resentment to the suggestion of sending their own children to learn Nagamese in school. The reason clearly is that they see the state-recognised languages (Hindi, English) as the more powerful languages of opportunity as compared to their actual mode of communication.

Likewise, in Jharkhand and the adjacent regions of neighbouring states (Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa), a diglossic situation prevails. People converse in hybrid Sadani/Sadri, but attempts

---

<sup>60</sup> For a more exhaustive discussion of this in the case of Oriya, see Mishra's chapter 'How the Vernacular Became Regional' in Mishra (2020: 31-75). For a similar discussion of Tamil see Sumathi Ramaswamy (1997); for Telugu see Mantena (2005; 2013) and for Marathi see Naregal (2001). The emergence of an autonomous Punjabi identity is discussed in Mir (2010), and Lisa Mitchell (2009) provides insights into the politics of the mother tongue in colonial Andhra Pradesh.

to introduce Sadani in schools have failed as many tribal elites resent Sadani for education due to its 'low' esteem, and prefer Hindi or a regional 'vernacular' (such as Bhojpuri or Maithili) as a medium of instruction.

However, the common misrepresentation in the state census due to the 'vernacular'-dialect power dynamics is not always endorsed by the masses. A case in point are the long-standing Maithili nationalist aspirations (Jha 2018). The politics of classification and categorization of languages and dialects produced Hindi as the hegemon and subsumed several other languages under it as 'dialects'. The numerical dominance of Hindi over and against other languages has been made possible by listing Bagheli, Bundelkhandi, Rajasthani, Braj, Avadhi, Bhojpuri, Magahi, and Maithili, among others, as dialects of Hindi.<sup>61</sup>

Thus, the enumerative logic that produced the Hindi majority also resulted in a backlash from Maithili and Bhojpuri, powerful local languages with a rich body of literature.<sup>62</sup> Though Maithili was later included in the eighth schedule of the Constitution of India in its 92nd Amendment in 2003, Bhojpuri or Surajpuri – spoken in Eastern Bihar around Kishan Ganj, whose speakers are demanding a separate state called Seemanchal – and many others like them are still fighting their battle for institutional recognition and often face opposition from the protagonists of Hindi. These language movements that have emerged in India over the last century have exposed the problematic of equating the 'vernacular' with indigeneity and powerlessness. Much as we may admit an inherent acknowledgement of the superiority of English in the term 'vernacular', these movements reveal its political potential as an instrument of power and authority in its own turn over the subsumed local speech forms. Besides, they also establish that the 'vernacular' in its hegemonic role is not coterminous with indigenous. G. Aloysius, in his book *Nationalism without a Nation*, has argued that the structural changes introduced by the British were always cognisant of the "the old order." Instead of causing a rupture in the pre-existing social order, they "in fact empowered it along polarized lines" (Aloysius 1997: 47). Seen in this light, one may argue that if on the one hand the term 'vernacular' enforced the transitional idea of progress (as in Macaulay's Minute discussed above), it also paved the way for the reassertion of pre-existing social hierarchies.

### English as a Postcolonial Indian Vernacular

In a 1909 article 'English in India' published in *The North American Review*, Charles Johnston stoically debunked all charges of English being a language of oppression or conquest. He,

---

<sup>61</sup> Interestingly, as Prabhakar Machwe notes in his monograph published by the Sahitya Akademi under its Makers of Literature Series, that the noted Hindi writer and intellectual Rahul Sankrityayan (1893–1963) advocated a re-drawing of the map of Hindi-speaking areas, on the basis of the so-called dialects. He believed that the language spoken in Meerut and Agra was the original mother of Khari boli; he called it Kauravi. (Machwe 1998). Aishwarj Kumar also draws attention to the fact that Rahul Sankrityayan was one of the few intellectuals who supported the use of Bhojpuri rather than Hindi as a medium of instruction in schools in Bihar (Kumar 2013).

<sup>62</sup> Jha (2018) traces the political assertion of Maithili back to Maithili magazines such as *Mithilā mīr* and *Mithilā mada* that amplified consciousness about the cause of Maithili in the 1920s when the idea of the Mithila region (*deś*) gained prominence. Further, the *Maithilī Sāhitya Pariṣad* (1931) contributed to consolidating and mobilizing the Maithili consciousness by supporting Maithili as a medium of primary education in the Maithili speaking region as well as the publication of a large number of text books in Maithili. In due course, the Maithili movement has raised demands such as enumeration of Maithili speakers in the census records, its recognition by Sahitya Akademi, demand for separate university in Mithila, and the inclusion of Maithili in the Bihar State Public Service Commission, etc.



instead, suggested that English was a language of commerce and “whatever in India was capable of being preserved, the English preserved.” (Johnston 1909: 702). Notwithstanding the patronising tone of these claims, the article voiced the sentiments that most Englishmen and Anglicised Indians genuinely believed and continued to believe even in post-independence India.

The tensions and contestations inherent in the making of modern ‘vernaculars’ and their conflicted relationship with English took new forms in post-independence India, when the sovereign nation-state was confronted with the task of deciding its language policy.

The asymmetrical relationship established among the indigenous languages through the hegemonic mediation of the postcolonial nation-state resulted in contestations at several levels. Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* describes the clashes over the Marathi-Gujarati conflict in Bombay:

That afternoon, the head of the procession of the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti collided at Kemp’s Corner, with the head of a Maha Gujarat Parishad demonstration; S.M.S. voices chanted ‘Soo Che!’ And M.G.P. throats were opened in fort; under the posters of Air India rajah and of the Kolynos Kid, the two parties fell upon one another with no little zeal, and to the tune of my little rhyme the first of the language riots got under way, fifteen killed, over three hundred wounded (Rushdie 1981: 265).

Similar conflicts occurred in different parts of India as well. Mahatma Gandhi had envisioned a nation bound by one national language, but the Constituent Assembly witnessed heated debates on this subject, resulting in the Constitution adapting an ambiguous stance regarding the status of the English language.<sup>63</sup>

The education planners of independent India were confronted with the same ambiguities and tensions concerning English and the Indian vernaculars that had beset the makers of the Constitution of India. The first Education Commission headed by S. Radhakrishnan acknowledged the role of English in achieving nationhood. It recommended that, “English be studied in high schools and universities in order that we keep in touch with the living stream of ever-growing knowledge.” All along, it also opined that English could not continue to occupy the place of the state language as in the past:

Use of English as such divides [the] people into two nations, the few who govern and the many who are governed – the one unable to talk the language of the other, and mutually uncomprehending. This is the negation of democracy. (As quoted in Kachru 2015: 114).

The subsequent commissions continued to support the use of English in the education system. For instance, the H. N. Kunzru Commission Report, published in 1965 as the *Report of the English Review Commission*, also advised against any hasty “change of English to an

---

<sup>63</sup> When finally, the Constitution came into force in 1950, Article 343 (1) of the Constitution of India provided for Hindi in Devanagari script to be the official language of the Union of India and unless Parliament decided otherwise, the use of English for official purposes was to cease 15 years after the Constitution came into effect, i.e., on 26 January 1965. But as the date for this switch approached, Anti-Hindi agitations caught momentum in the states in South India. The Official Languages Act of 1963, which provided for the use of English as ‘subsidiary official language’ beyond 1965, failed to satisfy the leaders from South India. In 1965, violent language riots erupted in Madurai. The Official Languages Act of 1963 was further amended in 1967 to strengthen the position of English, and in 1976, Official Languages Rules were passed to provide clarification on the subject of official language.

Indian language as the medium of instruction at state universities” (Kachru 2015: 114). The commission also echoed colonial attitudes in proposing English as an instrument to promote scientific knowledge and critical thinking: “teaching of English literature should be related to the study of Indian literatures so that, apart from its value for linguistic purposes, it could be an effective means of stimulating critical thinking and writing in Indian languages” (Chaudhury 2002: 48).

These discussions about the state policies expose the indispensability English has acquired in post-independent India. Most surveys and data collected at different points in post-independence India reveal the ever-growing number of English educated people in India, with the majority agreeing with the opinion that English is best suited for education (Kachru 2015; Chaudhury 1985; Parashar 1991). In fact, with the National Academy of Letters, Sahitya Akademi, recognising English as one of the Indian languages in 1954, writings in English have been institutionally admitted as part of the corpus of Indian writing.

Indian writers in English have always underlined the need to mould English to suit the Indian ethos. Here, one may cite the example of Raja Rao’s prescient ‘Foreword’ to his iconic novel *Kanthapura* (1938) where Rao envisions the localisation of English:

One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word ‘alien’ – yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up – like Sanskrit or Persian was before – but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it. (Rao 1967: viii).

Written at the peak of anti-colonial nationalism, Rao’s words have proven prophetic as English has spread its wings wider in post-independence India. Commenting on the increasing indigenisation or rather ‘vernacularisation’ of English in post-independent India,<sup>64</sup> David Crystal says, “Indian English is changing. Regional dialects are increasingly apparent – an inevitable consequence of this country’s cultural and linguistic diversity” (Crystal 2005; n.p.).

Indeed, it is this increasing habit of Indian code-switching and code-mixing that has resulted in what is now termed ‘Hinglish,’ a hybrid form of Hindi and English, with Hindi stock and English graft or even vice versa (Kothari and Snell 2011). Acknowledging the ever-growing sphere of influence of Hinglish through the internet, cinema and advertising, Harish Trivedi posits the risk of the nation losing its national language to this creolised form. He even compares this possibility to the case of colonised African or Caribbean countries where English was imposed, “[b]ut the major peril of thus promoting a dialect like Hinglish is that we may soon be left with neither Hindi nor English but just Hinglish” (Trivedi 2011: viii).

---

<sup>64</sup> For English in India has as many varieties as the local idioms (cf. Scheider 2007: 168; Krishnaswamy and Krishnaswami 2006; Gargesh 2009: 92).

If Trivedi views Hinglish as a threat to pure language forms like Hindi and English, there still exists a class of people who view Indian English as inferior to its pure variety. Crystal points out, "Many people still think of Indian English as inferior, and see British English as the only proper English" (Crystal 2005, n.p.). Perhaps it was to this class that Nissim Ezekiel belonged when he mocked Indian English in his famous poem "Very Indian poem in Indian English":

I am standing for peace and non-violence.  
 Why world is fighting fighting  
 Why all people of world  
 Are not following Mahatma Gandhi,  
 I am simply not understanding.  
 Ancient Indian Wisdom is 100% correct.  
 I should say even 200% correct.  
 But modern generation is neglecting  
 Too much going for fashion and foreign thing.  
 (Ezekiel 1989: 237)

The incursions of Hindi into English and vice versa have only increased in the decades after independence, so much so that English is no longer deemed as the language of the metropolis, a sign of the colonial past, or Western hegemony. Recent developments in Indian Writing in English, in particular fiction, bear out the diminishing alignment of English with 'foreignness' or cosmopolitanism (Anjaria 2015). In the aftermath of the liberalisation of the Indian economy in the 1990s, the diaspora is no longer a fetishised entity, and 'global' urban aesthetics have seeped into and inflected *bhāṣā* fiction as much as they have Indian English novels. Thus, Anglophone novels like Pankaj Mishra's *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana* (1995), Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor* (2004), or Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), have delved into the transformations wrought by liberalisation in lower-middle class lives, which benefitted economically but, having been thrust into the flux of consumerism, also experienced a sense of dislocation. These treatments are not very different from *bhāṣā* novels on the theme like Vivek Shambhag's *Ghacar Ghocar* (2013) or Ajay Navariya's *Udhar ke log* (2008). In short, the novel in English has emerged out of its western orientation to articulate new itineraries and sociological trends that imbricate it with writings in the vernacular in many complex ways.

Translations during the post-colonial phase have mostly been from Indian languages to English. Symptomatic of sustained consciousness among Indians of the superior position of English in India, this can also be seen as a means of empowerment (Kothari 2003, 2014; Niranjana 1992). Rashmi Sadana in her exploration of what she calls "anthropology of literature" (2006: 7), sets out to examine the way Indian readers, writers, translators, literary critics, and institutions situate themselves vis-à-vis English and India's regional languages. Pointing to a sea change that had taken place from Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August* (1988) to Chetan Bhagat's commercial blockbuster *Five Point Someone* (2004), one situated "firmly in an ironic pre-liberalisation India, caught in a bureaucratic haze" and the other "in comic, post-liberalisation India with call centres, negotiable corporate salaries" (*ibid.*: 178), Sadana observes,

Not much happens in *English, August* as the protagonist, Agastya languishes in a civil service posting in a small town far from his native Delhi. [...] By the time we get to Bhagat, and the phenomenon of Bhagat, we realize that those towns are filled with lower- and middle class aspirants, and their relationship

to English has changed in the intervening fifteen to twenty years. More people are “in touch” with a kind of English than ever before and, as a result, have new consciousness about their own social mobility. (Sadana 2006: 178f.)

Even as more and more people join the bandwagon of English alongside their mother tongues, strengthening the bilingual and multilingual character of the nation, English remains tied to the pole of power, desire, mobility, and wealth. Geetanjali Shree’s Hindi novel *Māī* (1993) explores this aspect linked to the privileged subjectivities produced by the use of English and the consciousness that vernacular speakers have of its currency. Sunaina and Subodh feel distanced from their mother, not just by knowing English, but by the desire and aspiration that this knowledge has aroused in them. English, therefore, dictates its own terms of negotiation with the mother tongue and the affiliated social milieu.

Recently, after a long hiatus of more than thirty years, the Government of India revisited the education policy and The National Education Policy 2020 was published, rekindling the debates over the ‘vernacular’<sup>65</sup> versus English. The Nadu-Nedu (Then-Now) scheme of the government of Andhra Pradesh was launched in 2019 with the aim of introducing English as the medium of instruction in government schools from Class I to Class VI and make English the medium of instruction up to high school-level in a phased manner by 2022. Such institutionalisation of English medium schools for the masses is an attempt to empower them. Scholars and intellectuals (Babu 2017; Faust and Nagar 2001) have highlighted the lack of knowledge of the English language as the cause of the poor academic performance of youth from marginalised groups like Dalits in higher education. Scholars of Dalit Studies have highlighted the liberating space offered by English. S. Anand, for instance, argues that even though in the absence of any “scriptural injunctions against the learning of English,” English offers equal accessibility to marginalised groups like Dalits and women, “the brahmanical classes have monopolised the use of English (as also other symbols of western modernity) and have justified the denial of the same to the Dalits” (Anand 1999: 54).<sup>66</sup> Subroto Dey goes on to pitch for “a new social” and claims that the introduction of English as a medium of instruction in government schools would create spaces where the privileged classes and the marginalised groups may come together and engage in a dialogue (Dey 2019).

### Beyond Postcolonial Binaries: Decentering English and Decolonising the Vernacular

Mahatma Gandhi had feared that the proliferation of English education would create a deep divide in society between haves and have-nots. In his address to the Education Conference at Wardha, published in *Harijan* on October 2, 1937, the Mahatma argued:

---

<sup>65</sup> The National Education Policy 2020 refrains from using the term ‘vernacular’ and uses “home language/mother tongue/local language/regional language” instead under the heading “Multilingualism and the Power of Language” (p. 13). Besides promoting bilingualism, whereby sciences and mathematics will be taught both in “home language/mother tongue and in English” (p. 14), the Policy further asserts: “The three-language formula will continue to be implemented while keeping in mind the Constitutional provisions, aspirations of the people, regions, and the Union, and the need to promote multilingualism as well as promote national unity” (p. 14).

<sup>66</sup> In her recent book *Vernacular English: Reading the Anglophone in Postcolonial India*, Akshya Saxena has argued that the representative power of English in postcolonial India, its imagined and desired capacity to speak for other vernaculars, in effect, vernacularizes English itself. She sees “English as a vernacular language of people’s democracy through its hope and frustrations.” (Saxena 2022: 26).

English, having been made a medium of Instruction in all branches of learning, has created a permanent bar between the highly educated few, and the uneducated many. It has prevented knowledge from percolating to the masses. The excessive importance given to English has cast upon the educated class, a burden which has maimed them mentally for life and made them strangers in their own land (*Collected Works*, Vol 72, P 287).

While Gandhi's words may still symbolically appeal to a commonsensical understanding of India's language situation, it has to be admitted that in the three-quarters of a century that has elapsed since then, the circumstances have changed. English has indeed gained wider currency, as shown above. Ambivalence in evaluating this state of affairs, or even its downright rejection, still prevails. Gyanendra Pandey, for instance, in an article with the telling title "Indians once displayed pride in multilingualism: Return of an instrumental English signals a new phase", echoes Gandhi when he interprets the current situation as a "decline of pride in bilingualism (not to say, multilingualism) – indeed, a decline of pride in linguistic/cultural inheritance and skills" and attributes it to two factors, firstly "an erosion of self-respect in the nation," which he attributes to the "demise of an anti-colonial, inclusive and forward-looking nationalism", and the simultaneous rise of "a narrow, exclusivist, backward-looking jingoism." The second factor, according to Pandey, relates to "the worldwide ascendancy of today's neoliberal, market-driven, consumerist capitalism" where nothing "counts against brute calculation of monetary profit and loss" (Pandey 2020).

Seeped in the rhetoric of nationalism, Pandey's argument may make sense from the 'nationalist,' or indeed 'vernacular,' point of view, which itself is an outcome of Western learning and English education, there is another dimension, too. The ever-growing sphere of influence of English in post-colonial India and the inability of the sovereign nation to replace it is also linked to the global rise of English, which Aamir Mufti calls "global literary vernacular" (emphasis in the original). Mufti further explains the term as "an assemblage and apparatus for the assimilation and domestication of diverse practices of writing (and life-worlds) on a world scale" (Mufti 2016: 17). English thus is involved in "exchange relations" whereby particularities of the local are placed in the global chain of circulation through English.

Speaking of the increased use of English in India, even in small towns, Rashmi Sadana posits, "[t]his awareness does not take census numbers away from bhashas but in fact creates more porous boundaries between languages, and the thoughts and ideas contained in them" (Sadana 2006: 178f.). Thus, English has entered an already porous and fuzzy linguistic domain in India, which has always been fraught with diversity, plurality and even inequality.

Speaking of it in terms of two zones – the stable zones like South India where identity and language communication are rather fixed, and fluid zones like the entire Hindi/Punjabi/Kashmir belt where "language identity and language communication patterns are not necessarily congruent [as] affiliations with one language or the other tend to fluctuate with the shift in social political climate and pressures of acculturation", and "ingroup/outgroup identity" is determined by factors other than language, Khubchandani posits:

Plural communities organize their multilingual repertoire through various processes of language contact. The use of the lingua franca Hindustani represents one such process. Bilingualism is another such process, manifesting

diverse patterns characterized by socio-economic strata and the density of population (in metropolitan cities, towns, and rural areas) [...]. Characterizing cultural pluralism of the Jharkhand region, Ram Dayal Munda states: "Culturally Chhotanagpur is the only area in the entire country where three major cultural streams – Aryan, Dravidian and Austroasians, represented through various languages – have converged to create a cultural synthesis of its own kind." This phenomenon highlights the assertion of the particularist identity through their ancestral language (Santali, Kurukh, Ho etc), the regional identity through the consensus over creolized Sadani/Nagpuria, and the national identity through the superconsensus over Hindi, signifying the vitality of non-exclusive identities in a pluralistic framework. (Khubchandani 2002: n.p.)

The fuzziness that Khubchandani describes above in the case of languages is what Sudipta Kaviraj describes for other identity markers in pre-colonial India.<sup>67</sup> In Sisir Kumar Das's view, the pre-colonial language scenario in India, which the British viewed as the 'Tower of Babel', had its own internal order which allowed for a harmonious existence of multiple tongues:

Bilingualism was an accepted way of life [... It] did not mean equal prestige for both the languages. Many poets wrote both in Sanskrit and in their mother tongues; or in Persian and Sindhi or Urdu [...]. In the Dogri speaking area, for example, none was considered a prestigious writer unless one wrote in Braj [...]. But there is hardly any evidence of the existence of any kind of tension among the linguistic communities and of any serious problem faced by the writers regarding the choice of their medium. (Das 1991: 28)

Das's claim about the organicity of the linguistic scenario in pre-colonial India appears to be a romanticised obfuscation of the oppressive caste and class disparities, social fissures and ascriptive inequalities that marked it. To the contrary, one may argue that the intervention of English language just reaffirmed those inequalities, safeguarding the interest of the dominant groups, and that the category of 'the vernacular' served as an agentive tool for the same.

In other words, the colonial production of the 'vernacular' was aimed at replacing the fuzziness and plurality of Indian society through institutional interventions for administrative purposes, without violently disturbing the interests of the native elites. And it was within this orbit of ideas that the nationalist moorings took shape. In a way, both English and the 'vernacular' in India were immersed in complex politics of power and desire which continue to remain operative even after independence. In short, if the British introduced a pyramidal structure of language with English at the top of the pyramid, 'vernacular' in the middle, and several spoken languages and dialects at the bottom, the post-independence nation-state reproduced the same pyramidal structure, as Bodra Hembrom points out:

The language policy of free India has created a hierarchical structure of the legitimacy of languages. At the apex of this hierarchy is Hindi, which is a link,

---

<sup>67</sup> "[Traditional Societies] tend to be fuzzy in two ways in which no nation can afford to be. First they have fuzzy boundaries because some collective identities are not territorially based. [...] Secondly, part of the fuzziness of social mapping would arise because traditional communities, unlike modern ones are not enumerated." Kaviraj (1992: 26).

official and national language. The intermediary layer of the hierarchy is constituted by regional languages, the languages of those speech communities that wield political clout, and those languages are perceived to be a part of India's ancient heritage. But numerous other languages with millions of speakers are dismissed as dialects; examples are Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Santhali, Bhili, Ghondi, Kurukh and so on (Bodra Hembrom 2016: 10).

It would, therefore, be an error and a conscious denial of the imbrications of the modern 'vernaculars' in the prevailing power politics, to accept the 'vernaculars' as synonymous with indigenous or native tongues, for they have absorbed as much of the English cultural system and moral and aesthetic assumptions as Indian English. The proliferation of the Anglophone intelligentsia in South Asia as a national intelligentsia can be attributed to the wide circulation of their works in the global circuit of books.

The colonial policies, through which discrete boundaries of local languages were produced, resulted in many contesting identities vying for ascendancy and supremacy, a contestation that further intensified in the post-colonial phase. The anti-English bias often voiced (mostly in the Hindi Belt) through epithets like 'Macaulay's children' is flawed, as it is rooted in the same colonial history which polarised the Indian linguistic scene through the discourse of indigeneity and uprooted the Indo-Persian public sphere. According to Mufti, "[t]he vernacular side of this debate is itself implicated in colonial genealogy and cannot sustain its claim to an authentic position uncontaminated by the colonial process" (Mufti 2016: 157). Suman Gupta has also drawn attention to the anxieties about the position of English in India, suggesting that the inculcation of English is seen as complicit with the nineteenth-century project of organising Indian texts and knowledge in compliance with the interests of the British colonial power. Citing examples of how even translations from Indian languages into English are seen by many scholars as a means of subjection, Gupta posits that the colonial relationship persists in the 'political unconscious' of postcolonial academic discourses (Gupta 2013: 161).

Acknowledging the presence of resistance to English, Rashmi Sadana observes that the "forms of resistance are much more complex than previously imagined and involve strategic uses of different languages and what they stand for depending on regional, national and transnational contexts" (Sadana 2006: 177). Sadana further posits the inadequacy of the postcolonial theoretical framework to account for these intersectionalities, as it "does not explain why and how English has played both a liberating and a confining role." In Sadana's view, postcolonialism blurs the vision of "all that is produced not just in English but *by* English", thereby erasing from our view how everyday use of English "intersects in myriad ways with other Indian languages, and the politics and the ideological frameworks therein" (Sadana 2006: 178).

Faisal Devji speaks of the failure of the post-colonial political frame in the context of Bangladesh's War of Liberation of 1971, which, having its genesis in the *Bhāṣā āndolan*<sup>68</sup> may be termed as an offshoot of the nationalist aspirations of the 'vernacular':

Post-colonialism, I would like to suggest, was born in South Asia in 1947 and died there in 1971 [...]. Might the new historical sequence of political founding initiated by Bangladesh signal the revenge of the social upon the precedence

---

<sup>68</sup> *Bhāṣā āndolan* [ভাষা আন্দোলন] refers to the political movement in East Bengal (1952) demanding recognition of the Bengali language as an official language of Pakistan.

of the political, and of equality on that of liberty, insofar as it depends upon the logic of civil war and its dissolution of the nation-state? (Devji 2021)

Extending Devji's argument to the discussion of the 'vernacular', we may argue that the category was used by the colonial state to transform a predominantly social fuzzy linguistic zone into a geographically demarcated, linguistically defined order that privileged the political to serve the interests of the colonial state. The postcolonial state's failure to placate this political order may be attributed to the close ties it shared with the interests of the traditional elite classes. Mahmood Mamdani also posits that "the violence of postcolonial modernity mirrors the violence of European modernity and colonial direct rule" (Mamdani 2020: 4).

Since both the post-colonial state and the postcolonial theoretical framework have failed to redeem the inequalities inherent in the term 'vernacular', which has only gained greater ascendancy and currency in recent times, and its privileging of English, would its replacement by a term like 'multilingual', as Orsini argues (2020), resolve the issue? Orsini would have us believe it would, but the linguists warn against its pitfalls. Braj Kachru, for instance, alerts us that, "Multilingualism does create competition among several languages, and/or dialects, hence linguistic tensions" (2015: 120). In so far as "multilingualism keeps languages distinct both at the societal level and at individual level" (Piccardo 2013: 601), it falls short of doing justice to the dynamic, supremely entangled linguistic scenario in the subcontinent. Perhaps it is time to disabuse ourselves of the Western obsession with the search for universals and look for plurilingual, pluriversal frames.

#### Pluriversal cosmopolitanism

To summarily present this argument, we proceed from the premise that the complex entanglement of both English and the 'vernacular' in the production of the political subjectivity in the subcontinent remained unchallenged in post-colonial times. The postcolonial frame, both as a theoretical tool and as a political scheme, failed to move beyond the asymmetries entrenched during the colonial period. We now need to move towards decolonising the 'vernacular' and depoliticising the linguistic scene to privilege the social over the political. In short, we need to shed the tendencies to polarize English and the 'vernacular' as emblematic of cosmopolitan and local, foreign and indigenous, and so on. Walter D. Mignolo argues,

Cosmopolitanism is a concern of Western scholarship, whether or not scholars who engage in cosmopolitan issues are natives of the Western (epistemic) world. The point of origination of "cosmopolitanism" – in other words – is the West, although its routes of dispersion encountered partisans beyond Western history of ideas and political debates. (Mignolo 2011: 252).

To challenge the Western orientation of the term, Mignolo has proposed 'Decolonial cosmopolitanism' which, he suggests, "shall be the becoming of a pluriversal world order built upon and dwelling on the global borders of modernity/coloniality" (Mignolo 2018: ix).

It would not be a theoretical overkill to suggest that this privileging of a pluriversal social order seems to be the logical way out of the current impasse concerning the 'vernacular'. This would allow the harmonious co-existences of a diverse linguistic continuum in full cognisance of the cultural plurality and specificity of the land. Speaking of the difference between the Western and Indian cultural attitudes, A. K. Ramanujan posited,



I think cultures [may be said to] have the overall tendency to *idealise* and think in terms of either the context free or context sensitive kind of rules. Actual behaviour may be more complex. In cultures like India's the context sensitive kind of rule is a preferred formulation. (Ramanujan 2004: 40).

Pluriversality allows for such a context sensitivity in which all linguistic forms can co-exist through conviviality, without the authority to subsume or regulate the 'other' and even without referring to political entities, the mediation of the state or any other political agency. In the context of the languages of the subcontinent, the G. N. Devy-led *The People's Linguistic Survey of India* may be seen as a step in this direction. In an attempt to counter the state-conducted decennial census – a colonial legacy, in which, as discussed in an earlier section, data results are often removed from ground reality – the *People's Linguistic Survey of India* was launched in 2010 and completed in 2012, and its outcome has been published in 50 volumes. In his endeavour, Devy is guided by "the abundant respect for the idea of India as a linguistically plural nation" and the grave peril to the minority languages of "phonocide." Devy also foregrounds the linguistic survey as an exercise in self-representation by the participants who speak India's languages. Marked by its non-state orientation, the *PLSI* is aimed at preserving "names of speech communities, their origin myths, history, folktales and folksongs, vocabulary, and customary laws and practices" (Devy 2014: 2).

Even though linguists may find gaps (Kidwai 2019) in the methodological tools deployed by the *PLSI*, it nonetheless signals an altered attitude towards language classification by privileging the social over the political and masses over elites, or in other words, the pluriversal over the universal. Such endeavours have the potential to redeem the English-'vernacular' debates from the abyss of binary politics.

Yet another register of complexity at the more proximal end of the temporal spectrum covered in this chapter that has emerged as a challenge to the English-'vernacular' binary and gestures towards 'pluriversality' is the mediation of digital tools in the linguistic panorama. With content in regional languages gaining traction and the introduction of typing tools based on Unicode, by which roman characters get converted into regional languages, has led to an exponential rise of regional language users of mobile phones. In fact, as per the 2017 Google KPMG Report on 'Indian Languages: Defining India's Internet', the Indian internet user base was expected to increase to 735 million by 2021. Indian language internet users were expected to grow at a CAGR [compound annual growth rate] of 18% to reach 536 million by 2021, while English users were expected to grow at only 3%, reaching 199 million within the same period. Rise in the popularity of YouTube videos of Haryanvi (Anonymous 2022) and Bhojpuri (Alam and Lomkar 2019) songs on social media platforms may be cited as a case in point for the popularity of digital content which is neither in English nor in the state-recognised regional languages or 'vernaculars.'

If the debates regarding the 'vernacular' so far have centred around questions pertaining to the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution (Saxena 1997) or the supremacy of Hindi, the mediation of digital technology has forged a space beyond state control where 'pluriversality' dominates. It allows one to wrench the language question from the predetermined and ideologically charged frames of 'nation' or 'identity' which the term 'vernacular' is so intricately enmeshed in. Such an approach also comes closest to Gandhi's vision. In opposition to the pyramidal structure of politics, Mahatma Gandhi had proposed a model of governance hinging on the idea of an 'ocean of circles', wherein he envisioned "ever-widening, never-ascending circles". In place of "a pyramid with the apex sustained by the

bottom”, Gandhi dreamed of “an oceanic circle”, of which individuals could be “integral units” (1997: 188).

The debates about English and the ‘vernacular,’ arranged in a pyramidal structure, tend to conceal the struggles of several minor and politically weaker languages. It is high time academic discourses acknowledged the reality on the ground and moved towards decolonising the linguistic sphere to pave the way for languages to co-exist in the ‘oceanic circle’.

## Conclusion

The transformation of certain local idioms into ‘vernaculars’ under the watch of English was closely tied to the formation of political subjectivities in colonial India. It redefined the relationship between language, place and people. New linguistic forms forged through new technologies, new channels of communication, meditation of state institutions, legislative interventions and state education policies, merged diverse publics into alliances of literary communities and into political groups producing new public spheres. The centrality of these linguistic reforms to the formation of political subjectivities and their inherent tensions did not diminish in the postcolonial nation state. The multiple minorities formed around the multiple ‘vernacular’ public spheres led by English-educated elites resulted in the failure of the post-independent nation-state to unseat English from its central position. Rather, it emerged as the only acceptable pan-national language. All along, the post-independence formation of states on the basis of the colonial geographical delimiting of the ‘vernacular’, resulted in assertions of several erstwhile neglected local languages for autonomy and authority such the Bhojpuri Movement, or the Maithili Movement.

To sum up, the ‘vernacular’ continues to remain a domain fraught by its complex and entangled historical relationship with English on the one hand and other local languages, which were assimilated or subjugated to these ‘vernaculars’, on the other. Going beyond the colonial hierarchies that privileged English over the ‘vernacular’ or the postcolonial democratisation that empowered ‘the assorted minorities’ of the vernaculars over the weaker language forms, this chapter has proposed a pluriversal cosmopolitan localism. This, in my view, is the way forward, in order to free languages from the clutches of linguistic imperialism in any form. It is a move towards decolonising the vernacular linguistic sphere, wherein English would co-exist alongside other local languages, shedding the hierarchy inherent in the etymological root of the ‘vernacular’ and in full cognisance of the complex and layered linguistic scene in India.

## References

- Adiga, Arvind 2008. *White Tiger*. New York: Free Press.
- Alam, Majid and Pramiti Lomkar 2019. ‘Dreamland of Bhojpuri Songs’. *The Statesman*, 12 April, 2019. <https://www.thestatesman.com/entertainment/dreamland-bhojpuri-songs-1502744905.html>.
- Aloysius, G. 1997. *Nationalism without a Nation in India*. New Delhi. Oxford University Press.
- Anand, S. 1999. ‘Sanskrit, English and Dalits’. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 24 July, 34 (30), 2053–56. <https://www.epw.in/journal/1999/30/commentary/sanskrit-english-and-dalits.html>.

- Anderson, Benedict 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised Edition. London: Verso.
- Anjaria, Ulka 2015. 'Introduction: Literary Pasts, Presents and Futures.' In *idem* (ed.): *A History of the Indian Novel in English*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp1-30
- Anonymous 2022. 'Can Haryanvi Music Industry Be the Next Big Regional Market?' <https://peddlermedia.in/haryanvi-music-industry-be-the-next-big-regional-market/>. Accessed April 4, 2022.
- Appadurai, Arjun 1993. 'Number in the Colonial Imagination.' In Peter van der Veer and Carol Breckenridge (eds): *Orientalism and the Post-Colonial Predicament*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 314-39.
- Aarsleff, Hans 1994. 'Locke's Influence.' In V. Chappell (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 252-289.
- Banerjee, Sarnath 2004. *Corridor*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India.
- Baylay, C. A. 1999. *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bhagat, Chetan 2004. *Five Point Someone*. New Delhi: Rupa & Co.
- Bodra Hembrom, Gomati 2016. 'Symbolic Power, Nation-state, and Indigenous Language: A Sociological Analysis of Tribes in Central India.' In G. N. Devy et al. (eds.): *The Language Loss of the Indigenous*. New Delhi: Routledge, 7-19.
- Case, Margaret H. 1964. 'The Social and Political Satire of Akbar Allahabadi (1846-1921)'. *Mahfil* 1(4), pp11-20
- Condillac, Etienne Bonnot de 2001. *Essay on the Understanding on Human Knowledge*. Translated from the French Original of 1746 by Hans Aarsleff. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chatterjee, Upamanyu 1998. *English, August: An Indian Story*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Chaudhary, Shreesh 2002. 'The Sociolinguistic Context of English Language Teaching in India.' In Kudchedka, S. (ed.): *Readings in English Language Teaching in India*. Chennai: Orient Longman, 37-66.
- Cohn, Bernard 1987. 'The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia'. In *idem: An Anthropologist Among the Historian and Other Essays*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 224-254.
- Cohn, Bernard 1992. 'The Command of Language and the Language of Command.' In *idem: Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 16-56.
- Crowley, T. (2017-2018). 'Language, Politics and the State: Reflections from Ireland.' *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 35 (1/4), 331-34.
- Crowley, Tony 2000. *Politics of Language in Ireland, 1366-1922*. London: Routledge.
- Crystal, David 2005. 'Mother-tongue India. A Talk for Lingua Franca'. *ABC Australia*. <https://www.davidcrystal.com/Files/BooksAndArticles/-4052.pdf>. Accessed on 20 October, 2021.
- Das, Sisir Kumar 1978. *Sahibs and Munshis: An Account of the College of Fort William*. New Delhi: Orion Publications

- Das, Sisir Kumar 1991. *A History of Indian Literature: 1800-1910*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.
- Datta, Kali Kinkar 1975. *A Social History of Modern India*. Delhi: Macmillan.
- Devji, Faisal 2014. 'India in the Muslim Imagination: Cartography and Landscape in 19th Century Urdu Literature.' *Idea of South Asia*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.3751>.
- Devji, Faisal 2021. 'An impossible founding.' *Global Intellectual History*, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23801883.2021.1962584>.
- Devy, G. N. (ed.) 2014. *The Being of Bhasha: A General Introduction in the series People's Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol 1. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan.
- Dey, Subroto 2019. 'What Are the Implications of the English-language Education Policy of the Andhra Pradesh Government.' *Economic and Political Weekly*, 24 July 2019, 54 (49). <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/what-are-implications-of-english-language-education-policy-of-andhra-pradesh-government>. Accessed on 22 November 2021.
- Dodson, Michael S. 2005. 'Translating Science, Translating Empire: The Power of Language in Colonial North India.' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 47 (4), 809-35.
- Dube, Saurabh 2004. "Colonial Registers of a Vernacular Christianity: Conversion to Translation." *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (Jan. 10-16, 2004), pp. 161-171. DOI <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4414498>.
- Ezekiel, Nissim 1989. *Collected Poems*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Faust, David and Richa Nagar 2001. 'Politics of Development in Postcolonial India: English-Medium Education and Social Fracturing.' *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28 July 2001, 36 (30). <https://www.epw.in/journal/2001/30/special-articles/politics-development-postcolonial-india.html>. Accessed on April 5, 2022.
- Gail, Minault 2003. 'Master Ramachandra of Delhi College: Teacher, Journalist and Cultural Intermediary.' *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, 18, 2003, 95-104.
- Gail, Minault 1999. 'Delhi College and Urdu.' *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, 1999, 14, 119-134.
- Gandhi, M. K. 1946. 'Interview'. In Anthony J Parel (ed.) *Gandhi: 'Hindi Swaraj' and Other Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 188-190.
- Gandhi, M. K. 1937. 'Questions Before Educational Conference'. In: *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (Electronic Book)*, New Delhi, Publications Division Government of India, 1999. 98 volumes, Vol. LXXII, 287-288 (first published in *Harijan* on 2 October 1937).
- Garg, B. R. 2001. 'Educational Despatch of 1854'. In *Policy Documents on India Education*. Ambala: The Associated Publishers.
- Gargesh, Ravinder 2009. 'South Asian Englishes'. In Braj Kachru, Yamuna Kachru, and Cecil L. Nelson (eds): *The Handbook of World Englishes*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 90-113.
- General Report of the Late General Committee of Public Instruction for 1840-41 and 1841-42*. Calcutta: William Rushton and Co., 1842.
- Ghosh, Suresh Chandra 2000. *The History of Education in Modern India, 1757-2012*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan (1st ed. 1995).
- Grierson, G. A. 1967 (1903). *Linguistic Survey of India*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas (Reprint of the 1903 edition).

- Grierson, G.A. 1885. 'Note'. In *Inquiries into the Spoken Languages of India: From Early Times to the Census of India 1901*. Census of India 1961, Volume 1, Part XI-C (i), Language Monographs. Language Division, Office of the Registrar General, India. [http://lsi.gov.in:8081/jspui/bitstream/123456789/415/1/52113\\_1961\\_SOP.pdf](http://lsi.gov.in:8081/jspui/bitstream/123456789/415/1/52113_1961_SOP.pdf)
- Guha, Ranajit 2002. 'The Authority of India's Pasts.' In *idem: The Small Voice of History: Collected Essays*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 474-475.
- Guha, Sumit 2003. 'The Politics of Identity and Enumeration in India c. 1600-1990'. *Comparative Study of Sociology and History*, Vol. 45, No.1, 148-167.
- Gupta, Suman 2013. 'Big Issues Behind a Small-Scale Phenomenon: Vernacular Pulp in English Translation for Indian Readers.' *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 48(1), 159-175. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989412470337>.
- Habib, S. Irfan 2000. 'Munshi Zakaullah and the Vernacularisation of Science'. In Narender K. Sehgal et al. (eds): *Unchartered Terrains: Essays on Science Popularization in Pre-Independence India*. New Delhi: Vigyan Prasar, 54-64.
- Hany, Babu M. T. 2017. 'Breaking the Chaturvarna System of Languages'. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 10 June, 52 (23). <https://www.epw.in/journal/2017/23/special-articles/breaking-chaturvarna-system-languages.html>.
- Haq, Maulavī 'Abdul 1962. *Marhūm dihlī kālij*. Na'ī Dihlī: Anjuman-i-Taraqqī-i-Urdū.
- Hariś'candra, Bhāratendu 1877. 'Hindī bhāṣā ke prati'. In *Bhār'tendu granthāvalī*, Vol. 2. Ed. Braj'ratan'dās. Vārāṇasī: Nāgarī Pracāriṇī Sabhā, 731-738. Digital Library of India <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.400857>. Accessed on 5 April 2022.
- Harris, James 1969 (1751). *Hermes or a Philosophical Inquiry Concerning Language and Universal Grammar*. London: J. Nourse, London (Facsimile reprint by Scholar Press).
- Hasan, Mushirul and Nishat Zaidi (trans. and eds) 2011. *A Voyage to Modernism: Syed Ahmad Khan*. New Delhi: Primus Books.
- Howell, Arthur 1972. *Education in British India: Prior to 1854 and in 1870-71*. Calcutta, Office of the Superintendent of the Government Printing.
- Ilahābādī, Akbar 1912. *Kulliyāt-i-akbar*. Ilahābād: Inḍiyan Pres. Digital Library of India: <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.424972/page/n5/mode/2up>. Accessed on 5 April 2022.
- Jha, Mithilesh Kumar 2018. *Language Politics and Public Sphere in North India: Making of the Maithili Movement*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Johnston, Charles 1909. 'The English in India.' *The North American Review*, 189 (642), 695-707. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25106354>. Accessed on 25 October 2021.
- Kachru, Braj 2015. *Collected Works of Braj Kachru*, Vol. 3 (edited by Jonathan Webster). London: Bloomsbury.
- Kalapura, Jose 2007. 'India Inscribed: Development of Printing Technology in India, 16-18th Centuries.' *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 68 (Part One), 436-463. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44147857>. Accessed on 20 October 2021.
- Kaviraj, Sudipta 1992. 'The Imaginary Institution of India'. In Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey (eds): *Subaltern Studies VII*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1-39.

- Khān, Iftikhār ‘Ālam. (2000). *Sar sayyad aur saintīfīk sosā`itī*. Dihlī: Maktaba Jāmi‘a.
- Khubchandani, Lachman M. 2003. ‘Defining Mother Tongue Education in Plurilingual Contexts.’ *Language Policy* 2, 239–254. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1027372700861>. Accessed on 20 October 2021.
- Khubchandani, Lachman M. 1992. *Tribal Identity: A Language and Communication Perspective*. Shimla: Institute of Advanced Studies.
- Khubchandani, Lachman M. 2002. ‘Demographic imperatives in Language Planning’. *World Congress on Language Policies* [Plenary address]. Barcelona. [http://CMPL2002\\_Plenari\\_LKhubchandani.pdf](http://CMPL2002_Plenari_LKhubchandani.pdf). Accessed on 20 November 2021.
- Kidwai, Ayesha 2019. ‘The People’s Linguistic Survey of India Volumes: Neither Linguistics, Nor a Successor to Grierson’s LSI, but still a Point of Reference.’ *Social Change*, 49 (1), 154–159. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0049085718821783>. Accessed on 25 October 2021.
- King, Christopher 1994. *One Language Two Scripts: The Hindi Movement in Nineteenth Century North India*. Bombay: Oxford University Press.
- Kipling, Rudyard 1901. *Kim*. Delhi: Maple Press Pvt Ltd.
- Kothari, Rita and Rupert Snell (eds) 2011. *Chutnifying English: The Phenomenon of Hinglish*. New Delhi: Penguin.
- Kothari, Rita 2003. *Translating India: The Cultural Politics of English*. London, New York: Routledge.
- KPMG in India and Google 2017. ‘Indian Languages: Defining India’s Internet’. April 2017. <https://assets.kpmg/content/dam/kpmg/in/pdf/2017/04/Indian-languages-Defining-Indias-Internet.pdf>.
- Krishnaswamy, N. and Lalitha Krishnaswamy 2006. *The Story of English in India*. New Delhi: Foundation Books.
- Kumar, Aishwarj 2013. ‘A Marginalized Voice in the History of “Hindi”’. *Modern Asian Studies*, 47(5), 1706–1746. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X12000492>.
- Locke, John 1693. *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. The Works of John Locke in IX Volumes. Volume the eighth, Twelfth edition. London, 1824. [https://oll-resources.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/oll3/store/titles/1444/0128-08\\_Bk.pdf](https://oll-resources.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/oll3/store/titles/1444/0128-08_Bk.pdf). Accessed on 5 April 2022.
- Machwe, Prabhakar 1998. *Rahul Sankrityayan (Hindi Writer): Makers of Indian Literature*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.
- Majeed, Javed 2018. *Colonialism and Knowledge in Grierson’s Linguistic Survey of India*. New Delhi: Routledge.
- Mamdani, Mahmood 2020. *Neither Settler nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Manley, Susan 2007. *Language, Custom and Nation in the 1790s: Locke, Tooke, Wordsworth*. Edgeworth, Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Mantena, Rama Sundari 2013. ‘Vernacular Publics and Political Modernity: Language and Progress in Colonial South India.’ *Modern Asian Studies* 2013, 4 (5), 1678–1705.

Mantena, Rama Sundari 2005. 'Vernacular Features: Colonial Philology and the Idea of History in Nineteenth Century South India.' *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 2005, 42, 513-34.

'Memorandum on the Census of British India 1971-72'. <http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/-files/ideologie/data/CensusIndia/CensusIndia1871/CensusBritishIndia1871.pdf>. Accessed on 10 October 2021.

'Mode of Educating the Natives.' *The Calcutta Monthly Journal*. November 1836, 271-314.

Mignolo, Walter D. 2018. 'Foreword. On Pluriversality and Multipolarity'. In Bernd Reiter (ed.): *Constructing the Pluriverse: The Geopolitics of Knowledge*. Durham, London: Duke University Press, ix-xvi.

Mignolo, Walter D. 2011. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Mir, Farina 2006. 'Imperial Policy, Provincial Practices: Colonial Language Policy in Nineteenth-century India.' *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 43 (4), 395-427. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001946460604300401>.

Mir, Farina 2010. *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

Mishra, M. P. 1865. *A Trilingual Dictionary; Being a Comprehensive Lexicon in English, Urdu, and Hindi, Exhibiting the Syllabication, Pronunciation and Etymology of English Words, with Their Explanation in English, and in Urdu and Hindi in the Roman Character*. Benares: E. J. Lazarus and Co.

Mishra, Pankaj 1995. *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana: Travels in Small Town India*. New Delhi: Penguin.

Mishra, Pritipuspa 2020. *Language and the Making of Modern India: Nationalism and the Vernacular in Colonial Odisha 1803-1956*. Cornwell: Cambridge University Press. DOI: 10.1017/9781108591263

Mitchell, Lisa 2009. *Language, Emotion and Politics in South India: The Making of a Mother-Tongue*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Mufti, Aamir R. 2016. *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literature*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Naregal, Veena 2001. *Language Politics, Elites, and the Public Sphere: Western India under Colonialism*, New Delhi, Permanent Black.

National Education Policy 2020. Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. [https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/NEP\\_Final\\_English\\_0.pdf](https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf). Accessed on April 5, 2022.

Nāvariya, Ajay 2008. *Udhar ke log*. Naī Dillī: Rāj'kamal.

Niranjana, Tejaswini 1992. *Siting Translation: History, Poststructuralism and the Colonial Context*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman.

Nu'mānī, Shibli 1971. 'Imlā' aur ṣiḥat-i-alfāz'. In *idem: Intikhāb-i-mazāmīn-i-shibli*. Na'ī Dihlī: Maktaba Jāmi'a, 37-41.

- Nurullah, Sayyed, and J. P. Naik 1943. *History of Education in India during the British Period*. Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, London: Macmillan.
- Orsini, Francesca 2019. 'Present Absence: Book Circulation, Indian Vernaculars and World Literature in the Nineteenth Century.' *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 22 (3), 310-328. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2019.1659169>. Accessed on 15 October 2021.
- Orsini, Francesca 2020. 'Vernacular: Flawed but Necessary?' *South Asian Review*. Vol. 41, No. 2, 204-206.
- Parahsar, S. V. 1991. *Indian Education: Functions and Form*. New Delhi: Bahri Publications.
- Pandey, Gyanendra 2020. 'Indians once displayed pride in multilingualism. Return of an instrumental English signals a new phase.' *Indian Express*, February 10, 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/hindi-hinduism-india-official-language-english-multilingualism-6259620/>. Accessed on 10 November 2021.
- Parulekar, R.V. and C. L. Bakshi 1955. *Selections from Educational Records 1815-1840*. Part 11. Bombay: Asia Publishing House.
- Pernau, Margrit 2006. *The Delhi College: Traditional Elites, the Colonial State and Education Before 1857*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Piccardo, Enrica 2013. 'Plurilingualism and Curriculum Design: Toward a Synergic Vision'. *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol 47, No. 3, 600-614.
- Pollock, Sheldon 1998. 'India in the Vernacular Millennium: Literary Culture and Polity, 1000-1500.' *Daedalus*, 127 (3), 41-74. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20027507>. Accessed on 10 June 2021.
- Pollock, Sheldon 2009. *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit Culture and Power in Premodern India*. California: University of California Press.
- Prakash, Gyan 1992. 'Science "Gone Native" in Colonial India.' *Representations* 40, 153-178. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928743>. Accessed on 15 November 2021.
- Qureishi, Ishtiaq Husain 1962. *The Muslim Community of the Indo-Pak Subcontinent*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rai, Alok 2000. *Hindi Nationalism*. Delhi: Orient Longman.
- Rai, Amrit 1984. *A House Divided*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Ramanujan, A. K. (2004). 'Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?' In Vinay Dharwadker (ed.): *Collected Works of Ramanujan*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 34-51.
- Ramaswamy, Sumathi 1997. *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891-1970*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Rao, Raja 1967. *Kanthapura*. New York: New Directions Paperbook.
- Rushdie, Salman 1981. *Midnight's Children*. London: Vintage.
- Sadana, Rashmi 2006. *English Heart, Hindi Heartland: The Political Life of Literature in India*. California: University of California Press.
- Safadi, Alison 2013. 'The Fictional "Fallout" from Fort William?' *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, No.28, 2013, 38-57.



- Saksena, Ram Babu 1927. *History of Urdu Literature*, Allahabad: Ram Narain Lal.
- Saranghi, Asha 2009. 'Enumeration and the Linguistic Identity Formation in Colonial North India.' *Studies in History*, 25 (2), 197-227.
- Saxena, Akshya 2022. *Vernacular English: Reading the Anglophone in Postcolonial India*. Princeton University Press.
- Saxena, Sadhana 1997. 'Language and the Nationality Question.' *Economic and Political Weekly*, 32(6), 8 February 1997. <https://www.epw.in/journal/1997/6/perspectives/-language-and-nationality-question.html>. Accessed on April 5, 2022.
- Schneider, Edgar W. 2007. *Postcolonial English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shackle, Christopher and Javed Majeed 1997. *Hali's Musaddas: The Flow and Ebb of Islam*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Shambhag, Vivek 2015. *Ghachar Ghochar*. Translated from Kannada by Shrinath Perur. Noida: Harper Perennial.
- Shih, Shu-Mei 2004. 'Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition.' *PMLA*, 119 (1), 16-30. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1261482>. Accessed on April 5, 2022.
- Skutnabb-Kangas, T. 2016. 'Linguicism'. In G. Gertz and P. Boudreault (eds): *The Sage Deaf Studies Encyclopedia*, Vol. 3. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 583-586.
- Śrī, Gītāṃjali 1994. *Māi*. Nayī Dillī: Rājīkamal Prakāśan.
- Tah, Abhishek 2021. 'Education and the Vernacular in 19th Century Bengal: Translation, Print and Standardization.' *Translation Today*, 15, 2, 73-98. DOI: 10.46623/tt/2021.15.2.ar4.
- Tieken, Herman 2008. 'The Process of Vernacularization in South Asia.' *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 51, 338-383.
- Trautmann, Thomas R. 2006. *Languages and Nations: The Dravidian Proof in Colonial Madras*. New Delhi: Yoda Press.
- Trivedi, Harish 2011. 'Foreword'. In Rita Kothari and Rupert Snell (eds) 2011. *Chutnifying English: The Phenomenon of Hinglish*. New Delhi: Penguin, vii-xxvi.
- Viswanathan, Gauri (1989). *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Zastoupil, Lynn and Martin Moir 2013. *The Great Indian Education Debate: Documents Relating to the Orientalist-Anglicist Controversy, 1781-1843*. London: Routledge.

## Chapter 3

### **Vernacularity and Aesthetics**

Torsten Tschacher

What relationship, if any, exists between the concept of vernacularity and aesthetics? To pose this question immediately leads into a definitional quagmire, for any reflection on that question must engage with the multiple meanings that the two central terms, 'vernacular' and 'aesthetics', may carry. As outlined in Hans Harder's contribution to this volume, the term 'vernacular' may be understood in different ways, for example, when applied to language, as either a reference to a particular state or function of language (vernacular<sup>1</sup>) or as a somewhat frozen reference to literary vernaculars in relation to non-vernacular languages (vernacular<sup>2</sup>). The matter becomes even more confusing when considering the definitional work performed by the term 'vernacular', i.e., against what entity the 'vernacular' is defined and understood. Generally speaking, 'vernacular' is sometimes used to define the 'natural', 'unmodified', 'unregulated' and 'spontaneous' in contradistinction to the 'artificial', 'modified', 'regulated', and 'premediated'. In other contexts, the 'vernacular' distinguishes the 'local', 'native', 'intimate', and 'familiar' to the 'universal', 'cosmopolitan', or 'public'. Finally, 'vernacular' can also be applied to the 'simple', 'quotidian', and 'common' as different from the 'complicated', 'extraordinary', and 'elite'. In most cases, these polarities are all somehow implied when the term 'vernacular' is invoked, even when a particular polarity is emphasised. Since the 'vernacular' is always indicative of such polarities, I have adopted a wide understanding of the term in this chapter, and have included in the discussion the work of thinkers who operated with this field of polarities, even when they eschewed use of the word 'vernacular'.

A similar problem of definition attaches to the notion of aesthetics. At one level, aesthetics are understood as "gut, embodied, doxic responses" to the world around us, a "first and unconscious response to phenomena in the world" (Bate 2009: 6). But aesthetics are not only our own, unreflective responses to things according to what we consider 'proper'. Aesthetics is also used to refer to the conscious employment of certain means (figures of speech, style, form, or material) to produce specific aesthetic responses. Finally, aesthetics

is the name of the meta-discourses and theories about these “gut, embodied, doxic responses” and the means to bring them about (cf. Bate 2009: 8). Again, I have not limited myself to speaking about aesthetics at just one level, especially since most scholars tend to implicitly shift between them. Yet, due to the argument I will be making, the first understanding of aesthetics as an unreflective gut response is present more in the first part of the chapter, where I will discuss the idea that ‘vernacularity’ is the name for a particular range of aesthetic responses, or the basis for producing these responses, while in the later sections, the more reflective understandings of aesthetics take over. This is unavoidable, since I will ultimately argue that the ‘vernacular’ itself is usually aesthetically produced, aiding the ‘aestheticization’ (cf. Bate 2009: 119) of a particular power-relationship between two entities that is invoked and contested through its aestheticization.

It does not require much searching to find examples for the importance of aesthetics in arguments about vernacularity. If we consider the tomb of Fateh Khan discussed by Hans Harder in his contribution to this collection (Fig. 2), it becomes quickly apparent that characterizing the architecture of Fateh Khan’s tomb as ‘vernacular’ is primarily a matter of aesthetics. As Harder indicates, the building materials and craftsmanship of the tomb are clear examples of ‘polite’, ‘non-vernacular’ architecture. Any quality of vernacularity attaching to the tomb lies in its imitation of Bengali bamboo huts without actually employing bamboo, while simultaneously eschewing architectural elements that are otherwise considered ‘typical’ for Muslim tombs, the dome especially.<sup>69</sup> But this seemingly simple example of the relationship between vernacularity and aesthetics actually obscures the more complex question of what that relationship precisely is. Can Fateh Khan’s tomb be described as ‘vernacular’ because it imitates, stylistically speaking, what is already predefined as vernacular in the first place, namely the Bengali bamboo hut, with its local prevalence, and use of local, widely available materials? In this case, it would be vernacularity itself that defines and produces a particular kind of aesthetic experience, discernible even if the actual object is ‘non-vernacular’ in other ways, as the allegedly ‘vernacular’ style of Fateh Khan’s tomb is perceptible despite its execution in more durable materials and superior craftsmanship than expected from the average bamboo hut. Yet one might also take the position that the relationship has to be characterised in the precisely opposite manner: that only by adopting the aesthetic of the bamboo hut for a building which we do not normally expect to be architecturally executed in this style, that we are in a position to characterise its aesthetic as ‘vernacular’. In other words, it is only by formulating the stylistic program of Fateh Khan’s tomb in contradistinction to something considered more ‘global’ or ‘polite’ that we can put Bengali bamboo huts in relationship to Muslim tombs like the Taj Mahal, and thereby identify the former as ‘vernacular’. In the first instance, vernacularity produces a particular variety of aesthetic – the aesthetics of Fateh Khan’s tomb are special because they are based on a type of architecture that is deemed ‘vernacular’, and beholding the tomb is imagined to produce an appropriate emotional response in those who are capable to sense the vernacularity of the tomb due to their familiarity with quotidian life in Bengal. In the second instance, it is the aesthetics that actually produce vernacularity – the tomb remains a ‘non-vernacular’ building, but in

---

<sup>69</sup> The significance of a dome for Muslim tombs is indicated by the fact that in many parts of the Muslim world, the Arabic term for dome, *qubbah*, actually signifies a tomb; cf. Diez 2012.

imitating a bamboo hut, it performs vernacularity through its aesthetic gesture towards quotidian architecture.

The argument I have outlined here with regard to an example from architecture is similarly transferrable to language and literature. Some have argued that the aesthetics of 'vernacular' languages possess certain typical properties precisely because the language is vernacular. Most commonly, given the association of vernacularity with the home, the quotidian, and the spoken, the aesthetics of 'vernacular' languages are assumed to mirror these qualities and celebrate the intimate, the simple, the common, and the oral. Vernacularity would thus create a particular variety of aesthetics. In contrast, vernacularity has also been seen as a relationship that results from particular aesthetic practices that are associated with specific languages. In this perspective, it is not the language as such that is 'vernacular', as in most cases, languages used for specific aesthetic purposes differ from the spoken languages of everyday conversation. Rather, the particular aesthetics employed by specific idioms are meant to evoke an impression of vernacularity. This can be achieved in various ways: languages may be limited to particular varieties of uses or *imaginaires* that signal their difference from 'non-vernacular' uses in a linguistic hierarchy. In other cases, a language may strive to compete with a superposed language in a language hierarchy by demonstrating that its expressive capacity is as great as that of the superposed idiom, thereby drawing attention to the power hierarchy between both idioms. Here, it is aesthetic techniques which create the impression of vernacularity. A similar argument could be made regarding the relationship between vernacularity and aesthetics in other fields of aesthetic expression, be it dance or music. This makes the distinction between aesthetics as being determined by vernacularity (or its absence), and seeing vernacularity emerge from aesthetics, a useful approach for probing the relationship between the vernacularity and aesthetics.

In this chapter, I will first discuss the idea of aesthetics as 'vernacular' if executed or voiced in an idiom that is pre-defined as 'vernacular', i.e., that vernacularity produces certain kinds of aesthetics. This notion, which I refer to as 'vernacular aesthetics', has been widely employed and underlies many theories about aesthetics, paradoxically even in cases when ostensibly the precise opposite perspective is argued for. That opposite perspective, namely that it is a certain type of aesthetics that actually produces the distinction between the 'vernacular' and the 'non-vernacular', I will discuss as the 'aesthetics of vernacularity'. From this perspective, vernacularity appears primarily as a performance of vernacularity through the means of non-vernacular aesthetics. While this perspective avoids the essentializing pitfalls of the 'vernacular aesthetics' approach, it does on the other hand threaten to undermine the usefulness of considering anything to be vernacular at all. Both perspectives are closely intertwined and share many tensions and contradictions. In the third part of this paper, I will therefore explore the limits of relationships between aesthetics and vernacularity by considering the connection between both concepts and power. While most would agree that a mutually reinforcing connection exists between vernacularity as a power relationship and the aesthetic expression of this vernacularity, a closer investigation of both perspectives - 'vernacular aesthetics' and the 'aesthetics of vernacularity' - not only allows for a better appreciation of this mutuality. The tendency to think of vernacularity as either an ontological condition or as an aesthetic performance often obscures the power

hierarchies inherent in the concept. With this chapter, I hope to point to possibilities to understand aesthetics in a world of hierarchical relationships without rearticulating these hierarchies.

### 'Vernacular Aesthetics'

The most common approach by far to the relationship between the vernacular and aesthetics is the idea, that the condition of vernacularity in an object or idiom has specific effects on its aesthetics. In other words, a 'vernacular' possesses certain qualities that make it 'vernacular', and these qualities produce a particular variety of aesthetics, which I will refer to here as 'vernacular aesthetics'. To examine how vernacularity operates on aesthetical terms, it is first necessary to define what precise qualities define vernacularity. This, however, presents us with a first problem, for while there is seeming consensus about the domain that vernacularity describes, individual definitions of it still differ substantially. Most commonly, and in keeping with the term's etymology, 'vernacular' is associated with the home, the ordinary, the intimate, and the quotidian. In an extended sense, it may also refer to the natural (as opposed to the artificial), the native (as opposed to the foreign), the unstructured (as opposed to the rule-bound), or the particular (as opposed to the universal). Returning to the case of Fateh Khan's tomb, we may see the definition of vernacularity reflected in the tomb's architecture that recreates a Bengali bamboo hut (the ordinary, everyday homes of the native region) in a medium that is far more exquisite, unusual, and 'artificial' than the quotidian hut. In the linguistic sphere, these definitions are best explored in the common association of the 'vernacular' with the native spoken, everyday idiom of familial conversation, or vernacular<sup>1</sup>. Yet, as I will discuss in greater detail below, in the context of aesthetics, it is Harder's vernacular<sup>2</sup> that is of greater importance than the actual spoken idiom.

Indeed, within European tradition, this particular understanding of 'vernacular' as intimate and quotidian, has a long history. It is already found in what was probably the first attempt at explicitly formulating a 'vernacular aesthetics' in Europe: Dante Alighieri's (1265-1321) unfinished Latin treatise *De vulgari eloquentia* ('About the Eloquence of the Vernacular', between 1303-1305). *De vulgari eloquentia* concerns the poetics of what Dante calls *vulgaris*, a term commonly translated today as 'vernacular'. By this, Dante means that language "which infants acquire from those around them when they first begin to distinguish sounds", or "which we learn without any formal instruction, by imitating our nurses". In other terms, the 'vernacular' is defined as the 'natural', 'informal' language of home and family. In contradistinction, Dante recognises that "there also exists another kind of language, at one remove from us". This is a language few master, "since knowledge of its rules and theory can only be developed through dedication to a lengthy course of study", which Dante calls *gramatica* (translated in Dante 1996: 3).<sup>70</sup> Dante was fully aware that there were different varieties of both *vulgaris* and *gramatica*, but while all humans possessed *vulgaris*, only a few,

---

<sup>70</sup> [...] *eam qua infantes assuefiunt ab assistentibus cum primitus distinguere voces incipient [...] quam sine omni regula nutricem imitantes accipimus. Est et inde alia locutio secundaria nobis [...] quia non nisi per spatium temporis et studii assiduitatem regulamur at doctrinamur in illa.*

like the Romans and the Greeks, also possessed *grammatica*. This distinction was not invented by Dante. More than four hundred years before Dante, Otfrid of Weissenburg (c. 800-c. 870), the first German poet known by name, lamented (in Latin) that “this rude (Frankish) language [i.e., German] is unpolished and unruly and unused to being restrained by the regulating curb of the art of grammar” (translation in Magoun, Jr. 1943: 880).<sup>71</sup> What distinguished Dante from Otfrid was, whereas the latter clearly valued ‘grammar’ (*grammatica*) as higher than the ‘barbarian’ idiom in which he wrote, to Dante, the *vulgaris* was superior to the *grammatica* because it was original, universally used, and natural rather than artificial (Dante 1996: 3).

It is not difficult to recover Dante’s shadow among those celebrating ‘vernacular aesthetics’ in India. Perhaps the most obvious and best-known example is Attipate Krishnaswami Ramanujan’s (1929-1993) distinction between Sanskrit as the ‘father tongue’, and the vernacular ‘mother tongues’, which he developed in the afterword to his translation of poems composed by the Tamil *bhakti*-poet Nammālvār (Ramanujan 1981: 126-39). Ramanujan’s conception of a ‘mother tongue’ has all the hallmarks usually associated with ‘vernacularity’: for him, the ‘mother tongue’ was, primarily, a ‘first language’, “the language of one’s earliest childhood and family, one’s local folk and folklore” (132), something Sanskrit was not and may never have been. Like the godhead praised by *bhakti*-poets, this language was localised inside the devotees themselves, and they inhabited that language like they lived inside God and internal to the community of devotees. “To lose this first language is to lose one’s beginnings, one’s bearings, to be exiled into aphasia” (137-8). Sanskrit, in contrast, was a ‘second language’, a ‘father tongue’, as Ramanujan calls it, in a gesture to Walter Ong’s characterisation of medieval Latin (Ong 1977: 28). Sanskrit was artificial, learned, hierarchical, and hieratic. It simultaneously belonged nowhere and everywhere. While Ramanujan was aware that Nammālvār’s poems were highly artful, he characterised their aesthetics as that of other *bhakti*-poets in other languages, in similar terms that characterised the ‘mother tongue’: “To the ‘culture language’ of Sanskrit they oppose their own ‘language of nature’, and they insist on their self-images as persons of wild, untutored, spontaneous passion” (Ramanujan 1981: 130). Natural, untutored, spontaneous – the aesthetics of the ‘mother tongue’ seem to derive directly from its very being.<sup>72</sup>

If Ramanujan’s discussion of ‘vernacular aesthetics’ remains appreciative, but descriptive, some of his contemporaries developed the idea that vernacularity produces a particular kind of aesthetics into a moral and political programme. This is probably nowhere more evident than in the writings of Marathi writer, scholar, and critic Bhalchandra Vanaji Nemade (b. 1938). Nemade’s theory of ‘nativism’ or *deśivād* is primarily a theory of aesthetics rather than of vernacularity. ‘Nativism’ is based on the idea “that any human being or literature can stand tall only in its own native land’s linguistic group. It has really no need of incipient international dimensions. The greatness of a literary movement or an

<sup>71</sup> *huius enim linguae barbaries, ut est inculta et indisciplinabilis atque insueta capi regulari freno grammaticae artis [...]*.

<sup>72</sup> Many of the same characterisations of the vernacular are already present in Ramanujan’s introduction (1973) to his translation of the Kannada *vacanas* of Basavaṅṅa and his followers: “unmediated” (29), “spontaneous” (38), “personal” (53), but the link between the style of the *vacanas* and the condition of vernacularity is as yet undeveloped.

author is not decided by international standards; it is determined by how many functions ranging from spiritual elevation to linguistic experimentation it serves" (Nemade 2009: 14). To be 'native' is something that inheres to a literary work and is "self-manifest as in plants and trees that patiently grow and live in their own soil". "Any literary work, sculpture, piece of music, or painting is an inseparable part of its environments, place, and period. Its stylistic principles, forms, and structures bear the unmistakable stamp of its native place and time" (p. 15). If it continues to be appreciated beyond the time and place of its production, it is due to factors beyond its actual creation (p. 26f.). That means, all art is nativist, though it is possible to appreciate it universally. In short, the 'native' is unavoidable in any form of creative expression.

Nemade's theory is primarily a theory of aesthetics, and, importantly, of politics, rather than of vernacularity as such. Nemade stresses the need for the 'nativist' artist to be "aware of the totality of the geography, of the consciousness of the homogeneity of all its castes, ethnic communities, sects, religions, traditions, period and place" (p. 30), something he terms 'geopiety' following geographer John Kirtland Wright (1891-1969; 1966: 251-3). Since he does not insist that 'nativity' requires to necessarily adhere to any particular idiom, a 'nativist' aesthetics can thus be found in works of e.g. Sanskrit literature, too (Nemade 2009: Appendix I). As everything, 'foreign' languages could be 'nativised' as well - Nemade explicitly mentions the 'liberal Muslims', who accepted India as their home, as one of the factors that saved India from an excess of nativism led by Brahmin orthodoxy (p. 32). Nemade instead, pours opprobrium on many Indian or Indian-origin authors who write in English, like Salman Rushdie (pp. 52-55), but his criticism consists in how these authors caricature India in order to gain success with Western audiences, and not in the fact that they write in English per se. However, in several ways, Nemade's theory of 'nativism' overlaps with common characterisations of the 'vernacular'. Like these, Nemade celebrates the simple, self-contained, local, and above all, the 'organic' and 'natural'. Since at one level, everything is 'native' (p. 15), because everything is produced in a local context that imprints itself on the work produced, only the 'native' is 'real'. In contrast, "internationalism is an artificial and parasitic concept" (p. 28), because it is inherently impossible to achieve and threatens the very acknowledgement of the native. Artificiality, elitism, or aestheticism were all anathema to the native spirit, or at least, considered subservient to the general principle of nativism. As Ganesh N. Devy (b. 1950) pointed out, Nemade's project "combines ethics and aesthetics" (2009b: 133) - literature is 'charged', both in the meaning of being necessarily linked to its context of composition that animates all 'true' literature, and in the meaning of demanding that literature should be faithful to the context that produced it. It is, hence, charged with the 'native' and charged to be 'native' at the same time.

Ramanujan and Nemade are just two prominent examples of an argument that can, in some way or the other, be found in many discussions of 'vernacularity' and aesthetics. The basic assumption concerns the existence of a domain that is somewhat hazy but still discernible in terms of content, namely, the domain of the local, the native, the spoken, the natural, the everyday, and the spontaneous, which one might term the 'vernacular' (though Nemade, for example, does not generally use this term). Precisely how this domain is characterised at a given moment depends partly on how its antonym is defined - the cosmopolitan, the foreign, the written, the elite, the artificial, the premediated - but no theorist focuses

exclusively on one aspect of this domain to the exclusion of the other. If the domain of the 'vernacular' (or 'the native', 'the local', etc.) would now enter within the purview of aesthetics, whether in the field of architecture, dance, music, or literature, it would be expected to produce a variety of aesthetics that carries the imprint of the 'vernacular'. In other words, the 'vernacular' produces a specific kind of aesthetics. Failure to do so tends to be evaluated critically. Despite his insistence that works of literature cannot escape revealing their time and place of production, or perhaps better, precisely because of that insistence, Nemade levels opprobrium ("juvenile and careerist", 2009: 13) on writers who attempted to be non-local, international, global. Devy similarly laments the absence of *bhāṣā* poetics and literary criticism that is independent of Sanskrit discourses, i.e., of an aesthetic meta-discourse that would do justice to these literatures as vernacular literatures (2009a: 65-84). The aesthetics of the 'vernacular' are widely expected to reveal their vernacularity by exhibiting the same characteristics that are ascribed to the 'vernacular' itself.

But already in Dante's conceptualisation, this notion reveals serious contradictions. The most obvious is that any conscious deployment of aesthetics removes the matter aestheticized, whether it be a building style, dance, or speech, into something that is 'artificial', 'premediated', and beyond the experience of the everyday. In the terms developed by Harder, the aestheticization of vernacular<sup>1</sup> leads to the creation of vernacular<sup>2</sup>, an idiom that, despite its invocation of vernacular<sup>1</sup>, is already at some remove from it. Despite his own celebration of the spoken language, much of Dante's unfinished treatise on the merits of the *vulgaris* is dedicated to formulating rules on how to use the language properly, including a lengthy section in which Dante rejects every single Italian dialect as unsuited for the eloquent 'vernacular'. Consequently, the best kind of vernacular for him is that which uses only words that are not particular to just one, but are present in each dialect of Italian, producing a decidedly 'unnatural' and 'artificial' idiom (Dante 1996: 27-41; cf. Pollock 2006: 454-5). The opposition between the somewhat essentialist characterisation of the 'vernacular' as 'spoken', 'natural', and 'unregulated', and its 'artificial', or perhaps better 'artful' character, is rather striking. But while the artfulness of the 'vernacular' is often noted, implications are frequently disregarded. Ramanujan dismisses the relevance of this observation in a footnote (1981: 133 n. 36), and Devy (2009a: 82) notes that *bhāṣā* literature constitutes a cross between oral 'folk' and written Sanskrit literature, while itself forming a third category that holds all three strands within itself. But this hardly resolves the tension, for even the domain of the 'folk' in Devy's conceptualisation is obviously not devoid of artfulness and is therefore, also marked by the very opposite of what is commonly understood as the 'vernacular'. But if aesthetics seem to contradict the very nature of vernacularity, is there any other way of conceptualizing the relationship between the two?

### 'Aesthetics of Vernacularity'

Scholars writing about the 'vernacular' in the Indian context often invoke yet another binary in addition to the well-worn tropes of 'natural'-'artificial' or 'spoken'-'written', namely that of *mārga* ('the way') and *deśī* ('the place'). This binary serves to confirm the applicability of vernacularity in the Indian context as a notion that was already familiar to Indians long before colonialism turned the 'vernacular' into a subject of anxious reflection, while



simultaneously allowing for the absorption of the binaries found in Western ideas about the 'vernacular' (such as the 'spoken' versus the 'written') into a mutually reinforcing chain of signification. However, the same authors also invoke the notions of *mārga* and *deśī* to move beyond the opposition implied in any binary. While Nemade utilises the term 'native' to render *deśī*, he also emphasises that "there has been a mutual give and take between [*mārga* and *deśī*], and each presupposed the existence of the other" (2009: 17). This was presumably in contrast to Western modernism and internationalism, which Nemade accuses of threatening the very existence of the 'native'. Similarly, Devy identifies *mārga* and *deśī* with 'horizontal', overarching and 'vertical', region-specific patterns of culture, respectively (2009a: 84-88). Like Nemade, Devy posits an original equilibrium between the two patterns, that was first destabilised by the "Indo-Islamic cultural invasions" (2009a: 87) and then by European colonialism.

Yet *mārga* and *deśī* were not always binary or complementary concepts that operated on the same level. In Sanskrit discourse, the term *mārga* originally referred to regional variations in style in Sanskrit literary theory, i.e., the term was used to refer to 'regional' distinctions rather than universality. According to Sheldon Pollock, *mārga* was first developed into the antonym of *deśī* in the Deccan, particularly in Kannada, around the beginning of the second millennium CE (Pollock 2006: 204-22; 405-10). The latter term owed its development less to Sanskrit, than to Prakrit (i.e., Mahārāṣṭrī), which supplied the basic tool for the "the conceptualization and theorization of regional vernaculars" in southern Asia (Ollett 2017: 24; more generally, cf. *ibid*: 152-68). Rather than forming a timeless matrix at the foundation of Indian culture, the *mārga-deśī* distinction was therefore itself a product of something Andrew Ollett calls the "self-theorization of vernacular literary culture" (Ollett 2017: 159, 161), that is, it developed as result of a transformation in the literary sphere which witnessed the emergence of multiple, regionally distinct 'vernacular' idioms that began competing with Sanskrit and Prakrit in the centuries surrounding the year 1000 CE. It appears that the conceptualisation of Prakrit as 'regional' depended on its association with Maharashtra, where the practice of writing Prakrit literature as well as its theorizing first arose. In this sense, the identification of Prakrit as *deśī* may be similar to the modern usage of the same term. In other words, *deśī* referred to Mahārāṣṭra in the same way that *deśī* refers to India today – just as one would never refer to German-produced alcohol as 'desi liquor' even if one was located in Germany. But the term *deśī* was not associated, in contrast to the modern usage and most conceptualisations of vernacularity, to either a specific regional identity or to the 'natural' or 'common' language of everyday life (Ollett 2017: 157-9). Prakrit was *deśī* and had originally belonged to Mahārāṣṭra, but it was not limited to that region. Instead of articulating a specifically Mahārāṣṭrian identity or polity, Prakrit was a literary language as unfettered by regional identities as was Sanskrit. And like the latter, Prakrit, in the form that it was used for literary purposes, was certainly not the spoken language of any part of India at any given time, but as carefully developed on the basis of different spoken idioms as Dante's 'eloquent vernacular'.

The question posed by this evidence is what role aesthetics play in not simply expressing, but actually creating vernacularity? If deriving a particular kind of aesthetics directly from the nature of vernacularity produces a paradox, might it not be more sensible to assume that vernacularity is in itself, at least partly, a product of aesthetics, and that it is aesthetics

that create the possibility to perceive of something as 'vernacular'? This might be all the more reasonable since the very terminology by which the 'vernacular' has come to be theorised both in Europe and in India, is in both cases derived from 'non-vernacular' idioms – Latin in the former case, and Prakrit in the latter. This theorisation of something as 'vernacular' or *deśī* can, however, only be successful in the presence of a value against which the 'vernacular' is deliberately contrasted, even if the resources of that 'Other' have to be drawn upon in order to make the contrast meaningful.

One way of approaching this topic is through Sheldon Pollock's highly influential theory of vernacularisation. Pollock's primary aim was to understand the development of 'vernacular' literature, though he did occasionally also refer to the fields of music and dance, suggesting that the general framework of his analysis has a larger application in fields beyond the domain of literature. For Pollock, the 'vernacular' as a concept or the *deśī* in Indian terms is fundamentally bound up with another category that forms its antonym – the 'cosmopolitan' or the *mārga*. He defines vernacularisation in literature "as the historical process of choosing to create a written literature, along with its complement, a political discourse, in local languages according to models supplied by a superordinate, usually cosmopolitan, literary culture" (Pollock 2006: 23). In other words, as already elucidated, vernacularisation does not simply occur as the simple result of the existence of a 'vernacular', whose essence supplies the aesthetic categories through which 'vernacular art' is created. Rather, aesthetic resources are derived from precisely the 'non-vernacular Other', the 'cosmopolitan' in Pollock's terms, against which the 'vernacular' is defined. In this manner, 'vernacular' and 'cosmopolitan' form co-constitute each other forming a definitional co-dependency, each fully understood and comprehensible only in the light of the contrastive concept.

Pollock's theory avoids some of the essentializing pitfalls created by the notion of 'vernacular aesthetics'. He moreover provides an explanation for the role of cosmopolitan aesthetics in the creation of many 'vernacular' literatures not only in South Asia, but also elsewhere. Whether it is the role of Sanskrit in the creation of Kannada or Javanese literature, or the role of Latin in the development of German or Italian literature, cosmopolitan languages supplied the aesthetic frameworks through which 'vernacular' literature was created and could be understood and theorised. Aesthetics thus constituted a vital field for developing the concept of the 'vernacular' or the *deśī*, but only by employing the means that are provided by the cosmopolitan. A little like Fateh Khan's tomb that reproduces the forms of Bengali 'vernacular' architecture by using materials and purposes of 'polite' architecture, the 'vernacular' is therefore conceptually dependent for its formation on its opposite, and it is only in relation to that opposite that the concept is meaningful in the first place.

The 'vernacular' thus emerges as an aesthetic concept, as that idiom which expresses the 'local' or 'regional' in an aesthetic world dominated by superposed 'global' or 'universal' idioms. Attractive as such a model is, it raises a number of questions. If the cosmopolitan and 'vernacular' are co-dependent concepts, the one theoretically cannot exist without the other. But from Pollock's definition of vernacularisation, the superposed 'cosmopolitan' idiom needs to be already present in order for the process of vernacularisation to commence, since the cosmopolitan provides the very model through which vernacularity becomes

conceptualised. This suggests that the cosmopolitan must exist prior to the 'vernacular'. To make matters worse, Pollock (2006: 20) simultaneously states that all cosmopolitan languages "began their careers as vernaculars", thereby seemingly making the 'vernacular' prior to the cosmopolitan. While many cosmopolitan languages indeed began their careers as 'vernaculars' under the dominance of other cosmopolitan languages – Latin in the Greek cosmopolis,<sup>73</sup> Farsi in the Arabic, English in the Latin – others, like Greek, Chinese, and possibly Arabic,<sup>74</sup> developed without such a cosmopolitan culture against which to define themselves. Sanskrit was transregionalised long before it became 'cosmopolitan' in Pollock's terms, spread through the Vedic sacrificial complex (Pollock 2006: 20). Part of this problem is of a terminological nature, shifting between a general conversational use of 'vernacular' and a rigorously theorised one. Alexander Beecroft has attempted to extend the conceptualisation of literature beyond the cosmopolitan and the 'vernacular' through concepts such as the epichoric and panchoric that preceded cosmopolitanisation, and the creation of national and world literatures, following the development of 'vernacular' literatures (Beecroft 2015). In the absence of such a terminology, however, Pollock coined the term 'cosmopolitan vernacular', signifying those idioms that fully availed themselves to the resources of the cosmopolitan, in contrast to the simple 'vernaculars', which were at best used for documentary, but not expressive purposes (Pollock 2006: 25-7). In coining this term, Pollock comes close to Devy's notion of how *bhāṣā* literatures constituted an intermediate space between Sanskrit (the cosmopolitan) and the folk (the non-cosmopolitan 'vernacular'). Terminologically, however, this raises another question: why call this process of turning ordinary 'vernaculars' into cosmopolitan 'vernaculars' 'vernacularisation'? Certainly, the process led to an increase in 'vernacular' idioms both in terms of actual number and in terms of functions performed by them. But the idioms, once made capable of competing with the cosmopolitan, were not ordinary 'vernaculars' anymore, but 'cosmopolitan vernaculars'. Could this process thus not as legitimately be termed 'cosmopolitanisation'? More importantly, the notion of the 'cosmopolitan vernacular' throws into relief a potentially more destabilizing question: in how far does it make sense to speak of a 'vernacular' in aesthetic terms at all?

Specifically, one might ask whether vernacularity is, in aesthetic terms, nothing but a performance or a simulation. Perhaps the best example is the use of Prakrit within Sanskritic literary culture, especially drama. As Ollett points out, Prakrit was anything but a 'vernacular' in the modern sense, however close its connection to the north-western Deccan, a region still known simply as the *Desh* ('the Region'). This Prakrit par excellence was joined in literary culture by a couple of other variants also labelled Prakrit today, and similarly distinguished on regional terms (*Śaurasenī*, *Māgadhī*), or, more correctly, associated with the people of these regions (Ollett 2017: 126-8; cf. Pollock 2006: 89-105). But despite such

---

<sup>73</sup> Latin provides an intriguing example, as the (for its time and place) unique adaptation of Greek literary practices to Latin arguably happened precisely to provide a fledgling Roman empire with cosmopolitan moorings rather than a 'vernacular' culture; cf. Feeney 2016: 136-7.

<sup>74</sup> Though Arabic literature developed on the edge of the Greek cosmopolis, literary criticism in Arabic connected only marginally with Greek aesthetics. Aristotle was primarily engaged with by logicians rather than literary critics and theorists; Key 2018: 202-3. In this manner, the development of literary theory in Arabic seems to parallel that of Old Tamil in some manners, which similarly developed on the edge of the Sanskrit cosmopolis without being, as I will argue below, truly 'vernacular'.

associations, the various varieties of Prakrit were hardly ‘vernacular’. Firstly, as Ollett contends, they did not represent actual regional speech, but rather mapped a small number of ‘regional’ differences onto the matrix of Mahārāṣṭrī, allowing for greater comprehensibility. Secondly, Prakrit was thoroughly conventionalised and subject to the rules of cosmopolitan literary discourse. And most importantly, thirdly, despite their regional associations, these Prakrit idioms were not used in drama to represent speakers from different regions, but rather, from different social strata, with men of high-status speaking Sanskrit, and women and persons of a lower-status utilizing ‘regional’ languages (Ollett 2017: 127; cf. Pollock 2006: 94). One might thus be tempted to claim that ‘regionality’ in Sanskrit-Prakrit literary culture was simulated, and that simulation did not adhere to notions of linguistic realism: a woman from western India might thus speak Māgadhī, an ‘eastern’ language, in drama, rather than a western Prakrit. If ‘vernacularity’ is aesthetically produced, then we might even argue that there is really no ‘vernacular’ at all, or at least, that there is no ‘vernacular’ in aesthetic terms; it is only a simulation and performance of vernacularity. However closely the aesthetically-produced ‘vernacular’ (vernacular<sup>2</sup>, in Harder’s terms) may mimic the model idiom (vernacular<sup>1</sup>) – spoken, quotidian, spontaneous, intimate – it never will be identical to that idiom. It is always a performance, artificial, rule-bound, and non-spontaneous. Nor is it actually the aim to reproduce vernacular<sup>1</sup>, as the aesthetically-produced ‘vernacular’ serves very different purposes than a spoken language or a quotidian structure, much as Fateh Khan’s tomb is, after all, a tomb, and not a dwelling, like the bamboo huts which it mimics.

A somewhat similar perspective, but in an altogether different context, is found in Homi Bhabha’s reflections on a special issue of *Critical Inquiry* on ‘Frontier Lines/Border Posts’, published in 1997. Given its nature as an introduction to a set of articles, Bhabha touches upon a variety of themes without always clarifying the links between these. In general, all the essays in the issue focus on writing “from the middle of difference” (Bhabha 1997: 435), surveying the enunciations and demands of what Bhabha himself terms ‘minorities’ in the essay. As he observes in his comments on the contribution by Etienne Balibar, in the postcolonial context of globalisation, migration, and nation-states, ‘minority’ is not primarily an ontological condition: “It is not what minority *is*, but what minority does, or what is done in its name, that is of political and cultural significance” (p. 437; emphasis in original). This performative character of ‘minority’ in the context of a “multiple universal” becomes relevant when, later in the essay, Bhabha turns to consider the ‘vernacular’. Intricately connected to the minority condition, or perhaps better, performance, it is little surprise that the ‘vernacular’ as a concept assumes importance in the context of translation, and even of ‘vernacular cosmopolitans’. Bhabha reflects on the need to bridge or translate the ‘local’ and ‘traditional’

[...] in situations where the driving cataract of history, flowing relentlessly in the direction of the global, does not simply obliterate locality as a kind of obsolete irrelevance but reproduces its own compensatory projections of what tradition, the local, or the authentic *ought to have been*. Such a counterfactual move attempts to normalise the emergence of minority resistance to play precisely the defensive part of the local *against* the global, the nativist *against*

the universalist, thus justifying both the future reach of globalisation without frontiers and its own extinction. (Bhabha 1997: 458)

Bhabha does point here to a situation in which the 'vernacular', or rather, its link to 'tradition' and 'locality' and the ontology of being non-global, is itself a projection of the global order, something that can apparently be countered only through the hybrid formulation of 'vernacular cosmopolitanisms', voices that emerge from the 'vernacular' rather than the global order, but which are able to rise above traditionalism to speak in a cosmopolitan manner.<sup>75</sup> However one chooses to read Bhabha's statements – positively as attempts at recovering the 'vernacular' as a non-parochial source of difference in the globalised world, or negatively as a takeover of the 'vernacular' by the global in order to devalue the local and traditional as inauthentic (Shankar 2012: 20) – they exemplify the pitfalls inherent in perceiving vernacularity as being primarily produced through the resources of cosmopolitan forces and aesthetics. They also gesture towards the element that has until now been missing from my deliberations – the question of power.

### 'Vernacular Sensibility' and 'Aesthetic Vernacularity'

Before discussing ways out of the impasse that I have been delineating, i.e., being caught between an essentializing understanding of the 'vernacular' and 'vernacular' aesthetics on the one hand, and an understanding where the 'vernacular' appears to dissolve into a merely aesthetic category on the other, it may be fruitful to consider examples that appear to be difficult to analyse in terms of vernacularity. That this is easier said than done is demonstrated by the difficulties of identifying languages as 'vernacular' in the first place, especially in situations when only few languages were written and even fewer possessed written literature. Obviously, if a term is defined through its relationship with an oppositional term, the existence of too few sample cases to exemplify such relationships will make analysis more difficult. The same is also true of the opposite case: too many idioms to consider makes it difficult to meaningfully focus on the relationship of just one 'vernacular' idiom to its 'non-vernacular' other, but not considering other relationships in which the same idiom does not play the role of the 'vernacular'. This is partly the problem with the term 'vernacular' identified by Francesca Orsini: "What is your vernacular if you or your parents were born in a Magahi-speaking village, went to Hindi-medium school, got your higher education in English and married a Bengali" (2020: 205)?

Out of the many cases which one could chose as examples for demonstrating the absence of vernacularity, I will briefly discuss the case of Old Tamil. Old Tamil has often been understood as an anomalous case, precisely because it seems to be an example of an early 'vernacular' that never really turned into a 'cosmopolitan' language. The difficulties Old Tamil posed to Pollock's theory can be readily appreciated by the frequency with which Pollock refers to the history of Old Tamil as "obscure" (e.g., 2006: 292, 383).<sup>76</sup> My argument

<sup>75</sup> This concept should not be confused with Pollock's 'cosmopolitan vernacular'.

<sup>76</sup> Pollock claims (2006: 100) that "disentangling fact from fiction in Tamil literary history is complicated, and the more reliable the data (as in inscriptions), the more the Tamil case conforms with the general picture of literary South Asia". However, the inscriptional record of the Pāṇṭiya-dynasty, the most relevant polity for the

for an absence of vernacularity in the case of Old Tamil is not the patently false ethno-nationalist claim that Old Tamil language, literature, and literary theory were unconnected to and uninfluenced by Sanskrit. Rather, I would draw attention to the treatment of Sanskrit as a presence in Old Tamil. The fourfold order of languages as discussed in theoretical treatises on aesthetics in Sanskrit and Prakrit traditions may serve as a useful example. The basic structure of this fourfold order in the latter tradition is based on a grouping of three languages (Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Apabhramsa or *deśabhāṣā*). This division into three orders or languages corresponds to three categories of word species (Sanskrit-identical/*tatsama*, Sanskrit-derived/*tadbhava*, and regional/*deśī* (Ollett 2017: 124, 153-4; Pollock 2006: 93). This triple order is complemented by a fourth category, which is not simply a fourth item similar to the other three in the series, but represents an element that contrasts with and negates the first three: the language of the ghosts (*bhūtabhāṣā*, *Paiśācī*), or the ‘common’ language (*sāmaṇṇa*), i.e., the spoken language of everyday life – vernacular<sup>1</sup> – that is unfit for literary purposes (Ollett 2014: 415-6; Ollett 2017: 129-30, 158-9). This terminology was adapted by Kannada and Telugu grammarians from the thirteenth century onwards, with a tendency of associating the ‘pure vernacular’ with the *deśī* (cf. Ollett 2017: 164-5; Pollock 2006: 374-5).

A similar three-plus-one scheme of word species is encountered in the Tamil *Tolkāppiyam* (*Collatikāram* 9, 397-402), but with an interesting twist. The first three categories, *iyarcol* (‘natural word’), *tiricol* (‘changed words’), and *ticaicol* (‘regional words’), all describe ‘Tamil’ words.<sup>77</sup> The ‘regional’ words, in particular, do not seem to enjoy a privileged relation with the Tamil language, but are defined as words originating from regions within the wider domain of ‘refined Tamil’ (*centamiḷ*), i.e. ‘dialectal’ words (cf. Chevillard 2008). What is surprising in this scheme is the fourth category that in the Sanskrit-Prakrit language order represents the oppositional element. In the *Tolkāppiyam*, this category is reserved for ‘northern words’ (*vaṭacol*), i.e., Sanskrit words (cf. Sanjeevi 1972). Not only does the *Tolkāppiyam* place Sanskrit in the same location where the Sanskritic language order places the ‘undesirable’, ‘improper’ words, but by calling these Sanskrit words ‘northern’, the *Tolkāppiyam* ‘emplaces’ what Pollock defines as the universal and ‘placeless’ Sanskrit (cf. Pollock 2006: 378). The Old Tamil language scheme therefore does not describe Sanskrit as the universal ‘Language of the Gods’, but simply as the ‘Language of the North’ that complements the ‘Language of the South’ (*tenmoli*), i.e., Tamil.<sup>78</sup> Thus, while the *Tolkāppiyam* draws on the theoretical framework of Sanskrit-Prakrit aesthetic theory, it does not locate itself in the Sanskritic language order as later Kannada and Telugu theorists did, leading to an approximate identification of these languages as the ‘regional’ (*deśī*). Rather, it reassigns the categories of the Sanskritic language order to itself and includes Sanskrit as a thoroughly ‘emplaced’ idiom in the unenviable fourth position. It thereby elides the distinction between vernacularity and cosmopolitanism as far as ordered, grammaticised language is concerned. All literary language or *gramatica*, as Dante would have called it, is connected to a place in

---

early development of Tamil literature, hardly conforms to the picture described by Pollock; cf. Orr 2009; Tschacher 2011: 11-12.

<sup>77</sup> The terms *iyarcol* and *tiricol*, as well as their pithy definitions in *Tolkāppiyam*, are in all likelihood calques on the Sanskrit terms *tatsama* and *tadbhava*, but importantly, are understood to apply to Tamil rather than Sanskrit words.

<sup>78</sup> The designation of Sanskrit as ‘northern’ is not limited to Sanskrit words used in Tamil, but to the language itself, as is borne out in many poems from the first millennium to the nineteenth century.

the *Tolkāppiyam*'s perspective, no matter whether it is Tamil or Sanskrit. There exists no universal, 'placeless' language in this language order, and the only relationship that can be described as 'vernacular' is the relationship between 'refined', grammaticised Tamil (*centamiḷ*) and its unregulated, regional others. Vernacularity in Old Tamil is present only as a relationship within Tamil, and not as a relationship between Tamil and Sanskrit.

What makes the case of *Tolkāppiyam* interesting is that its innovative scheme at emplacing Sanskrit continued alongside the Sanskritic model, which clearly distinguished between Sanskrit and 'the vernaculars', including Tamil (cf. Pollock 2006: 95, and more generally, 384-6). A new tendency to follow Sanskrit models more closely in Tamil grammar and literature commenced around the beginning of the second millennium CE, but this new tendency did not replace the model and terminology of the *Tolkāppiyam*. The most conspicuous examples of the vernacularity of Tamil in relation to Sanskrit do not, thus, originate from literary discourse, but from religious discourse, such as in the claims by Vaiṣṇava theologians that Vedic texts could also exist in Tamil since the language was, like Sanskrit, eternal (see Hardy 1995). In the latter example, Tamil was clearly viewed in competition to Sanskrit, and its supporters had to argue its case, as it were, 'from below', as the status of Sanskrit as an 'eternal' language was never in doubt. The peculiar tendency to posit equality between grammaticised languages in literature while conceding to a linguistic hierarchy in religious terms is also found among Muslim Tamil authors – they hardly drew on Arabic as a literary model, even as Arabic's status as the language of divine scripture remained uncontested (Tschacher 2019).

What do we gain from this example of the absence of vernacularity, or more specifically, the absence of vernacularity from aesthetics? The main point is not that it is impossible to discuss Old Tamil in relationship to Sanskrit in terms of vernacularity. After all, the differences between the two languages were real. But though Sanskrit was far more widely cultivated, the author of the *Tolkāppiyam* chose to ignore these differences. By conceiving of Tamil as a language of the same order as Sanskrit, as a language occupying a complimentary position in terms of emplacement, the reality of the hierarchy between the two languages was ignored in discourses on aesthetics. In contrast, early Kannada and Telugu grammarians, struggling to describe their languages through the categories provided by Sanskrit, were forced to emphasise the literary capacities of their idioms in a context where they self-consciously occupied a different and lower slot in the language order than Sanskrit. Here, aesthetics played a different role, becoming utilised as a tool to express and contest linguistic hierarchies.

Rather than essentializing the 'vernacular' as a category with clear, specific characteristics, that automatically produces a particular variety of aesthetics, or aestheticizing a 'vernacular' by assuming that it is nothing but a simulation and performance of social difference, with no reality outside aestheticised expression, the reality of vernacularity lies in the unequal power relationships between idioms and their users. If vernacularity is primarily an expression of an unequal relationship between two idioms, in which one of the idioms (the 'vernacular') is assumed to be of lesser value, sophistication, or reach, any expression of vernacularity must reflect this inequality in some way or the other. A fundamental part of Pollock's theory of vernacularisation is the link between 'culture' and

'power', the way changes in one field relate to changes in the other. Thus, the accelerated vernacularisation of South Asian and European societies in the first centuries of the second millennium CE was paralleled by changes in political culture from universalist empires to more regionally defined polities (Pollock 2006: chapter 12). Pollock emphasises that 'culture' and 'power' cannot simply be reduced to each other, but were mutually reinforcing each other (33). In this context, perhaps it makes best sense to link vernacularity as a relationship of power, with aesthetics: vernacularity in terms of aesthetics would be characterised by the expression, and in some cases, possibly by the creation of that power-relationship through the means of aesthetics. 'Vernacularity' in this sense would be an 'aestheticization' of power, a process of rendering "a material or immaterial object into something moving, beautiful, or sublime" (Dagalp and Hartmann 2021: 2), or possibly also to render it into something repulsive, ugly, or ridiculous, as would be the case with *bhakti* poetics or Dalit literature.<sup>79</sup>

The aestheticization of vernacularity as a power relationship may occur in quite different political contexts, with quite different understandings of the 'vernacular', and to quite different ends. If in medieval India and Europe, the process of vernacularisation was closely connected to the consolidation of power in regional rather than universal polities, one might argue that the vernacularisation of Latin in opposition to Greek occurred precisely in the context of the rise of the Roman Empire, a polity requiring a cosmopolitan language that could perform the same functions as Greek, but which was connected to the polity itself rather than to the defeated Hellenistic polities of the eastern Mediterranean (cf. Feeney 2016). Contemporary, democratic politics offers a wide arena in which 'vernacularity' may be a useful concept to invoke, but the manner this is done, much as in the medieval period, differs substantially. The 'Dravidian aesthetic' of Tamil nationalism, as Bernard Bate has argued, represents a "neoclassical modernity", featuring "a populism that speaks an elite language, a femininity within a masculine public sphere, ancient content in brand-new forms" (Bate 2009: 185). In this manner, it is comparable to the 'vernaculars' of the early-second millennium CE discussed by Pollock, that entered the public sphere of politics by simultaneously imitating and challenging Sanskrit. In contrast, it was not simply its celebration of 'native' Marathi Hindu culture that made the Shiv Sena popular with Marathi voters, but also the aggressive and abusive rhetoric of the party and its supremo Bal Thackeray. As Thomas Blom Hansen has noted: "The attraction of [the Shiv Sena's] ideological constructions lay in the fact that the perceived mediocrity of the Maharashtrians, their lowly status in education, wealth, and power, their lack of eloquence, enterprise, and political influence, was made into their most precious virtue" (Hansen 2001: 53), and Thackeray's refusal to conform to the standards of 'polite', 'cosmopolitan' political culture marked him as being a man of the masses.<sup>80</sup>

An important aspect of the aestheticization of the power-relationship of vernacularity is provided by what S. Shankar has referred to as 'vernacular sensibility' (2012: 22). An

---

<sup>79</sup> The notion of the aestheticization of power owes a lot to Walter Benjamin's idea of the aestheticization of politics under Fascism. But while in Benjamin's formulation, the aestheticization of politics was simply a stratagem through which Fascism provided the masses with an expression ("Ausdruck") of revolutionary change while actually conserving power-structures (Benjamin 1980: 506), the concept as employed here allows for such aestheticization to play an independent role in challenging hierarchies and power relations.

<sup>80</sup> I have to thank Deepra Dandekar, Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin, for this insight.



important aspect of Shankar's intervention lies in his perceptive observation that such "vernacular sensibility cannot be confused with vernacular language" (47), that is, that a 'vernacular sensibility' can be expressed even in a 'non-vernacular' idiom. What matters is the awareness and expression of the relationship of vernacularity through aesthetics, and not the idiom in which it is couched. Thus, Fateh Khan's tomb is an example of aesthetic vernacularity in that it juxtaposes and relates two otherwise independent domains: the world of Bengali bamboo huts and the world of Islamicate tombs, thereby highlighting their difference and differential relationship to each other. Turning the impermanent architecture of everyday life into the permanent architecture of death simultaneously contrasts the impermanence of life to the permanence of death *and* the desire for the everydayness of life over the extraordinariness of death. Rather be buried in a bamboo hut that is the symbol of everyday life, than be buried in a domed tomb that symbolises the emergency of death.

## Conclusions

To speak of vernacularity in aesthetic terms requires tracing the expression of power differentials through the means of aestheticised discourses or objects. Aesthetically speaking, vernacularity enunciates and contests power differences through 'art'. Vernacularity in aesthetic terms may be constituted through the empowered claiming of the expressive capacities of the 'non-vernacular Other', as Pollock has exemplified by exploring the case of medieval vernacularisation in Europe and India. That Kannada was an idiom as good as, if not better than Sanskrit despite it being a 'regional' language, or that Italian could compete with Latin, are some examples of this trend. On the other hand, vernacularity can also be expressed through deliberate counter-aesthetics: the rejection of 'learnedness' in *bhakti*-poetry, or the aesthetics of *dalit*-literature contesting caste hierarchies through a subversion of aesthetics would be examples of this trend. Since aesthetics is not necessarily imbricated in vernacularity, the decision to formulate or not formulate vernacularity aesthetically is a choice, as in the example of the *Tolkāppiyam*, rather than an automatism. It is precisely the presence of choice that acts as a guard against reducing all aesthetics to the demonstration and ontology of power. Aesthetics constitute a vital element in negotiating and contesting the power differences of vernacularity, but neither are aesthetics merely an expression of vernacularity, nor are the differences between the 'vernacular' and the 'non-vernacular' mere artifice.

What is striking in the discussion of the relationship between vernacularity and aesthetic is that, as we try to trace and understand these two mutually imbricated domains, we seem to shift inexorably from the common assumption of the quotidian character of the spoken vernacular (vernacular<sup>1</sup>) and aesthetics as an unconscious response, to the domain of the artificially and consciously produced aestheticization of an empowered idiom (vernacular<sup>2</sup>). Reflection may bring us ever closer to an understanding of what we reflect upon, but if unreflectiveness is what we set out to understand, our own reflections tend to transform the very object we reflect upon and turn it into something else (cf. Bate 2009: 8). Aestheticizing vernacularity, i.e., consciously producing 'vernacular' power hierarchies through aesthetics, requires a less 'vernacular' understanding of vernacularity itself. Insofar as this is un-

avoidable, it might be possible to consider such reflective understandings of the 'vernacular', or vernacular<sup>2</sup>, as more than just frozen memories of true vernacularity, or vernacular<sup>1</sup>. While it is of course possible to use the term 'vernacular' as a mere, ossified label, it may be more fruitful to engage with the challenge of the literary vernacular as an aestheticization of 'vernacular' power.

## References

- Bate, Bernard 2009. *Tamil Oratory and the Dravidian Aesthetic: Democratic Practice in South India*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Beecroft, Alexander 2015. *An Ecology of World Literature: From Antiquity to the Present Day*. London: Verso.
- Benjamin, Walter 1980. 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit,' in Rolf Tiedemann und Hermann Schweppenhäuser (eds): *Walter Benjamin – Gesammelte Schriften*. Frankfurt (Main): Suhrkamp, Vol. 1, Part 2, 471-508.
- Bhabha, Homi 1997. 'Editor's Introduction: Minority Maneuvers and Unsettled Negotiations.' *Critical Inquiry* 23, No. 3, 431-59.
- Chevillard, Jean-Luc 2008. 'The Concept of *ticai-c-col* in Tamil Grammatical Literature and the Regional Diversity of Tamil Classical Literature.' In Kannan, M. (ed.): *Streams of Language: Dialects in Tamil*. Pondichéry: Institut Français de Pondichéry, 21-51.
- Dagalp, Ileyha and Benjamin J. Hartmann 2021. 'From "Aesthetic" to Aestheticization: A Multi-layered Cultural Approach.' *Consumption Markets & Culture* 25, No. 1, 1-20.
- Dante. 1996. *De vulgari eloquentia*. Ed. and tr. Steven Botterill. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Devy, Ganesh N. 2009a. 'After Amnesia: Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism'. In *The G N Devy Reader*. Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan 2009.
- Devy, Ganesh N. 2009b. "'Of Many Heroes": An Indian Essay in Literary Historiography'. In *The G N Devy Reader*. Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan 2009.
- Diez, E. 2022. 'Ḳubba'. In P. Bearman et al. (eds): *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Brill Reference Online. doi:[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912\\_islam\\_COM\\_0532](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0532). Accessed 14 February 2022.
- Feeney, Denis 2016. *Beyond Greek: The Beginnings of Latin Literature*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hansen, Thomas Blom 2001. *Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hardy, Friedhelm 1995. 'A Radical Reassessment of the Vedic Heritage: The Ācārya-hṛdayam and Its Wider Implications,' in Vasudha Dalmia and Heinrich von Stietencron

(eds): *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity*. Delhi: Sage, 35–50.

Key, Alexander 2018. *Language between God and the Poets: Ma'nā in the Eleventh Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Magoun, Jr., Francis P. 1943. 'Otfrid's *Ad Liutbertum*.' *Publications of the Modern-Language-Association of America* LVIII, No. 4, Part 1, 869-90.

Nemade, Bhalchandra Vanaji 2009. *Nativism (Desivad)*. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study.

Ollett, Andrew 2014. 'Ghosts from the Past: India's Undead Languages.' *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 51, No. 4, 405-56.

Ollett, Andrew 2017. *Language of the Snakes: Prakrit, Sanskrit, and the Language Order of Premodern India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Ong, Walter J., S. J. 1977. *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Orr, Leslie C. 2009. 'Tamil and Sanskrit in the Medieval Epigraphical Context.' In Kannan M. and Jennifer Clare (eds.), *Passages: Relationships between Tamil and Sanskrit*. Pondicherry: Institut Français de Pondichéry and Berkeley: Tamil Chair, Department of South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of California, 97-114.

Orsini, Francesca 2020. 'Vernacular: Flawed but Necessary?' *South Asian Review* 41, 2, 204-6.

Pollock, Sheldon 2006. *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Ramanujan, Attipate Krishnaswami (ed./tr.) 1973. *Speaking of Śiva*. London: Penguin Books.

Ramanujan, Attipate Krishnaswami (ed./tr.) 1981. *Hymns for the Drowning: Poems for Viṣṇu*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Sanjeevi, N. 1972. 'Vaṭamoḷi: Sanskrit? In Ancient Tamil Literature.' *Annals of Oriental Research* 24, No. 1, 3-11.

Shankar, S. 2012. *Flesh and Fish Blood: Postcolonialism, Translation, and the Vernacular*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

*Tolkappiyam-Collatikaram with an English Commentary*. 1945. Ed. P. S. Subrahmanya Sastri. Annamalainagar: Annamalai University.

Tschacher, Torsten 2011. 'Method and Theory in the Study of Caṅkam (Sangam) Literature.' *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung* 106, No. 1, 4-14.

Tschacher, Torsten 2019. '(De-)Limiting the Universal: Engaging with Arabic in Muslim Tamil Poetry.' *Philological Encounters* 4, 80-108.

Wright, John Kirtland 1966. *Human Nature in Geography: Fourteen Papers, 1925-1965*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.