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Cultural Ideologies of Language in Precolonial India: A Symposium

RICH FREEMAN

THE INTENSITY OF CULTURAL INVESTMENT that South Asian societies have channeled into their languages and literatures, whether gauged in a globally comparative perspective or in absolute terms, is truly remarkable. The intellectual energies poured into linguistic and aesthetic expositions, the assiduous maintenance and temporal depth of written and oral traditions, or the complexity and consequence of sociolinguistic relations, both locally and in interactions of regional diversity, would each suffice on its own to underscore South Asia's marked preoccupation with language. Their combined effect, however, has at times produced a civilizational sphere whose very self-definition rested with foundational claims to achievement in language. Yet despite the richness of this linguistic and literary history (or, perhaps, because of it), relatively few studies combine substantive textual analyses with theoretical agenda adequate to a treatment of the multiplex roles and articulations of specific languages and their interactions in the constitution of particular South Asian societies.

As efforts in this direction, the essays that follow attempt to ground themselves in the particular histories of a language or set of language interactions in order to illuminate both their relationship to specific sociohistorical situations and trends, and to a wider set of theoretical issues concerning the relation of language and literacy to cultural processes more generally. In working through a previously unexplored set of texts and contexts for study, these articles strive to exemplify how a serious engagement with the cultural ideologies of linguistic forms and practices can both transcend instrumentally determinist theories of relating language to society, and yet simultaneously provide a fuller view of both the politics and aesthetics of language labors as well.

The civilizational care that South Asians have expended on their literary projects shows itself most clearly in the simultaneous production of higher level discourses on and about language that framed those projects. Whether these treatments of language take the analytic form of indigenous literary theories, grammars, and poetics, as in the texts surveyed by Pollock and Freeman, or whether they take the poetic form of celebratory epithets and mythologizing, as in Ramaswamy's essay, they highlight the conscious elaborations of language that literati have pursued in crafting their social and regional identities. The rubric "ideologies of language" seems an appropriate

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characterization of the cultural projects we treat here, since these efforts were expressly undertaken to evaluate linguistic media and products, and did so in a way that was bound up with creating and maintaining the wider sociocultural orders in which they were situated.

Pollock's essay, for example, shows how the explicit development of literariness in Sanskrit was tied to special conceptions of polity, as well as to the ordering of language choice among other literary media, and to the eventual creation of vernacular regional identities. The culture of Sanskrit virtuosity, he argues, helped constitute a political imagination whose localized transformations into the vernacular were reflective neither of religious affiliations nor of the upswelling of regionalist popular sentiment, as is often suggested. He points, rather, to the fostering of a broad political aesthetic, through which literary cultures not only reflected the norms of polity, but actually helped shape them.

Freeman's analysis similarly traces the relation between the crafting and regulation of a local literary language for the particular region of Kerala, and the reconfiguring of social and political imaginings that this entailed, both interregionally and locally. In apparent contrast with the Kannada region, the authorization of literary language in Kerala was more clearly concerned with locally popular speech forms and genres—though, again, the standard of literariness itself derived from Sanskrit. Part of the difference in the two cases may stem from how each author construes the relative balance in these literary cultures between elite intellectual capital versus popular practices and appropriations.

Ramaswamy's article considers the clearest challenge to Sanskrit's ideological sway, through expounding the alterity of Tamil's self-representation from a late medieval text. Here the figuring of Tamil is positioned both in a divinized context of mythology around Śiva, but also in a political imaginary where qualities of deity and royalty merge into sovereign claims for the language's rule against all contenders. The necessity for buttressing Tamil's unique heritage of literary production with mythically empowering political associations at this juncture in its history was likely related to the changed circumstances of the region's rule by non-Tamil kings, though Ramaswamy also traces the antecedents for these imaginings back into earlier Tamil history and forward into the secularly demotic transformations of modernity.

While recognizing the often local specificity of norms and practices informing the linguistic aspects of social identities in South Asia, these studies also emphasize the articulation of local languages in wider spheres of interactive multilinguality. They thus exemplify how the culture of language use and literary production in South Asia has been driven by a dynamic interplay between the multilayering of local language forms and the shifting overlap of wider, interregional language varieties. This suggests a kind of dialectic, in which more widespread linguistic and literary forms emerge from the coalescence of local patterns, but then provide supervening models that feed back into the local settings, only to be redifferentiated again by circuit through local contexts of use.

Following Pollock's essay, we can note in his crisper formulation that the local and the global are always reciprocally constituted. His study is correspondingly phased first by expanding his purview with the transcontinental spread of what he terms the "Sanskrit cosmopolis" across South Asia and into Southeast Asia, and then by contracting it to the mimetic localization of this model in the creation of a region-specific literature for the Kannada language of South India. Ramaswamy's discussion of the divinization of Tamil, India's only regional language claiming to rival Sanskrit in its classicality, similarly charts a dynamic of ideological interaction with other

languages. This is shown both through Tamil's shifting relations with the universalist and religious claims made for Sanskrit itself, and in terms of negotiating that changing late-medieval language milieu created by the conquest and rule of the Tamil country by Telugu-speaking warriors. Freeman's treatment of the emergence of the Malayalam language in neighboring Kerala gives us, in turn, a different perspective on the otherness of Tamil, as an imperial language against which Malayalam strove to differentiate its own linguistic and literary identity. Intriguingly, it pursued this development of its autonomy through an explicit adoption of forms and features from the cosmopolitan Sanskrit, while maintaining an equally explicit claim to its "Dravidian" affiliation with Tamil.

Though these studies all train their regional focus on the South Indian language areas of Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu, they thus point to the multiple ways in which these languages participated in spheres of interaction at both the interregional levels and at the level of a pan-Indic and cosmopolitan intellectual culture represented by Sanskrit. The focus on southern India is significant, in that these regional languages all belong to the separate Dravidian linguistic family, as against those of the Indo-Aryan north from which the trans-local Sanskrit and northern regional languages emerged. And yet even though the deep structural, phonological, and often poetic features of the Dravidian languages set them formally apart from those of the north, cultural-linguistic and political forces clearly threw them into repeated hybridizing interactions. Though the dominant linguistic ideology has more often predisposed us to consider how the southern languages adapted themselves to Indo-Aryan patterns, as seems predominantly the case with Pollock's poet-scholars, Freeman's treatment of Malayalam reveals ambivalent changes in both directions, while Ramaswamy's essay documents the ideological weight that could be brought to bear in favor of an alternately Tamil linguistic reading of South Indian literary and religious culture. All of this serves to indicate, again, the relation between the structurally multiple layerings of linguistic culture and the dynamic aspect of this complexity, as local movements were mediated through regional interactions into cosmopolitan circuits of culture formation.

If these studies present geographical foci which are at once indicators of a larger sphere of linguistic cultural influences, then this is complemented by a range of theoretically open temporal-historical parameters as well. Pollock's sweep is the most comprehensive, taking us in broad overview through a millennium of Sanskrit's reign as the medium of a cosmopolitan political aesthetic, from roughly 300–1300 C.E., into the emergence of an equally broad-scale vernacularization in which the various regional languages emerged to take over many of the former roles of Sanskrit. As an inceptive moment of this later vernacular trend, Pollock then narrows his focus to ninth-century Karnataka, when a seminal treatise on poetics, the *Kavirājamārga*, was produced in Kannada after a Sanskrit prototype, but as a historically particularized "experiment in the localization of a universalistic Sanskrit poetics and an analysis of Kannada literary identity."

Freeman's study is historically focused on a particular text, the fourteenth-century *Līlātīlakam*, which again, like Pollock's, is a poetics treatise, but in this case arguing explicitly for the differentiation of a separate language for Kerala, against the classical and imperial hegemony of Tamil though a principled and compensatory recourse to Sanskrit. While there is little before this text to indicate a self-conscious association of language difference with a regional identity, towards the end of his essay Freeman briefly characterizes the emergence of modern Malayalam (in the sixteenth and

seventeenth centuries) in terms of more popular forms and genres supplanting the Sanskritized hybrid of the *Līlātilakam*.

Ramaswamy's historical departure point is framed in terms of one text, a roughly seventeenth-century poem that is largely devoted to praising Tamil during the period of the Telugu-speaking Nāyaka rule of that region. She then goes on to contextualize that text's treatment of Tamil, however, by tracing the figurements of the language both back into Tamil's long literary past (where Tamil confounds any classical/vernacular distinction), and then forward into the nationalist transformation of language in the twentieth century, with its novel image of the "mother tongue" and its newfound basis in a concept of "the people."

What the historical perspective in these studies indicates is the relevance of these fundamentally premodern language ideologies and practices not only for understanding their specific trajectories and their subsequent developments in South Asia, but also for rethinking the relations between language and culture more generally. Thus, running throughout Pollock's essay are meditations on the juxtaposition of a premodern and postmodern globalism, articulated through the politics of linguistic cultures, and suggesting alternative ways of conceptualizing the aesthetic politics of literary production and language choice. In similarly broad theoretical reach, Freeman attempts to use the historical interplay between language ideology and the trajectory of actual language practice in Kerala to critique the tendency of much poststructuralist thought to assume reproductive congruencies between discourse and social power. He argues that the complexity of language can work just as readily to destabilize projects of normative regulation as it can to foster discursively based domination. Finally, Ramaswamy develops a model of potentially global differences between a premodern and modern-nationalist understanding of language in relation to its speakers as refracted through her Tamil materials. She also indicates, though, how the premodern imaginaries persist in transmuted form into the contemporary representations of Tamil, underscoring the continuity of interest in language itself that is present in all our work.

In conclusion, it is hoped that these essays suggest ways that more theoretically informed explorations of the language-culture dynamic in such "traditional" societies may in fact feed productively into the conceptual critique of modernism that informs the more interesting and responsible strains of postmodernist and poststructuralist thinking. And, in turn, it seems that the more linguistically principled aspects of contemporary theories that construe culture as "discourse" can alert those of us who continue to work with old texts to the wider sociocultural implications of materials once consigned to a largely unreflective philology. The results, as we seek to register here, may produce fresh insights from the premodern of relevance to our postmodern transformation, suggesting we still have much to learn of more general import from a deeper reflection on textual pasts.