BOOK REVIEW

A GRAMMAR OF GREAT ANDAMANESE: AN ETHNOLINGUISTIC STUDY BY ANVITA ABBI -A BOOK REVIEW
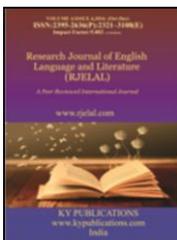
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ABSTRACT

This paper carries a descriptive review of the book The grammar of the great Andaman language: an ethnolinguistic study" by Dr. Anvita Abbi. It carries an in depth analysis of each chapter. The analysis are from the linguistic point of view. The ten chapters of book, extensively covering the phonology, morphology syntax and semantics of the language, are analyzed for their style and validity. It carries a note on the overall design and presentation of the book with references to the author's prior work in the field.

Key words: Grammar, Great andamanese, Anvita Abbi, Ethnolinguistic study

The book "The grammar of the great Andaman language: an ethnolinguistic study" by Dr. Anvita Abbi is a first ever descriptive account of the language. As the tittle suggests the book is an account not only of the grammar of the language but it also studies the way the language reflects the perception, cognition and world view of the community. The book is a product of Dr. Abbi's forty months of research and toil in the face of indifferent officials and difficult living conditions of the island. As she mentions in the preface, her endeavor was funded and backed by a major language documentation project *Vanishing Voices of the Great Andamanese (VOGA)*, under the patronage of the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project, I, which was undertaken from 2005 to 2009 in the Andaman Islands Islands.

As the name of the project suggests, the aim of the author was to preserve and document the reminiscence of the language in the face of its fast endangerment. The author recounts in the preface of the book- "Present-day Great Andamanese (PGA) is a highly endangered language; when the VOGA team first visited Strait Island, the current home of

the tribe, there were nine speakers. By the time the team left the Andamans for the last time in 2009 there were only six left. The last speaker of Bo, a variety of Great Andamanese, also died in January 2010. At present there are only five speakers with varying degrees of competence in the language.........All the languages spoken by these peoples are endangered as their population bases dwindle and Hindi extends its reach ever further in the islands. Great Andamanese is the closest to extinction, however; today only two of the four northern varieties of the language survive. The other two, Khora and Bo, became extinct with the passing of their last speakers Boro Sr. and Boa Sr. respectively".

The book is neatly divided into ten chapters extensively covering the phonology, morphology syntax and semantics of the language. The appendices in the book neatly provide extra information for aiding the comprehensive account of the chapters. The author provides a genealogical sketch of the informants in the first appendix in order to outline the influence and interference of other languages (if any) in their speech. The book

also contains a narrative of a folk tale of the community "*The Great Narrative of Phertajido*" which not only gives us the structure of language in continuation but also provides us perpectives into the culture and community life of the tribe. The author carefully lays out the list of all abbreviations and symbols used in the book.

Linguists in post-independent era classified all the languages spoken in the islands as Constituting one family (Basu 1952, 1955, Manoharan 1980, 1983). It was on the basis of the author's pilot survey of the Andamanese languages, i.e., Onge, Jarawa and PGA (Abbi 2003, that it was indicated that it may be possible to establish the Great Andamanese language(s) as forming one family that is distinct from the language family to which Jarawa and Onge belong.

Subsequent studies of a comparative, historical and typological nature of the three languages based on extensive field work (Abbi 2005, 2006a, 2006b) and fresh data from Jarawa (Kumar 2005), as well as citation of non-linguistic proofs (e.g., cultural, anthropological, archaeological and genetic) substantiated the thesis (Abbi 2009) that the languages of the Andaman belonged to two distinct families, i.e. Great Andamanese and Angan.

Great Andamanese is a cover term that has been used for 10 disparate groups of the tribes living in the Great Andaman, each speaking a different language but mutually intelligible to its neighbouring tribe. It constitutes the sixth language family of India (Abbi 2006b, 2009, Blevins 2007). There are ten languages, which can be grouped into three varieties: southern, central and northern. There are two distinct language families in the Andaman Islands, i.e. Great Andamanese and Angan, the latter being associated to the Austronesian language family (Blevins 2007).

The Great Andamanese family is constituted of ten languages, which can be grouped into three varieties: southern, central and northern. Except for Jeru and Sare all of the Great Andamanese languages are now extinct. The Great Andamanese languages formed a 'linguistic continuum', so that each language was closely related to its neighbour on each side but those at the extreme ends of the geographic continuum were mutually unintelligible.

Hence, Aka-Cari a North Great Andamanese language, was mutually unintelligible with Âkà- Bêa, the southern variety. The present-day Great Andamanese language is a mixture of four northern varieties4 with several linguistic inputs levelled to generate the current speech: a koiné (Manoharan 1989). Present day Great Andamanese(PGA) draws its lexicon from Jeru, Sare, Khora and Bo, but is primarily based on the grammar of Jeru.

In the introductory chapter, the author begins the descriptive view of the language with a view on the ecology of the language as well. Starting from the geographical topography to population, historical evolution between Present-Day Great Andaman and the Great Andamanese, *The Strait Island*, the readers are given an overwhelming overview of the socio-cultural geographical milieu of the language. "Language Ecology" a term used by Einar Haugan in his book *The Ecology of Language* (Stanford University Press, 1972).who used the metaphor of an ecosystem to describe the relationships among the diverse forms of language found in the world, and the groups of people who speak them. The author in this book reflects upon the aspects of the language in this settings(sociological) in which the language thrives.

The chapter also makes a comprehensive reading for anyone who wishes to have brief and quick overview on the ecology of the language. The author establishes the typological differences between the Andamanese and Angan languages thus proving the existence of PGA as an independent language family.

The readers are presented a sociolinguistic sketch of the language. The author reports a bleak picture of the competence of the speakers of the language. On a scale of five, the limited speakers when judged for competence, it was found that the most competent speakers were all above the age of forty. The mean age of the semi-speakers was thirty-five. It is clear that the level of competence goes down with age, the oldest having the best and the younger generation having the least knowledge, which shows the gradual process of language erosion which is a indication of the fact that the

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language is not transmitted from the older generation to the younger generation effectively.

The second chapter of the book is on the Phonetics and Phonology of the language. In this section the author presents the distribution and phonotactics of vowels and consonants respectively. The author mentions that "A high variation among the speakers in the inventory of vowels and consonants was noted, most likely because of the 'koiné' and 'mixed' nature of the language. Another factor leading to such variation could be that as the language is on the verge of extinction, community members do not remember many words and their exact pronunciation, and therefore offer varied sounds for the same word". The vowel chart and the phonemic contrasts and sequencing are well discussed by the author. PGA has a seven - vowel system and offers a large possibility of combinations in the area of vowel sequences or clusters. The language is rich in vowel sequences or vowel clusters. Again as the language was in a dilapidated state with a few speakers left, the author reconstructs the inventory using the principles of abduction.

The author also provides the canonical syllable structure and morphophonemic rules of the language. An acoustic study of the problematic sound (the use of a labialized lateral by peje instead simple alveolar lateral) was conducted and the results were provided in the appendix of the book.

The third chapter of the book is a consolidated overview of the grammar of the language. It is seen that PGA is a double-marking polysynthetic and agglutinative language with an SOV pattern. PGA is agglutinative in terms of its treatment of morpheme boundaries, but polysynthetic in its nature of word morphology. It has a dual semantic system for body part categorization: one that is expressed in concrete nouns and another more abstract one that is expressed in grammaticalized morphemes indicating body divisions. These are represented by body division possessive classes that classify body

part terms based on the area of the body they refer to. These classes also classify other inalienables, with some semantic connection to the body part system. Furthermore, body part semantics pervade the lexical and grammatical system of the language as this dual system is extended to other form classes, viz. verbs, adjectives and adverbs. The body division class markers occur as proclitics attached to all classes of content words. Thus, all content words in PGA can easily be divided into bound and free, the former necessarily imbued with the semantics of 'inherency' and 'dependency'. This is a unique and important feature of the language: that all parts of speech occur as dependent and non dependent pairs, the former being obligatorily marked.

The fourth chapter in the book is on the **Word Formation Processes** in the language. The author introduces the reader to the four types of word formation process in the language which are (b) by attaching proclitics (c) compounding and, (d) by a combination of affixation, proclitics and compounding. The author thoroughly explains each of the above process with profuse examples wherever required. It is to be noted that there is no evidence of reduplication in the language, other than that found in the words for 'mother' and 'swing'. There is also no evidence of the expressive morphology that is found in abundance in all South Asian languages.The absence of reduplication defies one of the significant Indian areal universals as PGA being the only language of India which does not have this feature.

In the fifth chapter of her book, the author throws light the noun and noun phrases in PGA. It had been already explained in the previous chapter about the dependent and independent nature of the nouns of the language. The author provides many illustrations to explain the unique "PROCLITICS which denotes a body division class marker". The author uses the following example to explain the myriad semantic conditions that govern the nature and form of the proclitic on the noun as can be seen in the figure 1.

(a)	*oɪ=caɪa*	(CLASS 4=scar)	scar left by arrow-head
(b)	*er=cala*	(CLASS 2=scar)	'scar on the head'
(c)	*oŋ=cala*	(CLASS 3=scar)	'scar on the limbs'
(d)	*e=tei*	(CLASS 5=blood)	'blood inside the body'
(e)	*ot=tei*	(CLASS 4=blood)	'blood outside the body' [when bleeding]
(f)	*oŋ=tei*	(CLASS 3=blood)	'blood on finger or from finger'

Figure 1(PROCLITICS which denotes a body division class marker)

The above example shows that, in addition to representing 'inherent' aspects, the markers symbolize the location of the nominal object with respect to the body.

The author uses varied example to drive home the point that noun designating different ailments are also differentially marked depending on the part of the body affected by the ailment.

The author provides a semantic classification of the dependent nouns in PGA .The independent nouns in PGA include the names of flora and fauna, and generic names for celestial bodies and other words related to the environment. The author provides a description of the number and gender system of the noun of the language. Then the author moves on to describe the names of flora and fauna, and generic names for celestial bodies and other words related to the environment.

The sixth chapter in the book is on possession, which is an intriguing feature of the language. The plethora of possession markers this languages uses is a rare feature when seen in the light of Indian languages. As the author puts it in the book "The distinctions between various forms do not depend only upon simple binary oppositions of physical alienability/inalienability but on various diverse ethno semantic categories defining the relation between the possessor and possessed nouns. Factors such as part-whole relationship, intimate/non-intimate relations, human/non-human relations, inextricably linked relations, permanency of the relationship between the possessor and the possessed, the notion of non transferability of the possessed entity from the possessor, and finally, the conceptual dependency between the possessor and possessed play an important role in deciding the appropriate possessive marker which is termed as 'inalienability marker' (ina for short) in the grammar".

At the outset of the chapter, the author begins, with the basic difference between alienable and inalienable construction, to describe the phenomenon of possession in the language. One of the major deciding criterion that determines the choice of a particular Ina is the partonomy of the body. Under various possessive forms lies the semantic typology for the categorization of the human body parts. PGA maintains seven divisions within the partonomy of body and then further extends the ina markings for these seven divisions to a variety of other terms including: kin terms, spatial relational terms, closely related object terms, human attribute/propensity terms, and terms concerning actions, manner and states. The fundamental division of animacy plays an important role in deciding the phonetic shape of the base form of the ina.

The seventh chapter in the book is **Pronouns, Pronominal and Object Clitics.** The author in this chapter discusses the personal pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, pronominal Clitics, interrogative and indefinite pronouns, reflexive forms, reciprocal Pronouns, locational adverbial demonstratives of PGA. The PGA has three persons and three numbers. The forms for first, second and third persons have three numbers. A distinction between inclusive and exclusive is maintained in the first and the second person singular and dual pronouns.

The language distinguishes between 'I' and 'I alone' or 'you' and 'you alone', the latter forms representing exclusivity of the participant. The

author mentions that first person plural has two forms: exclusive and inclusive, demonstrating the presence or absence of the addressee. An interesting feature is inclusivity at the level of the first person plural.

Apart from the visibility factor there are two levels of proximity which interplays with the decision of the appropriate third person proximate forms. Thus, proximate objects are distinguished between 'very close' which denotes references near to the speaker vs. 'intermediate' which is between 'distant' and 'proximate', which can be safely recognised as nearer to the addressee.

The author delineates some defining properties of the demonstratives of the language. Each property is substantiated with example wherever required. As far the pronominal clitic are concerned, in this language first, second and third person singular pronouns can occur as reduced single consonant or vowel clitic forms. Different case markings can be attached to basic pronouns for an appropriate meaning only after they are cliticized. There are certain restrictions in the occurrence of the clitics which the author discusses in great detail.

PGA has two basic interrogative pronouns: one is used for human referents, such as *a⊡iu* and the other for non-human referents, i.e., *cay*. It also has both nominal and verbal reflexives. The language has four different kinds of reflexive forms in the area of nominal reflexives. These are suffixed to the specific pronominal clitic. The reciprocal forms in this language are derived from the reflexive *εm* by suffixing it to the appropriate proclitic dictated by the host verb. Hence, it is a lexicalized form of CLASS MARKER + REFLEXIVE, such as, *ara + εm*. The initial vowel of the reflexive form *ε-* is dropped if the preceding class marker ends in a vowel.

The eighth chapter is a description of the **Modification including temporal and spatial deixis** of the PGA. The author discusses adjectives, adverbs, and temporal and⊡spatial deixis of the language.

Adjectives and adverbs can be either dependently or independently marked, i.e., they are marked by the presence or absence of the body

class proclitics. The author, then, categories the adjectives in the language on the basis of characteristic feature and the semantic content they denote. The community has seven color which according to the author is unlikely for a hunter and gatherer society. Unlike the position of adjective(which is post nominal), adverbs or modifiers of verbs can either precede or follow the verb.

The major feature of temporal adverbs designating 'morning' and 'evening' is that they are preceded by the pronominal proclitic coreferring to the subject, which according to the author, is a rare phenomenon in the linguistic literature. Thus, *ambikhir* 'morning', 'day' has the following forms depending upon whether the subject of the sentence is the first, second or third person singular pronoun.PGA has another interesting feature which is that the word for morning refers to 'yesterday' as well as to 'tomorrow'. It is the tense marking on the verb that clarifies the meaning. The word *ambikhir* appears to be the lexicalised form of the 'reflexive pronoun' + 'morning', i.e. *am + bik_ir.*

The fact that the book is more than a mere descriptive account of the grammar of the language is reinforced in the number of times the author makes a reference to the social and cultural life of the community. The Great Andamanese, like many other societies of hunter-gatherers, distinguish the day and the month on the basis of the appearance of the 'sun' *diu* and the 'moon' *dulo.* The Great Andamanese do not use specific days of a year as deictic categories. Hence, there are no names for the days of a week such as 'Sunday', 'Monday', etc. Other ways of marking time in PGA are based on the honey calendar and the naming seasons which are based on the seasonal blossoms.

The ninth chapter in the book is on **The Verb and Verb Complex** of the language. It is the longest in the book considering the fact it deals with the verbal morphology of the language. The author gives a basic schema for the structure of verb which is as follows

(PROCLITIC) (VALENCY) (REFLEXIVE) VERB ROOT ([FORMATIVE AFFIX]) (MOOD/ASPECT) [TENSE]

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In PGA a verb root may or may not be bound. All bound forms are obligatorily preceded by one of the seven body division class markers or object clitics. Verbs may optionally be prefixed by a valency indicating morpheme, such as the causative or applicative, or by a reflexive morpheme indicating self-directed action. If the verbal root morpheme ends in an open syllable, a formative affixal consonant -b- or -k- or –l is infixed between the verb root and the following mood or tense marker. Aspect markers are added directly to the verb root without the formative affix.

The author explains about the two ways in which The Great Andamanese grammaticalize the primary ina and use them in a sentence. (1) Verbs of the type 'exit', 'leave', 'come' and 'go' as well as many that are experiential in nature dictate the primary ina marker of class 4, viz. -ut ~ -ot suffixed to the agent nominal or pronominal clitic. Thus, ÿh=ut-cone-bom 'I am going' or thire-ut-ÿheÿe-bom 'the child is hungry'. (2) A large number of Great Andamanese verbs are necessarily attached to an object clitic on their left. The phonetic shape of these clitics is decided by the nature of the verb and the associated object seen in the context of the partonomy of the body.

The tenth and final chapter of the book is on the **Syntactic Organization** of the language. The author notes that (PGA) has a simple syntactic structure. Most of the complexities that exist are at the morphological level. Speakers keep their sentences short and conjoined by pauses. In this chapter the author gives an exhaustive and in-depth explanation of the complete syntax of the language from the word order, coordination structure, negation, interrogation to the relativisation. . PGA is a verb final language and the order of the constituents is SOV. However, the author notices some variability in the ordering of the word, not only because of focus, but also because the speakers were observed varying the order freely. Since the language is a moribund one with few speakers in different ranges of competence, the author highlights difficulty of ruling out any aberrations.

While explaining the above mentioned features, the author mentions that one interesting feature of the language is that it deviates from the prototypical SOV languages in positing valency increasing markers. The language does not put the causative and applicative after the verb but before the verb. There is another feature which does not adhere to the paradigm of verb final languages is that body division class marker clitics do not appear after the host but before the host. Similarly, verbal object clitics attach to their hosts in a preverbal position. Hence, they have been termed as PROCLITICS in the grammar.

Since the book is a firsthand account of the field work of the author it is replete with examples wherever necessary. It's brilliance lies in the fact that it abounds in the care concern and importance shown by the author towards the culture and heritage of the community. A fact that can be seen in the previous publications of the author on the community (*An Ancient Tale from Andaman.* 2012. National Book Trust. India, *Great Andamanese Dictionary*. 2012. an interactive English-Great Andamanese Hindi dictionary of the endangered language of the Andaman Islands with pictures and sounds. Ratna Sagar. Delhi, *Ethno-ornithology. Birds of Great Andamanese - Names, Classification and Culture*. 2011(with Satish Pande). Oxford University Press, Bombay). Thus this eminent work is not only a means to preserve a language on its last legs , it also contributes to the wider linguistic community of the world in providing an excellent account of the language diversity we are blessed with.

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