LANGUAGE AND THE PROBLEM OF JUSTICE

A conference to mark one year of Hany Babu’s imprisonment

JULY 22-24, 2021

Zoom Meeting ID: 875 3349 6996
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Organised by: Friends of Hany Babu, in collaboration with Scholars at Risk and The Institute for Post-Colonial Studies
DAY 1

Thursday, 22 July 5 PM - 8 PM

5 PM - 5.15 PM Opening Remarks

Madhava Prasad, English and Foreign Languages University
and Ayesha Kidwai, Jawaharlal Nehru University

Session 1: 5.15 PM - 6.15 PM Chaired by Ira Raja (DU)

“SYNTACTIC POVERTY” OF THE EAST: A CASE OF DIVERSITY AT THE PERIPHERY

Tanmoy Bhattacharya, Delhi University

Abstract: In this talk I introduce a certain linguistic element that crucially distinguishes between the dominant northern/central and eastern type of languages in India. Several historical questions are reexamined with reference to the appearance of this marker of difference, and based on our current linguistic research, and accruing archaeological and genetic evidence on the way, I argue for establishing an eastern Sprachbund and show that the east/ Northeast is the true melting pot of diversity, genetically as well as linguistically.

Session 2: 6.30 PM - 7.30 PM Chaired by Ayesha Kidwai (JNU)

SIMPLICITY AND RESTRICTIVENESS IN SYNTAX

David Adger, Queen Mary University of London

Abstract: Chomsky’s postulation of transformations in Syntactic Structures was motivated, to a great extent, on the basis of simplicity considerations: you could certainly capture the English Auxiliary system with phrase structure rules, but such a rule system could be simplified dramatically if one allowed transformations like affix hopping. However, transformational rules are unrestrictive, leading to well-known attempts throughout the history of generative grammar to place constraints on their operation. This trade-off between simplicity and restrictiveness continues: Merge was a dramatic simplification of the grammar, unifying structure building and structure transforming rules, but, as defined, leaves open a huge range of possible derivations whose legitimacy is debatable. In this talk I suggest a means of constraining Merge that appeals to the nature of memory within the definition of syntactic structures, and explore both linguistic and philosophical ramifications of this idea.

Session 3: 7.30 PM - 8 PM Chaired by Kavita Srivastava (PUCL)

SHORT INTERVENTIONS

Words of solidarity with Hany Babu, and peoples’ struggles by Noam Chomsky (MIT & Arizona), Josef Bayer (Univ. of Konstanz), Anne Breitbarth (Univ. of Ghent), Kavita Srivastava (PUCL), Minor Cosmopolitanisms RTG, Nandita Narain (Delhi University)
Session 4: 5 PM – 6 PM Chaired by K. Satyanarayana (EFL-U)

**LANGUAGE, TRANSLATION, AND JUSTICE**

*Nivedita Menon, Jawaharlal Nehru University*

Abstract: If every act of communication is an act of translation, then we need to pay particular care to the act of knowledge production. This tends all too often to be a translation of languages of the powerless to the language of the powerful. Through a critical reading of Ranciere’s "The Ignorant Schoolmaster", the lecture will reflect on different modes of pedagogy. Some that affirm the world as it is and others that attempt to subvert it.

Session 5: 6.10 PM – 7.10 PM Chaired by Ira Raja (DU)

**LANGUAGE AND JUSTICE: ON MINOR FORMS OF EXPRESSION**

*Udaya Kumar, Jawaharlal Nehru University*

Abstract: The norms that govern public uses of language in the pursuit of justice are arguably undergoing changes in our times. Increased restrictions on assembly and public speech are perhaps the most visible signs of this. An equally important challenge is posed by the erosion of the critical value of truth in public discourses. Less elaborate forms of political articulation such as slogans, which usually possess a non-individual and repetitive quality, have acquired greater prominence in this context. Attempts by violent groups to coerce people to chant a ritual formula or a political slogan aim to break the strong affective links between subjectivity and utterance. Contemporary times have also spawned new forms of assertion and resistance: rituals of mourning, gestures of affirmation or quiet resoluteness, and demonstrations of helplessness and vulnerability, by themselves, now appear as public expressions of the yearning for justice. This talk hopes to offer some preliminary remarks on the conceptions of subjectivity, agency and solidarity manifested in these forms.

Session 6: 7.15 PM – 8 PM Chaired by Ayesha Kidwai (JNU)

**HUMANISING LANGUAGE SCIENCES AND THE QUEST FOR JUSTICE**

*Jobin M. Kanjirakkat, Vellore Institute of Technology*

Abstract: I discuss three ideas here, all connected. The first pertains to the biolinguists’ view of language as an object of inquiry. Here I discuss features of the episteme that make certain questions inadmissible in that inquiry. How do the ideas of creativity and freedom purportedly associated with human language fare within this view? Secondly, I outline attempts, including HB’s, to address this problem. Following this line of thinking, I go on to ask whether certain views of ‘subjects’ accompany those prescribed as the guidelines for a scientific inquiry into language. This question may bear upon possible conceptions of justice for human as well as non-human entities.
EXPLORING LINGUISTIC INJUSTICE THROUGH HMAR AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY

Thelma Ramthienghlim, Delhi University

Abstract: The question of language and ethnic identity is undergoing intense study in the post-Mizo Union movement (1946) among Hmars inhabiting various parts of Northeast India, as it poses a serious challenge to their unity, integrity, and survival at the present time. This talk shall trace and investigate how autobiographical memory, existing oral narrative of memory and remembrance have disrupted the Hmar people’s notion of both self and group or ethnic identity qualified by language in contemporary times.

DAYS 3

Saturday, 24 July 5 PM - 8 PM

Session 7: 5 PM - 6 PM Chaired by by K. Satyanarayana (EFL-U)

WORDS FOR NEW: LANGUAGE, REVOLT AND THE TAMIL SELF-RESPECTERS

V. Geetha

Abstract: The Self-respect movement was founded by E V R Periyar in 1925. Amongst other things, its members wanted to free language from the bind of caste and religion and the semantics of gender. I examine this reworking of words and meaning by drawing on a set of illustrative examples and point to how and in what ways this made for a rich as well as contentious interaction between the thought worlds of Tamil, English and Sanskrit-Hindi

Session 8: 6.10 PM - 7.10 PM Chaired by Madhava Prasad (EFL-U)

THE LINGUIST’S BODY: GRIERSON’S EYESIGHT AND THE OCULAR IN THE LINGUISTIC SURVEY OF INDIA (1903-1928)

Javed Majeed, King’s College, London

Abstract: Drawing on Grierson’s unpublished correspondence, I address Grierson’s struggles with his eyesight and its significance for the Linguistic Survey of India. In particular, I explore the relationships of these struggles with the ocular dimension of the Survey in terms of its often described “monumentalism” and the Survey’s gramophone recordings of languages which Grierson repeatedly termed “séances”. I also consider the significance of the question of his eyesight for his complex subject position and relationship with the colonial state. The focus on the linguist’s body helps us to understand the ways in which the production of knowledge as embodied practice might intersect with the mode and style of that knowledge in the Survey, and how it might be telling for all of us in terms of how we see and are seen in the realm of knowledge production when we face the challenges of institutionalisation in our fields of study.
NOTES FROM AN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHER AT A PRIVATE INDIAN UNIVERSITY

Jyotirmoy Talukdar, Ashoka University

Abstract: The presentation will look at some rewarding and some challenging experiences of an English teacher at Ashoka University, 'a pioneer in its focus on providing a liberal education at par with the best in the world', situated in Sonipat, Haryana

THE CASTE SPACE OF INDIAN TOILETS AND THE TEMPLE- EXTREME BINARIES FROM FILTHY TO PURE

Raees Muhammad, Founder, Dalit Camera