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Author(s): Richard Burghart

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A Quarrel in the Language Family: Agency and Representations of Speech in Mithila

RICHARD BURGHART

Südasien Institut, Universität Heidelberg

> . . . there is a well-known form of speech in the south of the Panjab called 'Jangali', from it being spoken in the 'Jungle', or unirrigated country bordering on Bikaner. But 'Jangali', also means 'boorish' and local inquiries failed to find a single person who admitted that he spoke that language. 'O yes, we know Jangali very well,—you will find it a little further on,—not here.' You go a little further on and get the same reply, and pursue your will-o'-the-wisp till he lands you in the Rajputana desert, where there is no one to speak any language at all.

I came upon this passage in Grierson's *Linguistic Survey of India* (1927: 1: 1: 19) after having spent a year in the provincial town of Janakpur, documenting the Maithili language of northern Bihar and southeastern Nepal. Many local people encouraged and assisted me in my research, but all told me in good faith that I had come to the wrong place. I should have gone twenty miles to the southeast, where the 'authentic' language is spoken. It seems that I had not been alone in having been urged by informants and well-wishers to go somewhere else: either in pursuit of languages that do not exist or being redirected down the road to where the language is really spoken. Unfortunately visa problems prevented me from taking up the advice of friends, yet a cursory reading of the literature on regional and social dialectology would have been enough to turn anyone into a skeptic about what one might have been gained from such a journey. Subjective dialect boundaries do not often register on maps of isoglosses, and the objective methods of linguists usually reveal local perceptions of speech behaviour to be based on stereotypes.

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Yet disproof of the existence of such languages did not solve my problem, for objective methods beg the question of what produces this chimera of imaginary and real languages. A linguist at this point would hand the problem over to the sociologist, and by this interdisciplinary referral avoid answering the question that went begging. Interestingly, though, Grierson's anecdote on the Jangali language demonstrates that it was his method that relegated the language to the realms of pure imagination. Both he and his Panjabi informants excluded this language from their experience, but they constructed the absence differently and therefore located it differently. For Grierson it was 'nowhere' objective (that is, it was solely in the minds of his Panjabi informants), for his informants it was simply 'not here'. In sum, a language cannot simply 'not exist'; rather it is made not to exist, and in the techniques of exclusion linguists play as significant a role as their layfolk.

The initial aim of my research in Janakpur had been simply to describe spoken Maithili according to the conventions of descriptive linguistics. It is possible for people in Mithila to communicate with one another without knowing anything about descriptive linguistics, but it is impossible—for them or me or my European predecessors in Mithila—to present spoken Maithili as a language without representing it as something else, and this 'something else' perforce draws upon the political culture of the describer. Moreover, basic decisions as to what can be described as Maithili—let alone 'real' Maithili or 'boorish' Maithili—are also informed by political culture, no matter how scientific the model. In short, patterns of speech and political culture mutually reinforce one another, and this mutuality, in turn, sustains language representations in southern Asia.

My aim here is not to criticize the useful fictions of linguistics: neither the contrivedness of formal linguistic models nor the historical reconstructions of language shift. Rather my aim is to analyse their workings as representations. Linguists formalize languages as autonomous sound-and-symbol systems governed by rules of speech production, grammar and communication. The actualization of potential human sounds imputes naturality to speech; the grammatical structure imputes rationality to intelligible utterances; and the inaccessibility of speech rules to ordinary consciousness supports the linguist's objective description of communication. The fact that communication is a central function of speech does not, however, contravene the fact that communication has become conceptually central in the modern description of systems, and strategically central in their control. This

fact is no less true of language than of any other system. Furthermore the universality of the model does not contravene the fact that people of other times and places have represented language in other ways, emphasizing different functions or structures of speech. Regardless of their validity as language models, such representations have plausibility for the speakers themselves, for what is central to their conception is mutually reinforced by other relations in their political culture. From this perspective 'boorish' dialects and 'real' languages take on an existence despite the fact that they might not show up on a map of isoglosses, or that the linguist might be led on a wild goose chase into the Rajputana desert.

This essay, then, is about the political culture of speech in Mithila. It has four parts: an ethnography of Mithila that exposes local representations of speech; an account of the philological practices that led Sir George Grierson to classify Maithili as a dialect of the Bihari language; a history of the reasons why ten generations of census commissioners considered Maithili to be a dialect of Hindi; and an account of the procedures used by pandit-grammarians in Mithila in constructing the linguistic autonomy of their mother tongue. In conclusion, I return to the connection between speech and political culture, analysing the representations that construct speech as language and how such constructions, in turn, relate to the agencies that work through culture.

The Language and Country of Mithila

The country of Mithila extends northward from the river Ganges across Bihar and into the Nepalese Tarai from where the Siwalik foothills of the Himalayas emerge from the plain. Its western and eastern frontiers are ritually demarcated by the Gandaki and Kosi rivers whose headwaters originate on the Tibetan plateau, collect in the inner Himalayas and turn southward across the north Indian plain to meet the Ganges. Between the Gandaki and Kosi other rivers and streams, such as the Bagmati, Lakhandei and Kamala, drain the southern flanks of the Himalayas and head southward across the country, playing every year on the hopes and fears of farmers. Mithila possesses many important market towns, such as Muzaffarpur and Samastipur, plus the pilgrimage towns of Janakpur (Nepal) and Sitamarhi and the former royal capital of Darbhanga, but the country is largely rural in its aspect and preoccupations. Most Maithils live in

clustered villages, connected with other villages by cart roads leading between the fields and pastures. From the village perimeter extends an unbroken view outwards across paddy fields, interlaced with earthen dykes, to distant mango and lychee orchards, bamboo groves, clusters of coconut palms or a row of tall, sharply pruned *siso* trees. There are not a great many trees in Mithila, but the land is so low and flat that trees form the horizon. Hence as one looks out across the land, few distant sights are revealed but there are many distant sounds that travel unimpeded across field and stream.

Mithila may appear deficient in landmarks, but for its countrymen it is a land replete with 'speechmarks'. Each place has its own language, its *sthāniyā bhāṣā*, which identifies the residents as being natives of the place. To the east of the Kamala river on the Indo-Nepalese frontier are several villages where people terminate their verbs with the sound '*go*'. People who speak the '*go-go*' language do not ask, like everyone else, 'what do you do?' Instead they ask 'what do you do-igo?' Or so I was reliably informed by a cowherder who comes from the west bank of the Kamala. South of the Ganges, on the perimeter of the Maithili-speaking area, are the people who speak the Chika-chiki language, characterized by the *chika* and *chiki* forms of the verb 'to be'. East of Madhubani in Manigachi district people on the banks of the Kosi elide the present participle and auxiliary to form the present imperfect tense (e.g. *paṛáit aich* becomes *paṛáicha*). To these variations in speech one might add the several Maithili dialects classified by Grierson (1909: x–xii) and S. Jha (1958: 48–53), yet it must be borne in mind that knowledge of these dialects is part of the linguistic self-awareness of Maithils. Rural people may dignify their regional dialect by calling it a language (*bhāṣā*) and then naming it in order to impute to it some measure of autonomy. Yet in moments of modesty the very local and conventional character of their communication obliges them to admit that they speak nothing other than the 'going language' (*cālū bhāṣā*) that circulates throughout the country and beyond. The distribution of this functional language is not uniform; in each micro-region the lexical, syntactic and phonetic features may vary (see Grierson 1883; 1885). The people of each locality find their own speech 'natural'; it is only the speech of others that seems strange and leads one to call it the language of some other place. It is the 'language of a place' that differentiates stranger from native. Again a linguist might make something of all this, but I refer here only to the amateur applied linguistics of Mithila—the way by which a suspi-

cious farmer distinguishes native from stranger and verifies the credentials of the latter.

What, then, is Maithili? There is a sense, dating back centuries, in which Maithili is the *sthāniyā bhāṣā* of Mithila. That is to say, Maithili is literally the language of a country (*deśa bhāṣā*). The implication of the expression is that the autonomy of the language is not to be found in its formal linguistic structure, but in its territorial identification. As a *deśa bhāṣā*, it would be more precise to refer to it as the language of Mithila than to the Maithili language. Making no special claim as to the autonomy of the linguistic structure, areas of mutual intelligibility lie on the frontiers of speech. The language of Mithila is a speech form that has become objectified in the light of the speech of other places in the same manner that the '*go-go bhāṣā*' spoken east of the Kamala river has become differentiated from that which is spoken west of the Kamala.

Such a basis of linguistic differentiation makes sense when one travels to the frontiers of Mithila and searches for a language boundary. Contrary to popular European expectations, boundaries of intelligibility cannot be located. Rather one language blends into another. Rural people use the intransitive 'to mix' (*milab*) to describe the phenomenon. Maithili 'mixes' with Bengali on the east, Magahi on the south and Bhojpuri on the west. The mixture may take two forms. Either the frontier is characterized by a local dialect possessing singular features that cannot be attributed to the neighbouring languages. A case in point is the Chika-chiki dialect spoken in Bhagalpur in which the termination of the verb 'to be' differs from the three neighbouring languages of Maithili, Magahi and Bengali. Or the frontier is characterized by an interpenetration of speech patterns. In this latter case the outcome is referred to as *khicaṛī bhāṣā*, after *khicaṛī*—a dish in which rice and pulse are cooked together, creating a white-and-yellow effect in the pot (or what in English would be expressed as a salt-and-pepper pattern). *Khicaṛī bhāṣā* is a local speech form which—like the dish—is mixed but unblended. Use of the term is somewhat jocular and pejorative, for anyone who speaks *khicaṛī* does not have a language of his own place; rather he speaks the language of two other places. Indeed, some would even deny that *khicaṛī* is a language, claiming instead that 'the people of such-and-such a place have no language (*bhāṣā*), they just speak *khicaṛī*'. Such is the case of the Sarlahi district (Nepal) whose people live on the eastern frontier of Bhojpuri, a language famous throughout upper

India for its narratives and songs, and on the western frontier of Maithili, whose advocates claim for it the honour of being the sweetest language in the world. The people of Sarlahi—so a Bhojpuri speaker from Champaran district (India) informed me—speak Bhojpuri words with Maithili '*tuning*'. They use the lexicon of one language and the phonemics of another. That's *khicaṛī*.

The fact that Maithils detect a rice-and-pulse pattern along their linguistic frontier implies that within and beyond the frontier there is either rice or pulse, but not both. That is to say, within Mithila there is a language which is trans-local enough for it to be considered *a* language. But what is this language and what is its name? Native speakers distinguish between two kinds of Maithili: chaste Maithili (*śuddh máithilī*) and rustic Maithili (*dehātī máithilī*). The distinction is somewhat evaluative, as well as possessory, for chaste Maithili speakers sometimes claim more strongly that they alone speak Maithili; what the others speak is not rustic Maithili but simply rustic language (*dehātī bhāṣā*). Here speech participates in personal refinement and civilized values. Maithili is the preserve of those who cultivate their minds, not their fields. In the former category one finds Maithils from the so-called 'big' castes: the Maithil Brahmans who are guardians of Sanskritic knowledge, the Bhumihar Brahmans who are the traditional landlords of Mithila and the Kayastha scribes who kept the accounts and revenue records for the Bhumihars. In the latter category are the so-called 'little' castes who comprise the touchable servant and artisan castes, such as the Cowherders (the most populous caste of Mithila), Blacksmiths, Watercarriers and Barbers; and the untouchable servant and artisan castes, such as the Oilpressers, Palanquin bearers, Cobblers, Washermen and Sweepers.

Chaste and rustic Maithili are mutually intelligible speech forms that differ lexically and phonetically. With regard to the lexicon chaste Maithili is enriched with recent Sanskrit loanwords (*tatsama*) while sharing with rustic Maithili much the same native *tadbhava* vocabulary that derives historically from Sanskrit but which entered Maithili through Prakrit, Apabhramsa and the various proto-forms of modern Maithili. For example, in chaste Maithili one might use either the *tatsama* word '*prācīn*' for ancient or the *tadbhava* '*purān*'. Rustic speakers, however, would only use '*purān*'. Research on caste dialects in Dravidian south India has shown greater lexical borrowing among the high castes (Bright 1960), but considerable research would have to be completed before the same argument could be advanced for Maithili. It may be that rustic speakers merely borrow from a dif-

ferent source. For example, speakers of chaste Maithili use the *tadbhava* '*ber*' for 'time', but rustic speakers tend to use '*bājī*' from the Persian. Still other chaste and rustic words may have come from a common *tadbhava* source, evolving differently in their pronunciation: e.g. the English 'well' is '*inār*' in chaste Maithili but '*iṅḍā*' in rustic. In a somewhat similar vein English loanwords in chaste Maithili are rendered phonetically into the Maithili sound system. Rustic speakers also take up English words, but they are more likely to adapt the source word to local pronunciation. A case in point is the English word 'cement', which is '*sīmeṇṭ*' in chaste Maithili but '*simaṭī*' in rustic. Finally, literary words, such as the verb 'to be' derived from the root '*thik*', form part of spoken chaste Maithili, but are not characteristic of rustic speech, which is perforce colloquial.

Bearing in mind that agency in the Hindu universe is expressed by manual passivity and self-restraint, 'big caste' speakers of chaste Maithili often aim for a curtailed speech (*alp bhāṣā*), leaving rustic speakers to express through their vociferousness the necessity of their domination. Alternatively chaste speakers sweeten their speech or infuse it with sentiment (*rasāeb*) in order to animate conversation in a pleasing manner. These various stylistic aims produce a somewhat higher pitched speech, articulated from the front of the mouth which is light in manner and low in amplitude. Chaste Maithili speakers also exhibit a tendency to end words in a consonant, the effect of which is to give a stop-and-go pattern to the rhythm of their speech. By contrast, rustic speakers produce a more lilting sound by ending words in a long intra-syllabic vowel: e.g. the word '*purān*', mentioned above, is often pronounced '*purnā*' or lengthened to '*purnkā*' by rustic speakers. This vocalic contrast is accentuated by metathesis among the speakers of chaste Maithili. For example, in uttering the word water '*pāni*', chaste speakers pronounce the short intra-syllabic 'i' before the consonant as '*pāin*'; rustic speakers lengthen the intra-syllabic vowel and pronounce it after the consonant as '*pānī*'. Bearing in mind the recourse to Sanskrit loanwords, chaste Maithili speakers articulate the cacuminal '*ṇ*' which is found only in Sanskrit loanwords. Rustic speakers, however, render it as a dental. Similarly the unvoiced alveopalatal fricative '*ś*', which in early Maithili may not have been distinguished from the dental '*s*', is often articulated by chaste speakers who are conscious of its pronunciation in Sanskrit loanwords (S. Jha 1958: 187–8).

With regard to the grammar, adjectival and verb terminations often differ in chaste and rustic Maithili, but the variation does not lie in

their complexity. Almost without exception chaste inflexions are matched by rustic inflexions in all the tenses (prior past, past, present, prior future, future), aspects (completive, imperfect, perfect, continuous, intentional) and moods (declarative, interrogative, imperative, subjunctive, optative). Furthermore, special politeness forms, such as the future tense of the imperative mood used to make requests of one's affines, are found in both speech forms. In making these remarks, the grammatical complexity of Maithili (in relation to adjacent Indo-Aryan languages) should be borne in mind: e.g. the full complement of moods and the agreement of transitive verbs not only with the subject but also the object. In only a very few cases did I note rustic speakers not making a grammatical distinction found in chaste speech. For example, in the present tense of the subjunctive mood, when the subject is the second person respectful grade, intimate mode and the indirect object is in the third person, chaste speakers distinguish in their verb ending between respected and common indirect objects; rustic speakers, however, use the same verb termination, regardless of the status of the object. Similarly in the future intentional tense at the same place in the paradigm no distinction is made by rustic speakers. Apart from these few examples, nearly all distinctions recorded in chaste speech can be matched by distinctions in rustic paradigms.

Although the grammatical structures of chaste and rustic Maithili are equally complex, the two differ in their prosody. In rustic speech there is a tendency to end the verb in a vowel (e.g. *-kái*, *-ho*), where a chaste speaker would opt for a consonant (e.g. *-k*, *-h*). Alternatively where a verb ends with the conjunct consonant '*-nh*', the rustic speaker usually de-aspirates the sound. With adjectives a similar tendency is evident in which rustic speakers opt for the long form of the modifier and chaste speakers the short form: e.g. 'small' is pronounced '*choṭkā*' in rustic speech, but '*choṭ*' in chaste. Chaste speakers find that the lilting effect of low caste speech easily lapses into vulgarity.

In sum, it cannot be said that rustic Maithili is in any way a simplification of chaste Maithili, for the grammar is equally complex. Nor can it be said that rustic Maithili is spoken in ignorance of chaste Maithili, for rustic speakers may put on chaste airs, either in sign of respect to high caste people or in irony, mocking the high-minded pretensions of their fellow rustics. Rather it would seem that chaste Maithili is an accentuation of certain high caste values in a common speech source. Hence the difference that emerges is largely one of style

as a result of the big and little castes taking different sorts of vocalic and semantic decisions. These are decisions of which speakers from both high and low castes are very much aware.

If chaste and rustic Maithili are the same language, varying only in their aesthetic, this still assumes that Maithili is *the* language of an entire country. It does not imply, however, the existence of a language boundary in the modern sense of the term. Nor does it imply that the two aesthetics are equal in their power to organize the frontiers of speech. The one micro-region where Maithil people recognize the chasteness of their speech is the Madhubani area northeast of Darbhanga. Maithils refer to this region as *pañc krośa*, or *pañc kośī*. The expression derives from the tantric notion of the 'five sheaths' of the ritual body, but the sense overlaps with that of *koś*, a unit of measurement slightly longer than two miles. Hence the *pañc kośī* region notionally signifies a circular area, approximately ten miles in radius, to the northeast of Darbhanga where Maithili is spoken in all its chasteness. The centre of this micro-region is said to be the village of Sauratha, where Maithil Brahmans and their genealogists gather every summer to negotiate marital alliances (S. Jha 1940–1941: 39; U. N. Jha 1980). The conjunction of chaste speech and chaste speakers is not fortuitous. It would be ethnographically misleading to objectify chaste and rustic Maithili as two different dialects and then attempt to account for their differences purely on linguistic grounds. The word 'speech' is more ambiguous: shifting back and forth between the objective 'spoken' and the subjective 'speaker'. The linguist's demarcation of isoglosses would miss the subjective valuations, or alternatively discredit them because the purported subjective differences have no objective linguistic existence. The difference between chaste and rustic Maithili is motivated; it should be seen as an aesthetic difference expressed in speech, not a linguistic difference marked by 'objective' phonemic content.

Outside the *pañc kośī* area Maithili is still spoken, but the speech patterns reveal that chaste Maithili mixes with local dialects such that it becomes debased. Durgānāth Jhā (1983: 412) notes that Maithili diminishes beyond its heartland: in the east it blends with the speech of Purnea (influenced by Bengali); in the southeast with Bhagalpur and Monghyr speech (influenced by Magahi); in the west with the speech of Muzaffarpur and Champaran (influenced by Bhojpuri) and on the northwest and northeast by the speech of Sitamarhi and Morang respectively. Hence the frontiers of Maithili are thought to register different densities of chasteness. At the centre of the country

Maithili is spoken in all its chasteness. Indeed, rather in the alchemical manner of purifying substances that turn base elements into gold, I was informed that even the small castes of the *pañc kośī* area speak a chaste form of Maithili (although S. Jha 1958: 6 records the Central Colloquial as a separate dialect). But as one moves toward the perimeter in all four directions, the language weakens. The topography suggests a language map with several concentric boundaries. The inner boundary delimits the chaste *pañc kośī* region; the next outward boundary demarcates where debased Maithili is spoken; and beyond that outer boundary lies the frontier where Maithili blends into neighbouring speech patterns. The movement from centre to periphery registers not only a difference in form but also a diminution in value. Maithili is essentially chaste Maithili, and the *pañc kośī* region is where the real language is really spoken.

The essential/local contrast—not a true opposition—is widespread in Mithila, structuring both language and society. A trivial, but commonplace example pertains to the two qualities of tea available at roadside stalls: *ispeśal cāh* and *lokal cāh*. To prepare special tea, tea leaves and sugar are boiled in milk; to prepare local tea, the milk is diluted with water. There may be a place, such as Darbhanga for tea or the *pañc kośī* region for speech, where the real thing exists, but most places must make do with the pale imitation. Just as real tea is watered down on the periphery of Mithila, so also is real Maithili. This is also the implication of the perception that *khicaṛī bhāṣā* is spoken along the frontier. *Khicaṛī*, rather like the Flemish *stumpf* or the English 'bubble-and-squeak', is a wholesome dish eaten by 'simple' people. At the centre of civilization, however, finer food is consumed. A less trivial example of the essential/local contrast concerns political boundaries in India and Nepal prior to Company rule. Palace, capital and realm were concentrically situated icons of the universe. As one moved outward from palace to realm, royal influence waned. The four temples that guarded the perimeter of the realm in the four cardinal directions—like the sacred Kosi, Ganges, Gandaki and Himalaya used by Maithil Brahmans to demarcate the country within which Maithili is spoken—did not enclose a region in which there was an even distribution of political influence or uniformity in speech. Rather they marked the limit of influence—a frontier region where one thing blends into another.

This hierarchical organization of space in which the centre is real and the perimeter a pale imitation is sustained in the territorial dis-

tribution of castes. Of all the 'big' castes, Maithil Brahmans have had the most influence in defining the style and prosody of chaste Maithili and perpetuating its forms in literature. Their territorial distribution centres on the *pañc kośī* region with outer-lying pockets in the micro-regions beyond, where eventually they cede place to the Gaur Brahmans of Bengal, the Kanyakubja Brahmans of Uttar Pradesh and the Nepali Brahmans in the foothills of the Himalayas. They are one of the few castes of Mithila which is restricted to Mithila and which in the past had been entirely within the orbit of the Darbhanga Maharaja. Indeed, to say 'I am Maithil' implies that one is Maithil Brahman. The same cannot be said, however, for the Landlords (*bhūmihār brāhmaṇ*) and the Cowherders (*yādav*)—both of whom extend into Bhojpur. The Domestic Servants (*kurmī*) and Oilpressers (*telī*) are spread across Bhojpur and Orissa; the Clerks (*kāyastha*) into West Bengal; and the untouchable, possibly uncatchable, 'Thieves' (*dosādh*) into Rajgir. These castes, qua caste, have no particular language identity. Those who find themselves in Mithila speak Maithili, but their caste mates in eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar speak Bhojpuri; in Orissa they speak Oriya; West Bengal, Bengali; and Rajgir, Magahi. In sum, the demographic record provides a historical trace, both of the concentration of cultured Maithil Brahmans in the *pañc kośī* region that has served to organize the frontiers of speech and of the distribution of the agricultural, artisanal, merchant and servant castes across the frontiers of speech into adjacent language areas.

In his *Linguistic Survey of India* Grierson notes a local saying that the language of upper India changes every twenty miles. An observation with which Grierson concurred, suggesting that 'an ideal map of the Aryan languages of India would therefore present to the eye a number of colours gradually shading off into each other' (1903–1928: 5, 1, 3). If one can travel throughout the country every twenty miles noting mutually intelligible variations in speech, then the problem becomes not only the seemingly endless variation of related forms of equivalent value, but the essentialization of certain forms in a social space such that a regional difference comes 'really' to make a difference. In specifying that difference, the socio-cultural link between style and status and the politico-economic link between royal patronage and courtly Brahmans are critical (see Misra 1976: 221–8 for an account of the role of the Darbhanga Maharaj in the twentieth century 'Maithili Renaissance'). Named languages are geographically centred and socially hierarchical. They form the presence of those who dominate a

country. As for the rest, they have a 'working language' that sets up the possibility of mutual intelligibility as 'it' goes, and they go, from here to there across centres of dominance.

The Philological Discovery of the Bihari Language

Throughout Company rule and the early colonial period Maithili remained poorly understood by European scholars. Looking westward from the Company seat at Calcutta, Maithili (sometimes called Tirhuti) appeared to be a dialect of Bengali (Colebrook 1801: 199–200; Carey 1853, cited in Grierson 1903). Looking eastward from the former Mughal imperial seat at Delhi, Maithili appeared to be a dialect of eastern Hindi (Kellogg 1876; Hoernle 1880, but with misgivings: pp. viii–ix). A more precise and, in that measure, more accurate European perception of the language had to await the arrival of George Grierson in Mithila. Better known for his massive eleven-volume *Linguistic Survey of India* (1903–1928), Grierson began his studies in Sanskrit and Hindustani as a student at Dublin, and upon completing his education, entered the Indian Civil Service. Arriving in India in 1873, he worked for the next fifteen years in Bengal (which at the time included present-day Bihar, Assam and Orissa) serving variously as district magistrate, school inspector and opium agent (Chatterji 1942). In the early years he was based at Madhubani in the heart of the *pañc kośī* region, later transferring to Patna where he served as joint magistrate. The language of the courts was Urdu and Persian, but native testimony was spoken in the vernacular which was poorly understood by court officials. Grierson wrote (1883: 1):

> Many Bihar officials have complained to me of the impossibility of understanding the *gaonwari boli* [rustic speech] of the witnesses who come into their courts, and more than one has suggested to me that I should compile a grammar of it, imagining apparently that the *gaonwari boli* was one uniform language current over the whole of Bihar.

Grierson set about recording the so-called rustic speech of Bihar. The project led him to compile his *Seven Grammars of the Dialects and Sub-dialects of the Bihari Language* (1883–1884), the separately published *Introduction to the Maithili Language of North Bihar* (1881), his encyclopedia of rural society *Bihar Peasant Life* (1885) and his revised edition of the earlier 1881 study, retitled *The Maithili Dialect of the Bihari Language as Spoken in North Bihar* (1909).

Grierson's inquiry into the regional languages of Bihar came at the

very time that the public domain of Maithili was threatened both by British administrative policy and the emergent Indian nationalist movement. From 1764 the Maithili-speaking area of the Tirhut Sarkar had been under Company rule, with the revenue districts coming under direct Company administration in the reign of Maharaja Chatra Simha (1808–1839). In 1860 Maharaja Laksmisvar Simha succeeded to the throne; but being a minor, he was made subject to the authority of the Court of Wards. The Court not only directed the education of the young ruler; it also abolished the use of the Maithili language, making Urdu and Persian the language of public life. Surmising that Urdu might violate the religious sensibilities of the royal family, the British advised the young ruler, upon coming of age, to make Hindi the courtly language with Urdu and Persian remaining the language of the law courts (Misra 1976: 221–2). The advantage of Hindi was twofold. First, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Hindi had become, in effect, the *lingua franca* of upper India. Outside its *khaṛī bolī* territory in western Uttar Pradesh between Delhi and Merath, it was often uttered in a highly simplified or locally variant form; yet either as a garrison language (*zaban i Urdu*) or a *Verkehrsprache* (*Hindustani*), it served as an effective means of communication across a broad culture area from the Punjab in the west to Bengal in the east, from the Himalayas in the north to the Deccan Hills in the south. Second, concomitant with the prosyletization of humanistic Hinduism and the colonial formation of a modern Hindu identity, High Hindi—also called 'Nagari Hindi'—supplanted Urdu as the language of public life for Hindus in upper India. The Nagari Pracarini Sabha was formed in Benaras to promote the use of High Hindi written in the Devanagari alphabet, rather than the Perso-Arabic and Kaithi alphabets in which Urdu and Hindustani had previously been transcribed. Fonts were prepared in the Devanagari script, which—with its evocation of Sanskrit—became the script of preference for educated Hindus. Maithil intellectuals who wished to participate in the public life of upper India adopted Nagari Hindi as their language, and even the Benaras-based advocates of a Maithili cultural movement abandoned Mithila's ancient Tirhuta script (cognate with the Bengali, Oriya, Assamese and Newari scripts) in favour of Devanagari when it came to publishing their monthly journal *Mithila Modi* (Misra 1950: 2: 9). With the emergence of Nagari Hindi, or High Hindi, in the public life of Hindus and the continued use of Urdu in government administration one might appreciate the remark of Grierson, quoted above, in

which he refers to the view of Bihar officials that Maithili was just a *gāonwārī bolī*, that is, 'rustic speech'.

If Maithili were merely the rustic speech of villagers then Grierson thought it would have to be the dialect of some language, be it Hindi or Bengali, that served as its standard. Alternatively Maithili could be a language, distinct from Hindi or Bengali, with its own subsidiary dialects. For Grierson the synchronic distinction between language and dialect hinged on two criteria: first, a language serves as a standard for which dialects appear as variant forms; and second, the mutual intelligibility of dialects and the mutual unintelligibility of languages. Despite their conciseness, the application of these criteria to particular cases is often problematic, and especially so in the case of Indo-Aryan vernaculars.

With regard to the first criterion, considerable ambiguity clouds the term 'standard'. Does the word designate the normative form of speech that is prescribed in schoolbooks, but highly restricted in use? Or does it designate the normal form of the language as it is distributed throughout a speech community, the existence of which social and geographical dialectologists call into question? Grierson was not unaware of this ambiguity as he set out to establish the standard of, or possibly for, Maithili. His method was informed by his classical and orientalist training as much as by his commitment to language studies as philology (rather than as linguistics, a term which had not yet gained its modern currency). He represented languages as paradigms of person and number or of cases according to which verbs are conjugated and nouns declined. Such a grammatical representation informed both the European study of Latin and Greek as well as the prescriptive English grammars used in schools. The standard was found by having native informants translate Maithili from Hindi and Sanskrit equivalents in terms of a Latin-derived 'word and paradigm' representation of language (Grierson 1881: 1).

> I printed paradigms of all the forms in Hindi and Sanskrit Grammar and circulated them as widely as possible amongst the Pandits, Village School Masters and educated Native Gentlemen of Northern Mithila, with directions to give the exact translation of each of these forms in their own native language.
>
> I was enabled in this way, to collect some fifty most useful books of forms, supplied by representatives of all classes of society, from the village *guru*, who knew little more than the herd-boys he taught, to the most learned Pandits of Mithila. I am glad to say that the utmost interest was taken in my design, for the people are proud of their language and were pleased at the idea of its being made a polite one, by obtaining the honour of print.

Despite the disparaging reference to the village guru, all of Grierson's informants were literate, and by implication members of the so-called big castes. Moreover, they resided in the Madhubani subdivision of Darbhanga district and the adjoining portion of Bhagalpur—that is to say the *pañc kośī* region—where Maithili is spoken by Brahmans in its greatest purity and where they have 'retarded its corruption' (1909: xi). In short, the Maithil pandit's 'chaste Maithili' became the European philologist's 'standard Maithili'. By implication, the Maithili spoken outside the *pañc kośī* region became variant forms, which were classified as 'dialects'.

In one respect these two language values—the 'chaste' and the 'standard'—are commensurable. Ethnographic accounts of 'Sanskritization' describe the persuasive imitative pull that Brahmanical customs, privileges and manners have exerted upon lower castes; hence the pandit's chaste Maithili is as authoritative as the European philologist's standard Maithili. Yet the hierarchical ordering of caste society deprives chaste Maithili of the prescriptive import that the 'standard' language form has in societies with a commitment to egalitarian values. Chaste Maithili does not impose itself as the normative form of rustic Maithili (or at least it did not until universal primary education came to Bihar). Moreover, a certain type of speech comes 'natural' to a certain type of speaker such that the adoption of the speech styles of persons from higher or lower stations in life is unnatural. In medieval drama different ranks of characters were scripted in different languages: Brahmans and the king in Sanskrit; women and persons of middle rank in Sauraseni; and comic characters in Magadhi (Bloch 1965: 19). If one searches for prescriptive import in spoken or written Maithili then the comparison would be between the impact of Sanskrit grammar on chaste Maithili and of Latin grammar on nineteenth-century prescriptive English (the splitting of infinitives or the mixing of cases in 'It is me' are 'bad usage' because they violate the rules of Latin grammar, not the conventions of spoken English).

As for the second criterion of a language, namely its mutual unintelligibility with other languages, linguistic research in the 1950s and 1960s has demonstrated how problematic such a criterion is. Intelligibility is often a matter of degrees and contexts, so that one is still left with the problem of determining how unintelligible communication must be before two dialects may be thought of as separate languages (Haugen 1967). Moreover, perceptions of intelligibility—and therefore readiness to make oneself intelligible—are matters of local ethnic

attitude (Wollf 1959). It is not clear how Grierson tested for mutual unintelligibility, except to note that comparison was made with reference to the neighbouring languages of Hindi and Bengali.

Because there was no external standard for Maithili and in view of its mutual unintelligibility with Bengali or Hindi, Grierson concluded that Maithili was an independent language (1881: 2).

> For Maithili *is* a language and not a dialect. It is the custom to look upon it as an uncouth dialect of untaught villagers, but it is in reality the native language of more than seven and a quarter millions of people [1880 figures], of whom, as will be borne out by every official having experience of North Bihar, at least five millions can neither speak nor understand either Hindi or Urdu without the greatest difficulty. It differs from both Hindi and Bangali, both in Vocabulary and Grammar, and is as much a distinct language from either of them as Marathi or Uriya. It is a country with its own traditions, it own poets and its own pride in everything belonging to itself.

In sum, Maithili passed the language test.

Grierson had no sooner made up his mind than he changed it again. The change was provoked by the additional material he had collected on the other so-called '*gāonwārī bolī*' of Bihar. While Maithili did seem to be a language in relation to Hindi and Bengali, it was mutually intelligible with Bhojpuri (spoken in eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar) and Magahi (southern and southwestern Bihar), both of which separate Maithili from the Avadhi-speaking ('eastern Hindi') area. Initially Grierson, together with Hoernle (1880: 35), thought that Maithili might be the standard for Bhojpuri and Magahi. Yet he subsequently revised his view to say that the various dialects did not share a common standard, nor did Maithili have any external standard. Lacking an external standard, Maithili might be considered a language; but being mutually intelligible with Bhojpuri and Magahi, it might be considered a dialect. In short, it made as much sense to label Maithili the one as the other.

In the event Grierson opted for the term 'dialect', but with the proviso that Maithili lacked an external standard (1883: 1–2). The proviso made the language/dialect distinction meaningless in its synchronic sense.

> [The term dialect] popularly (though not scientifically) accepted, necessarily presupposes the existence of some one closely connected form of speech to which the dialects can be referred as a standard. . . . But there is no standard language of which, say, Tirhuti [Maithili] or Bhagalpuri can be called dialects, . . . If, therefore, we use the word 'dialect' at all, it must be . . . in the sense of speech used by the people of a certain limited tract of country, and

that all idea of reference to another standard speech must be rigorously excluded.

From 1883 Grierson began to refer to Maithili, together with Magahi and Bhojpuri, as dialects, meaning by the term nothing more than the native category of *sthāniyā bhāṣā*. Local speech forms, where either of these dialects had been 'corrupted' or where two or more dialects intermingled, were classified as subdialects. In sum, chaste Maithili became a dialect without any external standard and served, in turn, as the standard for its neighbouring subdialects.

Grierson was not entirely surprised by his predicament, for he knew that William Carey, student of Indian languages and translator of the New Testament into Bengali, had run into the same impasse some 67 years earlier (cited in Grierson 1903; see also Grierson 1927: 1: 1: 22–4).

> But although we entered on our work with these ideas [the Sanskrit origin of the nine principal Indian vernacular languages, all the rest being dialects of Hindi] we were ultimately constrained to relinquish them. First, one language was found to differ widely from Hindee in point of termination, then another, and in so great a degree, that the idea of their being dialects of Hindee seemed scarcely tenable. Yet while they were found to possess terminations for the nouns and verbs distinct from the Hindee, they were found as complete as the Hindee itself; and we at length perceived that we might, with as much propriety term them dialects of the Mahratta or the Bengalee language, as of the Hindee. In fact, we have ascertained that there are more than twenty languages, composed, it is true, of nearly the same words and all equally related to the common parent, the Sungskrit, but each possessing a distinct set of terminations, and therefore, having equal claims to the title of distinct cognate languages. Among these we number the Juypore, the Bruj, the Oodupore, the Bikaner, the Mooltanee, the Marawar, the Maguda (or South Bahar), the Sindh, the Mythil [Maithili], ... etc., languages, the very names of which have scarcely reached Europe, but which have been recognized as distinct languages by the natives of India since time immemorial.

Given the impasse on the terminology, Grierson reconsidered what was really at issue for him: not the synchronic variations of chaste and rustic speech in Bihar but the diachronic implications for delineating the genealogy of modern Indo-Aryan vernaculars (see Grierson 1895, 1896). If Maithili, Magahi and Bhojpuri were dialects, from what language did they derive? Hoernle had tentatively supposed Maithili to be a dialect of eastern Hindi, but Grierson found the term inaccurate and objectionable. Given the mutual intelligibility of Maithili, Bhojpuri and Magahi and unintelligibility of Hindi, Grierson sup-

posed the three dialects to have derived from the same language. A name did not exist for this congery of dialects, but Grierson (1883: 2) made good the absence by calling them dialects of the Bihari language. The Bihari language was spoken throughout much of Bihar province and hence served—like Marathi, Panjabi, Bengali and other languages named after places—to designate the language of the region. In 1909, when the revised edition of *The Maithili Language of North Bihar* (1881) was published, the new title reflected Maithili's diminished status in the family of Indo-Aryan languages: *The Maithili Dialect of the Bihari Language as spoken in North Bihar.* In brief, Maithili, and its neighbouring 'dialects', stemmed from the common Bihari language source which, in turn, possessed common features with Bengali, Assamese and Oriya. Bihari became the 'parent' of Maithili and the 'sister' of Bengali, Assamese and Oriya in the family tree of eastern Indo-Aryan languages. All four languages, in turn, sprang from Magadha Apabhramsa.

The philological discovery of the Bihari language defies in some measure common sense. Grierson offered the comparison of Marathi, Panjabi and Bengali as territorially defined languages, yet the comparison is not entirely apt. True that Bengali is spoken in dialect, yet the speakers of these various dialects recognize in some sense their common membership in a Bengali speech community. No such awareness exists in Bihar of there being a Bihari language, or of there ever having been a Bihari language. It seems preposterous that Maithili, Bhojpuri and Magahi speakers could all speak variants of a language, of the existence of which they remained unaware.

To be charitable, though, the invention of the Bihari language has some plausibility. Grierson was a philologist, applying the comparative method to formal features of speech (sound, grammar, words) so that dialects and languages might be found whose relatedness stemmed from their supposed common origin. At the time of Grierson's initial research in the 1880s comparative philology had been put on a 'scientific basis' by the Junggrammatiker, based in Leipzig, who formulated phonological laws of language change such that lapsed parent languages could be reconstructed from an analysis of their descendent forms. Such reconstructed proto-forms, called hypotheticals, were pure philological inventions, and were indicated as such by an asterisk. The fascination for Grierson, as much as for other philologists, of Indian languages was their proto-relation with European languages and the availability of documents and inscriptions extending over several millennia which enabled the reconstruction of the

Indo-Aryan language family with relatively rare recourse to starred items. Nonetheless hypothetical forms were part of the stock-in-trade of the philologist. Grierson's invention of the Bihari language was not a departure from philological convention.

Given the, by now, commonplace criticisms of the synchronic language/dialect distinction and the family-tree model of language change (see Lyons 1981), there is no need to take Grierson to task for being a 'man of his time'. Yet it is curious, his shift in frame from subdialect to dialect to language. The dialect/subdialect relation was synchronic and hinged on the distinction between standard and variant forms; the language/dialect relation was diachronic and genetic. He implicitly treated Maithili as a language in its synchronic context, for it was the standard form of its variant subdialects; and he explicitly treated Maithili as a dialect in its diachronic relations with so-called Bihari. By constructing a genealogy in which a plethora of regional dialects stemmed from four languages (Bengali, Oriya, Assamese and Bihari) that emerged from one Ursprache (Magadha Apabhramsa), Grierson solved his problem of synchronic heterogeneity by imagining a prehistory of homogeneity.

Yet one might expect the socio-linguistic conditions that made the synchronic language/dialect distinction unworkable in the late nineteenth century to have also made it unworkable in the prior past. Indeed, a purview of the philological literature reveals the absence of any consensus whatsoever on the genealogy of Maithili (reviewed in Yadav 1981). Kellogg (1876) and Hoernle (1880) considered Maithili to be part of eastern Hindi. Grierson separated the three 'Bihari dialects' from Eastern Hindi and put them with the eastern Prakrit of Bengali, Oriya and Assamese. Chatterji (1926) granted 'independence' to the three dialects, making Bengali, Assamese and Oriya the eastern Magadhi; Maithili and Magahi the central Magadhi and Bhojpuri, Nagpuri and Sedani the western Magadhi. Misra (1976: 21) similarly granted Maithili 'independence', putting it in with Bengali, Assamese and Oriya, relegating Bhojpuri into the eastern Hindi family and sending Magahi into oblivion. The common feature of these fictions is that language families tend to achieve some measure of identity when they are spoken at the former imperial centres of the Ganges basin. The so-called Bihari languages, being on the periphery of Bengal and the Doab, are shifted back and forth between the languages of two other places as counters in the reconstruction of the past.

Census Commissioners, *raisons d'état* and the Wider Senses of Hindi

If Grierson's philological scholarship may be taken as one type of colonial science, then that of the census commissioners may be seen as a rather different sort. Both philologist and census commissioner were interested in Maithili, and in the 1901 Census they even collaborated in their work; yet their knowledge was constituted by different scholarly practices, subjected to different institutional constraints and sanctioned by different authorities. Grierson moved in administrative circles, but his fieldwork in the heart of the *pañc kosī* region put him in relations of trust and dependency with Brahmans and he tested his philological knowledge against the opinions of other orientalists. His interest lay in Maithili: its grammatical structure (1881, 1909), regional dialects (1883, 1885) and lexicon (1885). He may have been essentialist in matters of language systems (otherwise he would not have had so many problems on the language/dialect issue), but not in matters of speech communities, where he perceived a shifting basis of language identity. He was, for example, sharply critical of Risley and the nineteenth-century ethnologists with their racial notions of the connection between blood and language (1903–1928: 1, 28–9). By contrast, census commissioners were interested in the movement and control of populations upon a territory. Language was a matter of interest from the very first census in 1872, but not as a phenomenon in itself, rather as an index of nationality and a measure of population change. Reasons of state directed what information was collected, how it was classified and how it was put to use. The knowledge gained was so constrained by policy that it became at times indistinguishable from it.

Interestingly, both Grierson and the census commissioners concurred that Maithili was a regional dialect; they differed, however, in what it was a dialect of. For Grierson Maithili was a dialect of Bihari; for the census commissioners a dialect of Hindi. As the decennial census machinery became institutionalized and *raisons d'état* changed, successive generations of census commissioners changed their reasons for treating Maithili as a dialect of Hindi; the classification itself, however, remained unchanged.

The history of the changing reasons for the unchanging policy dates back to the latter half of the nineteenth century and to the role of ethnology in the classification of the subject peoples of the British

Empire. Ethnologists applied the comparative method, as developed originally by anatomists and later by philologists, to the study of preliterate peoples so that on the basis of a formal comparison of similarities and differences with neighbouring peoples their history might be discovered and light might be shed on the origins of civilized man. Material culture was an important source of information for inferences about levels of culture; race and language were important for derivations of identity. The comparative ambitions of ethnology suited well the schemes of empire and, in particular, those of the early census commissioners who also understood the identity of 'races' and 'tribes' to be fixed in blood and language. The modern state found it imperative, as did its colonial agents, to identify populations so that their territorial movements might be monitored and controlled. The classification and enumeration of subject peoples in terms of their mother tongue with reference to the boundaries of their administrative jurisdiction became central to state knowledge. Moreover, in the nineteenth century 'races' and 'tribes' were thought to be two types of 'nation', and empires—by definition—were constituted by a plurality of nations. Until the idea of the self-determination of all nations—regardless of their 'level of culture'—gained legitimacy, the enterprise of ethnology found itself bound up in the glorification of the British Empire.

The first Indian census for the Bengal Presidency in 1872 derived in large measure from Dalton's *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, also published in 1872. The volume emerged out of the abandoned plans of the Asiatic Society of Bengal to hold an ethnological congress in Calcutta in 1869–1870 in which living specimens of the various races of the 'Old World' would be put on display and subjected to scientific scrutiny. The political implications of such 'strange', 'shy' and 'wild' creatures dying while under government care soon put paid to these plans, but the Government of Bengal did direct its local authorities to furnish complete and accurate lists of the various races within their jurisdiction and Colonel Edward Dalton was put in charge of compiling the information. In the event the information was not very helpful and Dalton was obliged to put together his text on the basis of his own administrative experience and the published record in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society*. Much of Dalton's work was taken directly into the Census. Interestingly, though, the Census follows Dalton's language/race classification more closely with reference to the myriad 'tribes' of the Presidency than to the greater 'nations', where presumably administrators felt more confident about their own sources of

knowledge. The passage below, drawn from the 1872 Census (p. 152), reads like three pictures from the exhibition that never took place:

> Living amid a network of rivers and morasses, and nourished on a watery rice diet, the semi-amphibious Bengali in appearance belongs to a weak and puny race, yet he is able to endure an amount of exposure to which the up-country Hindustani would soon fall victim. In active pursuits the Bengali is timid and slothful, but in intellect he is subtle and sharp-witted; and these latter qualities, combined with a plodding industry and a natural fondness for sedentary employment, have carried him into Government offices all over the country and raised him to some of the highest judicial posts in the land. . . .
>
> Allied to the Bengali by language as well as descent, the people of Orissa have nevertheless derived a peculiarity of physiognomy and character from their isolated position. The Ooryas are even more timid than the Bengalis. Conservative to a degree, they are wanting in enterprise, contented to follow the practices of their forefathers and evincing a thorough dislike of all modern improvements. The same characteristic makes them the most bigoted and pride-ridden people in India.
>
> Perfectly distinct from these nationalities above mentioned, the up-country Hindustani of Behar are of a hardier and more manly type. They speak Hindee, the language of upper India; though some of the inflections used in the vulgar dialects exhibit a remarkable affinity to the language of Bengal. The Hindustanis are more decidedly Aryan than any of the other races found in Bengal. Even the semi-aboriginal tribes met with in that part of the country are of a better build and of nobler mien than similar tribes in Lower Bengal. This no doubt is partly due to the climate, partly to their more substantial diet, and partly to the circumstances of a longer infusion of Aryan blood into the country.

Of particular interest in the 1872 Census is not only the racialism implicit in the language classification but also the notion that the frontiers of speech resemble administrative boundaries. The following passage refers to a tract of land that would eventually in 1901 be understood, but not officially recognized, as the eastern frontier of the Maithili-speaking area (p. 116):

> The Kosee river used to be the boundary of Behar, but Hindustanis are the prevailing race for some distance beyond. . . . If it were possible to draw a hard and fast line which should divide the country inhabited by Bengalis from that inhabited by Hindustanis speaking a dialect of Hindee it should perhaps run in a vertical direction through the police stations of Amourkasbah and Kudba.

This administrative sense of boundary contrasts with that of Grierson who also had an interest in language boundaries, but these were

isoglosses of a single feature (e.g. where the short 'i' becomes long) of a subsystem (e.g. sound) of a dialect of a language. The language, as a whole, was not seen as being bounded; rather it had a frontier where one regionally dominant pattern of speech shaded into that of another.

The 1881 Census retains a keen interest in nationalities, but more for the control of populations than for the glorification of the Raj. Language and birthplace were taken as the key indicators by which nationality might be determined; and accordingly the Government proposed that these two items be put on the census schedule. The proposal, however, was turned down by the Secretary of State for India (1881, I, 147), and only the inquiries on language went ahead. Again the system followed was that of Dalton (p. 162) in which the 'Asiatic languages' of the Province were divided into the following categories: Bengali; Hindi, Hindustani, Urdu; Uriya; Kolarian; Dravidian; Languages of the Northern Borders; etc. By 1891 the 'Asiatic languages' were named 'Languages of the Empire'; and Dalton's list was updated and revised to include 'Aryan languages, Kolarian, Dravidian and Tibeto-Burman'. Although there were some additions to the list of Aryan languages spoken in Bengal ('Nipali–Hindi' and Assamese), no mention was made of Maithili. In Bihar, apart from Chota Nagpur, Hindustani was the main language.

The 1901 Census is of interest, for it was the first census in which a competent philologist worked hand in hand with a census commissioner to establish valid categories for the recording of the languages. The philologist was Grierson; the commissioner Gait. At the time of its preparation Grierson had already been engaged on the preliminary work for his *Linguistic Survey of India*. He had gone with the 1891 Census returns back to the districts concerned to correct inaccuracies with regard to the language spoken, number of speakers and names by which it was known. The initial document, entitled *First, Rough, List of Languages*, Grierson made available to Gait who used it in devising the language categories for the 1901 Census (p. 312). Gait prepared an alphabetical list of language names and how they were classified philologically and circulated the list among district officers for examination. The list was revised in the light of the reports and sent to Grierson who corrected them and sent his final revisions back to Gait. If languages were returned which were 'new' and had no place on the list, they were double-checked by caste and birthplace to figure out what the language was; or enquiries went back to the district to determine its place. By the time it came to prepare the 1901 Census

schedule Grierson was ready with various refinements in the categories under which languages were enumerated and tabulated.

Grierson's advice, like that of Dalton, was taken up with regard to the poorly understood, loosely controlled, and numerically insignificant 'tribal peoples' of Bengal, but he was largely ignored when it clashed with administrative perceptions of the greater language groups in Bihar (1901: 311).

> These dialects [spoken in Bihar], taken together, constitute a language which is now recognized as being entirely distinct from Hindi properly so-called, and are now known collectively to grammarians as Bihari. But to the ordinary native they are all alike called Hindi. Separate dialects, such as Bhojpuri, Maithili and Magahi, are known to exist, but these distinctions are not looked on as of any practical importance, and at least ninety-nine persons out of a hundred, if asked what their language was, would at once reply Hindi, and this is what was usually recorded in the language columns of the census schedules.

Bihari, therefore, was deemed to be 'Hindi in the wide sense' (p. 314), a phrase that would reappear in later censuses. The number of Bihari speakers—comprising the dialects of Maithili, Bhojpuri and Magahi—was worked out according to the formula Grierson had used to recover the speech community from its exclusion in the 1891 Census. The Maithili formula was: all the people from Darbhanga and Bhagalpur districts, 6/7ths of the population of Muzaffarpur, 1/2 that of Monghyr, 2/3rds the population of Purnea and 4/5ths of the Hindi speakers of the Santhal Pergunnas. According to this calculation in 1901 there were 10,387,897 Maithili speakers, up from 9,207,131 as from Grierson's calculations from the 1891 Census (p. 320).

The administrative convenience of recording Bihari as Hindi suited the government's emerging policy on language. By the turn of the century the Government of India had begun considering ways by which the regional government might be made more effective. It was clear that the Bengal Presidency was too large, and yet the initial solution to the problem—the crude division of the Presidency in 1905 into an eastern and western province—angered Bengali speakers who saw their country being cut in two. Resistance was strong enough to make the Government rethink the basis of effective administration. A common language was seen to be a precondition of communication, and socio-cultural homogeneity was thought to promote the growth of local loyalties. To this effect plans were made to constitute four culturally homogenous states: Bengal, Assam, Bihar and Orissa, each of which possessed its own dominant language. Hindi (Hindustani,

Urdu) was the language of Bihar—both of the people and the government—and this difference alone legitimated its separation from Bengal. At the Delhi Darbar on 12 December 1911 it was announced that in the following year the western and eastern provinces of Bengal would be reunited into one administrative unit, but that Assam would be detached from the Presidency as a Chief Commissioner's Province and that a separate province of Bihar and Orissa would be created. Orissa was to be administered from Patna until judged ready for its own government (Government of Bihar, 1954: 12).

> It is to the highest degree desirable to give the Hindi-speaking people, now included within the Province of Bengal, a separate administration. These people, have hitherto been unequally yoked with the Bengalis, and have never, therefore, had a fair opportunity for development. The cry of Bihar for the Biharis has frequently been raised in connection with the conferment of appointments, an excessive strong belief has grown up among Biharis that Bihar will never develop until it is dissociated from Bengal.

Under the circumstances it would have been difficult for the O'Malley Census of 1911 to maintain that Hindi was not spoken in Bihar and at any rate 'it was realized that it would be hopeless to expect the people themselves to return their languages with any philological exactitude' (p. 382). A person who speaks Bihari does not call his language Bihari, but Hindi.

By 1921 the classification scheme of the *Linguistic Survey of India* was adopted for Bihar and Orissa. All Indo-Aryan vernaculars were relegated either to the Outer or the Inner Sub Branch, with the exception, again, of Bihari which is not brought into the schedule. The Census Commissioner could not, however, pretend—as O'Malley had done—that the people of Bihar do 'not recognize such names as Magahi, Bhojpuri and Maithili as designations for different dialects of that language' (1911: 382). During the first few decades of the twentieth century numerous organizations for the promotion of Maithil culture emerged in Calcutta, Benaras and the towns of Mithila, of which the chief of them was the Darbhanga-based Maithila Mahasabha, formed in 1910 on the instigation of the Benaras-based Maithili journal *Mithila Moda* (Misra 1976: 223–8). Thus the reason why Maithili could not be returned in the 1921 Census now lay with the unsophistication of the enumerators as philologists, not the people (p. 211):

> Considerable interest was displayed at this census in the Maithili dialect, and letters were received from the Maithili Mahasabha of Darbhanga and the Shree Dharmaamrita Vaishini Sabha of Bhagalpur suggesting that

Maithili be entered in the census schedules. ... If an accurate return of Maithili speakers could be obtained through the agency of the census staff it would be of great interest but they could not distinguish subtleties of dialect change. Even an experienced philologist would find it difficult to draw the border between Bhojpuri and Maithili.

In North Bihar 98.7 per cent of the people were said to speak Hindi where the 'linguistic distribution is as flat and devoid of variety as is the landscape—facts which are connected as effect to cause, for languages naturally spread more rapidly where there is no physical hindrance to the free movement of people who speak them (p. 210).' It is clear from the above statement, which reveals more about the doctrine of free trade than about language distribution, that a philologist did not write the 1921 Census report.

The 1921 Census is of interest, for it confirms that the census had now become a state institution. The 1901 Census in Bengal was preoccupied with problems of validity. Regardless of Risley's racialist concept of caste and Grierson's invention of Bihari, there was an attempt by Gait to base the census categories on the perceived socio-cultural reality of India. By 1921 the value had shifted to reliability. There may be a language or dialect called Maithili but there is no sense in recording it because if the census categories are altered one can no longer compare the returns of the present census with previous ones to monitor and measure population movements. It is impossible to say whether Khotta is Hindi or Bengali but since it was treated as Hindi in 1911, better to do so in 1921 (p. 209). Moreover, weight is given to precedence, as in Grierson's formula for recovering Maithili speakers (1901: 320; 1911: 388; 1921: 219). Expressions from previous censuses are now repeated as stock phrases: e.g. Maithili is 'Hindi in its wide sense'. Finally the census loses its character as an occasional text. Each report incorporates the previous reports in a complex form of authorship generated by a concern for legal precedence rather than scientific validity.

The 1951 Census is of interest as it was the first census of an independent India. The ruling Congress Party found itself, however, in a linguistic dilemma. Although the Indian National Congress had committed itself in 1921 to the idea of linguistic provinces in the belief that this was the only way to reach the mass of people in such a culturally diverse land, by the time the Congress Party had assumed power in 1949 the need for a common language to strengthen national unity was also recognized. The language of the former imperial rulers was an inappropriate symbol of national unity and Hindi was the most obvious candidate for elevation to that role. Thus there was little

reason for the state to recognize Maithili, for such recognition would exacerbate claims for regional autonomy and diminish the officially uncontroversial area where the 'main language' and 'national language' were one and the same. Yet the non-recognition of regional languages by Congress would betray the trust of those people who had fought to free the country of imperial rule (see Government of India, 1956).

The 1951 Census schedule cleverly sidestepped the horns of this language dilemma. If Hindi was to function as the national language it would have to be the subsidiary language in those regions where it was not the main language. Hence the innovation of the 1931 census, namely the enumeration of both main and subsidiary languages, was retained in the schedule, but for the first time Maithili was listed as a Bihari dialect, the returns of which would be provisionally enumerated. All 'Urdu and Bihari and Hindi dialects', however, were ultimately recorded with the Hindi language in the table. Respondents could not offer Maithili *and* Hindi as main and subsidiary languages, for they were the same language. The 1951 Census returns marked the nadir of the Maithili language movement. Coming so soon after independence, the feeling for national unity was high as was the commitment of local leaders to sacrifice their regional identity for the sake of that greater unity. In northern Bihar only 97,685 persons returned Maithili as their mother-tongue.

The years following independence were marked, however, by an increasing disenchantment with Delhi so that in the 1950s the aims of Maithili advocates gained greater purchase on public opinion. Having failed in their attempt to have Maithili listed as a regional language in Schedule VIII of the Indian Constitution, they looked forward to the 1961 Census as a forum for demonstrating the justice of their aims. The Maithili *v.* Hindi issue, together with the Urdu *v.* Hindi issue, made the language section the most controversial part of the schedule, even creating in some areas a 'law and order' problem (p. 459). Maithili advocates promoted an unsuccessful attempt to have the residents of Darbhanga and Bhagalpur districts entered *ipso facto* as Maithili speakers (based on Grierson's formula), and numerous rumours circulated within the districts that enumerators had been instructed to enter Maithili as Hindi. The result of all this 'consciousness-raising' was an increase of some 5000 per cent over the 1951 figure for the number of Maithili speakers. The total of 4,982,615 was, however, still less than 50 per cent of what Grierson had calculated for 1901.

From 1872 in which 'Hindee is the language of upper India' to 1961

and beyond in which 'the figures for Urdu and Bihari and Hindi dialects have been shown with Hindi in the Table' the knowledge of the census commissioners remained *in force*. Discontinuities appear only in the changing reasons for maintaining that policy. Either the people are too unsophisticated to return Maithili; or the enumerators are too unsophisticated. Either the language does not exist; or it exists, but to record it would upset the projections based on previous censuses. In 1911 Maithili is Hindi in its wide sense because it is not Bengali; from 1951 Maithili is Hindi in its wide sense because it is important that the national language be the main language in as many regions as possible. The continuity in knowledge/policy during the early and late colonial periods, both before and after independence, demonstrates how successfully the interests of the modern state and of its institutionalized census resisted changes in government and forms of government as much as the 'will of (half) the people'. For the state Maithili was and is Hindi 'in its wide sense'.

The Brahmanical Assertion of the Autonomy of Maithili

Grierson is widely respected throughout educated Maithil society for his 'service' to Maithili language and literature; indeed, when Congress politicians after independence renamed Glisan [Grierson] Chowk in Madhubani as Gandhi Chowk, townsmen protested until the name Glisan was restored. Yet Maithil pandits and scholars have been mystified and hurt by Grierson's designation of Maithili as a dialect of the 'Bihari language'; as indeed have been the scholars of Bhojpuri (Tivari n.d.) and Magahi (Aryāṇī 1976). Misra (1976: 20–2), the leading historian of Maithili literature, notes with some bitterness that Grierson's 'cardinal mistake' continues to abet the 'fake theories and prejudices' of those who wish ill of Maithili, even though the 'imaginary theory' is perpetuated today in only 'the less scientific treatises'. The problem with authoritative texts, such as the *Linguistic Survey of India* and the *Census of India*, is that as long as the authority remains plausible, so do the texts, despite the validity or invalidity of their internal argument. Ever since the publication of Grierson's classification of Indo-Aryan vernaculars—first by the Royal Asiatic Society and later by the Government of India—Maithil scholars have been caught up defending the honour of their mother tongue from the 'mischievous' label of its being a dialect. University texts on Maithili grammar and literature, written in Maithili (B. Jhā 1981: 1–6; D. Jhā

1983: 409–10) and in English (Misra 1949), also respond to the debate, coming down on the side of Maithili's status as a language, sometimes even citing Grierson as an authority (but strategically referring to the 1881, not 1909 Grierson; see Misra 1949: xiii).

The terms of the debate in Maithili and Hindi are, however, as muddled as those of Grierson. Indian linguists—writing in Hindi (Śarmā 1977: 335–69) or Maithili (B. Jhā 1981: 1–6)—distinguish between *bhāṣā* and *bolī* (sometimes *upbhāṣā*), the former being the translation of 'language', and the latter of 'dialect'. Yet as with European usage, the application of the terms is highly problematic. The conventional usage of pandit-grammarians departs from that of linguists. In classical India knowledge was inscribed in Sanskrit which, strictly speaking, was not called a *bhāṣā*, that term being applied to the regional vernacular tongues as in the case of Braj Bhakha, the language of Braj to the southeast of Delhi. With the rise of High Hindi as the authoritative speech of modern, upper India, and the identification of Braj with the pastoral life of Krishna at Brindavan, High Hindi acquired the reputation of being a *bhāṣā*, and Braj a *bolī*, or dialect. Thus, as terms, *bhāṣā* and *bolī* have been interchangeable; the underlying concepts, however, remain stable. *Bolī* is the nominative of the Hindi *bolnā* 'to speak', meaning 'speech'. *Bhāṣā* is a Sanskrit loanword which imputes a formal, authoritative character to speech, thereby giving it the dignity of language. Furthermore 'speech' is by definition spoken and actual in that it is rooted in local, momentary, intelligible utterances. A *bhāṣā*, insofar as it is spoken, may also be this; but it may also exist in a formal sense (dignified by grammatical description) and possess a written literature, which gives it a secondary mode of perpetuation. It would seem that the words *bhāṣā* and *bolī* are inconsistently used; yet there is some consistency in the relation they describe: the distinction between a universal language and regional speech forms.

Conceived in this way, the very same relation that governs the *bhāṣā bolī* distinction can be perceived in the distinction between Sanskrit ('refined' speech) and Prakrit ('natural' speech) as described in a Maithil pandit-grammarian's introduction to his Maithili grammar (G. Jhā 1979: 1–2).

> The Sanskrit language probably existed in the same form throughout all of India, but Prakrit languages took many forms according to the region. In northeastern India a form gained currency whose name is Pracya Prakrit. Some time later this language's form changed again and then its name became Pracya Apabhramsa. In this Pracya Apabhramsa were kept in seed

Maithili, Bengali and the other modern Pracya Apabhramsa languages. Then from this Pracya Apabhramsa a new Madhyavarti language took birth whose name is Abahattha, also Abhatha. It may be seen in Vidyapati's *Kirtilata* and other texts. The modern language, which was born from this Abhattha language of the country of Mithila, is called today Maithili.

Regardless of how one uses the terms *bhāṣā* and *bolī* as labels, the context in which they are used invariably describes a relation between an authoritative language and one caught up in local circumstances. The authority variously derives from its universality, divinity, originality, purity or the dignity invested in it by the qualities of its speech community (human and celestial gods). In short, one returns to the essential/local contrast between chaste and rustic Maithili described above in the first section.

The preoccupations of the essential/local structure of language identity touch on Grierson's diachronic reconstructions but not on his synchronic classification of eastern Prakrit languages. The mutual unintelligibility of languages and the mutual intelligibility of dialects is not an issue for Maithil pandit-grammarians in the assertion of the linguistic autonomy of Maithili. Nor do they discuss the 'standard' form of the language. Indeed, they do not even mention the existence of rustic Maithili, for chaste Maithili is essentially Maithili. Only Maithil linguists (not pandits), writing in English (S. Jha 1958), render the chaste form as the 'standard'; and only European scholars (Grierson 1909; myself) betray their alien sense of comprehensiveness by mentioning rustic speech in their descriptions of the language. What is at issue is the autonomy of the language; derived genetically from an authoritative language of the past which ultimately stems from Sanskrit, or derived from the autonomy of the country in which the language (*sthāniyā bhāṣā*) is spoken. In the former case what is critical is the essence (the 'seed' as G. Jhā put it) of the present language in a previous authoritative one, not the question of one being the 'standard' of the other. In the latter case what is critical is the uniqueness of its speech forms as artefacts of the country, not its degree of intelligibility with neighbouring forms of speech.

A language that possesses its own authoritative seed in the past and unique, local features in the present is autonomous (*svatantra*; or 'independent' as stated by Misra 1976: 20–2). Diachronically autonomy is established by the purity of one's pedigree, traced back to Sanskrit through Apabhramsa and Prakrit languages. Dependence upon Sanskrit, as a universal language, can be acknowledged, but not the dependence of one modern language upon another; or one

Apabhramsa upon another. The reason why Grierson's 'imaginary theory' is so irksome to Maithil pandits is that Brahmans are also in the business of reconstructing language origins; and the implication of Maithili being the niece of Bengali or the grand-niece of Hindi is insulting. Synchronically autonomy is established by unique grammatical features, in which postpositions and verbal terminations are deemed significant. Value is also placed on the extent to which the lexicon is unique, resisting adulteration by the forms of speech of other places.

The essential and local sources of lingual autonomy are supported by the three etymological categories of Brahman pandits: *tatsama*, *tadbhava* and *deśī*. The first source of autonomy emphasizes Sanskritic ancestry; hence the *tatsama* words taken directly from Sanskrit into the modern vernacular and the *tadbhava* words that entered the vernacular from Sanskrit through the medium of Apabhramsa and Prakrit. The second source of autonomy derives from words of customary usage in their country (*deśa*) of origin. Such words lack the cachet of Sanskrit, but at least they are free of the stigma of alien importation. The *tadbhava* and *tatsama* categories imply that Brahmans are willing to see their language in a genetic relationship with the cultivated language of Sanskrit and the *deśī* category in an exclusive, local relationship with their country. Again one returns to the essential/local contrast: the same dynamic that structures in common parlance the difference between chaste and rustic Maithili, structures in Brahmanical discourse the autonomy of the language and the distinction between language and dialect. Dialects are not variant forms of speech nor mutually intelligible ones so much as derivative or adulterated ones. What is for the philologist a matter of knowledge and for the administrator of policy, is for the pandit-grammarian a matter of honour.

In restoring honour to their language, Maithil Brahman pandits and scholars have worked both sources of autonomy. Various scholars have sought to establish the antiquity of the name Maithili, finding evidence back to the late eighteenth century from European sources and earlier still in the *Ain-i-Akbari* and in the *Alphabetum Brammhanicum* (1771). Pre-modern Maithili sources note the name of their language as *avahattha*, *mithila-apabhramsa* or simply as the 'language of the country' (Misra 1976: 16). Other authors take solace in the antiquity of the name of the country Mithila, if not the language Maithili (S. Jha 1958: 2–5). With regard to the literature Misra (1949) traced its genealogy back to the Buddhist *caryapads* (*c.* A.D. 800–1100) and described the middle period in such a way as to recapture Maithili

literature from its Bengali claimants. Considerable popular consciousness remains among Maithils of their own Tirhuta script, which—although related to Bengali—differs from it in several key respects (Misra 1949: 1: 67–72; 1973). As for Grierson's cardinal mistake, Maithil pandit-grammarians are quite empirical where philologists become hypothetical. There is no evidence (*pramāṇ*) of the existence of a Bihari language, let alone a Bihari literature (Tivārī n.d.). It is, as Misra said, an 'imaginary theory'.

Meanwhile Maithil scholars have throughout this period guarded their flanks, trying to ensure that the dialects on their periphery are not accorded autonomous status. Local movements have sprung up, renaming the Chika-chiki dialect Angika Bhasa. Its centre (never mind the periphery) is Bhagalpur which, according to the Puranas, was capital of Ang Desa at the time of the war of the Mahabharata. Similarly on the west of Mithila the dialect in the Muzaffarpur region is now called by some the Bajjika Bhasa, after an appellation that supposedly dates from Licchvi period. Maithil scholars, however, discount these two speech forms as autonomous languages; rather they are dialects of Maithili (D. Jhā 1983: 412).

As for the second source of autonomy, Maithil Brahmans and Kayasths defend the territory of Mithila by defending the uniqueness of their speech. Brought into the defence is the complexity of the verbal system in which there is a full coverage of moods (present and future imperative, present and perfect subjunctive, present and perfect optative) and the rule that transitive verbs agree with the person and status of both subject as well as object. No other Indo-Aryan language rivals Maithili in this regard (but see the mischievous claim by de Vreese 1962 that the complex conjugational system is neither old nor Indo-Aryan but has been adopted from the tribal Santali). Most interest is shown, however, in the native lexicon, the so-called *ṭheṭh* words of Maithili that are believed to stem from no other language source. Except for the trained etymologist, the derivations are uncertain; what principally matters is that the word is not in active use among one's neighbours. The postposition of purpose *-lāgī* 'in order to' has been current in Maithili-speaking areas for at least several centuries, although in usage it is less frequently uttered than the alternative *-lel*, or the chaste forms *-vāste* and *-hetu*. The frequent use of *-lāgī* in Nepali as the postposition of purpose has led some Maithili speakers in the Nepalese Tarai to think that their use of *-lāgī* is not native. Similarly *rānhab* and *pakhāeb* would appear to be equally authentic Maithili verbs meaning 'to cook' (the latter, more in the

sense of 'to roast'). Yet the proximity of *pakhāeb* to the Nepali *pakāunu* has accentuated *rānhab* as authentic Maithili and *pakhāeb* as a Nepalese influence. In a somewhat similar vein local opinion about the alien source of words revealed that *iskūl* comes from English word 'school', but *sinemā*, or 'cinema', was said to be a native Hindi word, presumably because of the cultural impact of Hindi films. Discussion of the word for towel was interesting: not only because one informant thought that *táuliyā*, introduced by the Portuguese into Hindustani several centuries ago, was native Maithili but also because another informant identified *aṅpochā* as native. The word, a compound of *aṅg* meaning 'limb' and *pochab* 'to wipe', is not found in dictionaries of neighbouring languages, but the compounded words are found in all Indo-Aryan languages (Nep. *puchnu*; Hin. *pochnā*; *etc.*). Here it would seem that the expression is native, even though the individual words are not.

Despite the restoration of Maithili's reputation as a 'language' and the denial of the existence of 'Bihari', the pandit-grammarians and -etymologists of Mithila recognize that the rectification of one's pedigree is, on its own, an insufficient basis for having one's linguistic autonomy accredited. Maithili must also be recognized by the state as a language. Here, however, Maithili advocates have enjoyed only limited success, for scholarly rectifications cannot counter the present-day *raison d'état* that makes Maithili 'Hindi in its wide sense.' In 1949 the government of Bihar reaffirmed Hindi as the language of state administration, but recognized Maithili as a language, enabling it to become a medium of instruction in primary and secondary schools (Brass 1974). Nonetheless by 1960 only 55,000 students had opted for their mother tongue. At university level Maithili courses aim to teach the standard form of the language, but there is no consensus about what that form is. The ambiguity that surrounds the English word 'standard'—meaning both normal and normative—enables one (as Grierson did) to reword chaste Maithili as the standard language. Yet the two are separate in their values; and it has so far proved impossible to write *the* standard text, for provincial society structures differently people's speech decisions and strategies. Meanwhile, different family traditions of pandit-grammarians vary in their accounts of the language, with points of agreement, such as gender categories, and points of disagreement, such as voice categories and the tense/aspect system (compare, for example, the university level texts written by B. G. Jhā 1981; G. Jhā 1979; Y. Jhā 1983). Brass (1974: 68) notes that 'students are afraid to study Maithili because they can never be

certain if the form of the language taught to them will be the same form used by the outside examiner. . . .' Moreover, Maithili grammars written by Maithil pandits rely upon Indo-Aryan grammatical categories (four gender categories, three or four voice categories); whereas Maithili grammars written by Maithil linguists rely in some measure on Latin-derived or descriptive linguistic categories. Indeed, Yadav, an American-trained Maithil linguist from Nepal, refers to the grammars of pandits as '. . . Sanskrit grammars, masquerading as Maithili grammars' (1981: 73). Meanwhile attempts to 'modernize' the language by simplifying its complex conjugational rules and by bringing the use of honorifics more in line with values of an egalitarian society remain idiosyncratic.

In sum, without Maithili becoming a medium of communication by the modern state, it is unlikely that a 'standard' form will emerge. And such a state of affairs is, in turn, unlikely. Bihar counts within its frontiers not only Maithili but also Bhojpuri, Magahi and the various Munda languages (Santali, Ho, etc). Maithili is neither the majority tongue nor the administrative language; it has state certification, but lacks public currency.

At the national level Maithili advocates have been even less successful. In 1965 the All-India Sahitya Akademi recognized Maithili as a language, which entitled Maithil writers to receive central funds for the promotion of Maithili literature, but the national censuses continue to treat Maithili as a dialect of Hindi. Meanwhile, on the Nepalese side of the border, the government rid its census returns, if not its territory, of all trace of Hindi by designating Maithili, Bhojpuri and Avadhi as autonomous languages, not dialects of Hindi. This administrative action mentally banished from Nepalese territory the national language of the dominant regional power, and at the same time turned Maithili into the second largest language group of Nepal (Census of Nepal, 1971; see also Gaige 1975). Yet there was no gain for Maithils. Nepali remains the sole state language and, since 1962, the sole medium of instruction (Gaige 1975). Although political leaders from various parties in the general election of 1991 campaigned for a reversal of the language policy of the previous *pancayat* regime, Maithili still lacks public currency and its future remains uncertain.

What works against the aims of Maithili advocates, however, is not only the absence of public currency, but also the way in which the essential/local contrast subverts the very notion of linguistic autonomy that it constructs. The subversion is particularly evident with

regard to Hindi and English, the dominant languages of the region. For some Maithils, Hindi is *kharī bolī*—the regional vernacular of western Uttar Pradesh whose speech forms should not adulterate the regional vernacular of Mithila; for other Maithils, Nagari Hindi is *bhāṣā*—the authoritative language of the Indian subcontinent whose words may be used to refine one's vernacular speech. In the same way that women perpetuate local culture in their dress, their menfolk opting for the more cosmopolitan trousers, shirt and wristwatch; so also is it said that Maithili is woman's speech, the menfolk opting for Hindi in their more public lives. Similarly English is often taken to be a universal, authoritative language—like Nagari Hindi or Sanskrit—rather than a regional one. This is the implication in the statement of a village woman who was proud that her son was starting to learn English at school. She asked me when children start to learn English in London. When I informed her that it is taught by their mothers from babyhood, she was surprised and exclaimed, 'No wonder England is such a developed country'. Here are some examples of refined speech recorded in the eastern Tarai of Nepal.

phāīneṅcal iśyūke ham otek robasṭ ka phīl naih karáit chī.
[I do not feel very robust on the financial issue]
ham sosāyaṭīeme sīgareṭ pibáit chī
[I only smoke cigarettes in society]

Further evidence of refinement comes from the cosmopolitan world of the local consumer. Here are some shops where Maithil people take their custom in Janakpur: the *Hiro Sālun* for haircuts; the *Guḍphīṭ Ṭáilars* and *Isṭeṇḍarḍ Tailars* for clothes; the *Isṭeśanarī Senṭar* for paper; and the *Reḍiyo Hāṁspaṭal* and *Vāc Repáir Senṭar* for radio and watch repairs. For roadside snacks, there is the *Lāiṭ Hoṭal* and, several buildings down the road, the *Nyū Lāiṭ Hoṭal.* An untouchable cobbler, too poor to afford a shop, worked from a hessian mat on the roadside. In front of his anvil and toolbox was propped a small sign: *Nyū Śū Senṭar.* In all these examples English is not an alien language, rather it is a refined one. Like Sanskrit, it gives style to one's life, authority to one's speech.

For Maithili advocates, however, native speech is authentic insofar as it eschews such refinements. From such a point of view English, as well as Hindi, is seen as an alien influence. Urban people often admit that their speech has become corrupted, but 'simple', 'unaffected' villagers are still thought to speak *ṭheṅṭh máithilī*. Indeed, the term *śuddha*, which means as much chaste as unadulterated, has acquired

an ambiguous meaning. For some *śuddha máithilī* is the chaste Maithili of Maithil Brahmans; for others *śuddha máithilī* is the speech of rustic villagers which remains unadulterated by foreign terms. Undue recourse to English may then be evaluated more as a sign of foppishness than of refinement. Fine airs may be all right for Kathmandu, Delhi and London but not for rural Mithila.

> He went to Kabul, became a Mughal
> and began to speak their language.
> Calling '*āb-āb*', my son has died,
> and under the bed there was water.

The couplet, dating from Mughal times, condenses the story of a young man who left Mithila and went to the seat of Mughal civilization at Kabul, where he abandoned his native ways for the refinements of the Mughal court. Many years later he returned to visit his ageing father. Becoming thirsty, he asked for water (*āb*) in the courtly manner, but no one understood him. He died of thirst, and all the while there was a pot of water under his bed. In telling this story today, one need not substitute '*wāṭar-wāṭar*' for '*āb-āb*' and London for Kabul for local people to catch the allusion.

The belief that local speech is appropriate for provincial society does not call into question, however, the conviction that such usages are but the pale imitation of refined speech at the centres of universal civilization. The assertions by pandits of their linguistic autonomy are persistently countered by local visions of more highly valued speech forms. The capital cities of Kathmandu and Delhi, and the global centres of London, Moscow and New York not only dominate increasingly vast empires of influence but also the way in which the world is described. Some measure of domination may be gained from the extent of Maithili's 'adulteration' as well as from the degree of multilinguism among its speakers. On the cultural periphery of the world one needs languages to gain access to the centre: the educated Maithili speaker knows his own language plus Nepali or Hindi and some English. Educated Nepali and Hindi speakers, however, need only their own language and English. Meanwhile the English get by with their English. The hierarchy of world civilization is relational, with the view from the top reciprocating that from the bottom. *Pañc kośī* Brahmans speak chaste Maithili in relation to their rustic countrymen, but national elites find chaste Maithili decidedly rustic in character, so rustic that in Kathmandu and Delhi it is even said to have 'charm'. One hundred years after the publication of Grierson's

study, the view from above is that Maithili is still rustic speech, a *gāonwārī bolī*.

Speech and Political Culture in Mithila

The four sections above describe various representations that construct speech as language in Mithila. At the risk of caricaturing their differences, one might also perceive in the accounts four different attitudes toward speech: for local people speech is a matter of aesthetic; for philologists, of knowledge; for census commissioners, of policy; and for pandit-grammarians, of honour. These differences, however, should not be exaggerated, if for no other reason than the fact that the representations are not in all cases separate. For reasons to be advanced below, the representation implicit in Grierson's philological research is ambiguous in character; and the representations with which pandit-grammarians assert the autonomy of their mother-tongue build upon the essential/local difference found throughout Maithil society. Indeed, when analysed with reference to the agencies that work through the present-day political culture of Mithila, only two representations stand clearly in contrast. These are: the essential/local difference found throughout Mithila and the administrative construct of census commissioners which structures claims of identity and representation.

To summarize, the essential/local contrast exists in a hierachically organized society of big and little castes. The internal boundary is sharpest, for that marks a difference in rank; the external boundary with other languages takes on more the character of a frontier. Mutual intelligibility is assumed to some extent: either because the internal boundary that marks a difference in rank must have intelligibility for superiors to command inferiors or because upon the frontier communication willy-nilly takes place. The internal difference between chaste and rustic Maithili is one of aesthetic, not of communication; and language itself gives as much style to expression as content to thought.

Pandit-grammarians build upon this essential/local contrast in asserting the autonomy of their mother-tongue. Autonomy is demonstrated by virtue of the genetic derivation of speech forms from a lapsed, authoritative language and by the uniqueness of certain grammatical or lexical features. A language is further dignified by being a medium of literature and an object of description (its grammar,

rhetoric, etc.). Despite little caste people having their own aesthetic values, they make no political claims on the basis of language representations. It is chaste Maithili, not rustic, that organizes the frontiers of speech. Moreover, the resistance against the dominant models of the *Linguistic Survey of India* and that of the *Census of India*, in which Maithili has only the status of a dialect, is mounted by those persons with an alternative language representation, that is, the members of the 'big castes' who predicate their local dominance on speech. In this case, at least, the census schedule and colonial scholarship was not decisive in 'objectifying' society (see Cohn 1987), for linguistic self-awareness as a basis of regional and social identity is as old as the names 'Maithili', 'rustic language', etc.; if anything, the census became the focus of a contest on how speech was to be socially constituted.

The fact that language figures in the dominance of the 'big castes', but not in the tactics of resistance by the 'little castes' suggests only that language representations have little bearing on how lower castes express agency in culture. Rather the speakers of the 'going language' (*cālū bhāṣā*) act and defend themselves on other terms. The stereotype of society in northern Bihar as being 'traditional', 'cast-ridden' and 'backward' does not fit squarely with the lower castes having been at the forefront of the freedom movement or the fact that Naxalbari is on the border between the Maithili- and Bengali-speaking areas. When a Maithili-speaking rickashaw driver from Sitamarhi District informed me that the Bihar state police is a *khāgatī bhāg*, or 'paper tiger', one gets an idea of what other sorts of literature are read by lantern light in Mithila. Needless to add, the 'Red Army of Muzaffarpur' is not fighting against the stigma of Maithili being a dialect. These remarks help explain not only the political failure of a broad-based Maithili cultural movement (see Brass 1974) but also the fact that in the 1961 census less than half the Maithili-speakers returned Maithili as their mother-tongue. The lower castes have masterful narrative and rhetorical skills, but they do not elaborate the autonomy of rustic speech as language.

Grierson's invention of the Bihari language remains a singular discovery that encountered almost universal rejection: from census commissioners, from his Maithil pandit informants and from some of his philological colleagues. Indeed, in view of Grierson's previously cited remarks on the imaginary Jangali language, the search for 'Bihari' by the local administrators who prepared the 1901 census schedule takes on some irony. But apart from Grierson's reconstruc-

tion of Maithili's pedigree, his research in Mithila was otherwise ambiguous in cultural derivation. He took *pañc kosī* Maithili to be the standard form of speech; and he meant by standard the correct form, not the prevalent one. He understood Maithili to have not a boundary, but a frontier that might best be represented by the shading of colours. Given the inadequacy of the synchronic language/dialect distinction, he was forced to treat Maithili as the language of a place (*sthāniyā bhāṣā*) whose existence could best be described with reference to its genesis. Although Grierson and pandit-grammarians differed in their metaphysics, and therefore in what makes history, nonetheless the philologist's *stammbaum* model of language change could have been readily reworded into the terms of the pandit's 'seed' model. Finally, the conjuring of the Bihari language stemmed not from the arrogant use of an alien method, but from his recognition of the inadequacy of the European language/dialect distinction. In short, Grierson's philological investigations were not in any simple sense of the term an alien 'construction'. He was enough in the hands of local Brahmans that the difference between the knowledges of investigator and investigated became ambiguous.

These few observations, plus the fact that Grierson's scheme was resisted by the census commissioners, suggest that scholarly practices ought to be distinguished from the institutionalization of scholarly knowledge by the state and from the effects of that institutionalization. In a recent article Cohn (1985) described the work of an earlier generation of philologists who during the Company period used the comparative method in order to construct the genealogical history of Indian vernaculars. Although it is clearly the case, as Cohn (pp. 292–5) shows, that philologists, such as Sir William Jones, worked from their own expectations about legal traditions and that they learned Sanskrit in order to reduce the Company's dependence upon Indian interpretors of Hindu and Muslim law, it does not follow that the comparative method of philologists was in itself a purely alien method or that by means of this method they could give to Indians their history (p. 326). What Jones learnt from his Sanskrit teacher in Nadya remains unclear, and Emeneau (1955) in his homage to Indian linguistics detects the influence of Panini on the emergence of comparative philology in Europe. At the level of philological practices there could be, as was the case with Grierson in Mithila, ambiguity in the scholar's understanding of others.

With regard to the institutionalization of knowledge by the state the language representation that counts most and contrasts most with the

essential/local difference is that of the census commission. Here the object of knowledge is population, for which language becomes a characteristic and, possibly, an index of something else (e.g. 'nation' in the 1881 Census of Bengal; 'culture' in the 1971 Census of Nepal). No matter how philologically or linguistically enlightened an administrator may be, in the fulfilment of his duties he is caught up in boundaries of jurisdiction. These boundaries are characteristic of the modern state in which citizenship is an exhaustive and (usually) exclusive category and the state claims an exclusive interest in what happens on its territory. Conversely citizens are entitled to make certain claims upon the state, and in the settlement of such claims matters of jurisdiction must be dealt with from the outset. No matter what the modern state might understand of philological knowledge, it can only institutionalize it in ways which make boundaries. The shift from the value of validity to reliability in the language section of the censuses of India, which, in turn, is couched in the legal genre of precedent suggests not only that lawyers had a greater role in writing the census than philologists but also that Indian subjects of the crown were making claims on the government on the basis of census returns. The census also played, and continues to play, a role in determining political representation, both in the number of representatives per territorial unit and in claims for regional autonomy based on presumed cultural differences. Implicit here is the assumption that a common cultural background facilitates communication and, therefore, effective administration.

In sum, the representation of speech in the Indian census stems from the modern preoccupation of language as a sound-and-symbol system within which there is mutual intelligibility and beyond which intelligibility breaks down. The mutual intelligibility implies the existence of common grammatical, phonetic and lexical features with consensus as to their standard form. It is further assumed that a language is in some measure a medium of human consciousness that also fixes consciousness such that differences between two peoples' perceptions and thoughts may be attributed to their different languages. Just as the modern state claims an absolute and exclusive interest in the loyalty of its citizens so also the modern mother-tongue claims an absolute and exclusive interest in the consciousness of its speakers. Any polity that legitimates itself with reference to popular will may seek to delimit its domain with reference to the territorial distribution of its speakers. These two senses of boundary overlap sufficiently that one may be tempted to look for a geographical place

beyond which communication cannot take place and to represent that boundary by a line that can go across both earth and paper.

Both the essential/local contrast and the representation of the census administration co-exist in Mithila with political forces making one or the other salient in particular socio-historical contexts. The first representation has been used by pandit-grammarians to demarcate the territorial distribution of their language with reference to the ritual boundary of the country—the Kosi, Ganges and Gandaki rivers and the Himalayan range. These boundaries, however, only point at a frontier where Maithili blends into another language. According to the second representation—as worked out by philologists and linguists, reported in the censuses and used in boundary commissions—the boundaries of the Maithili-speaking area are rather different. Bhojpuri has crossed the Gandaki and occupied the west of the country, but Maithili has crossed the Kosi and Ganges, thereby extending the frontier to the east and south. Hitherto in provincial society chaste Maithili was the focus of value: internal political debate focused not so much on how many people spoke the language, but on how few spoke it well. One wanted to know who the 'real' speakers were, and in what micro-region they lived. Such a focus still remains, but in state and national politics language numbers have become important; disputes occur over how many Maithili speakers there are and claims of common identity are advanced with reference to the variant forms with which it is intelligible. In the pre-modern polity, when speaking a language had an aesthetic value, Assamese Vaishnavas wrote drama in Maithili (Misra 1976: 187–96) and the Newari-speaking Malla rulers of Nepal wrote poetry in Maithili for the pleasure of a Newari audience (*ibid.*: 143–63). In modern Nepal, however, a writer resorts to Nepali to express his 'Nepaliness' (*nepālīpan*); only the mother tongue has access to the innermost thoughts and feelings of the author. Here language is no longer a matter of aesthetic; it is a matter of consciousness.

It is perhaps tempting to read in these language representations something that may be 'colonial', or 'European' or 'Maithil' by virtue of the period and place in which they were observed. Yet such descriptions fail to characterize these representations of speech in terms of any consequence. The institutional continuity of the census and census policy in colonial and post-colonial India, including the unchanging classification of Maithili as a dialect, implies that the census has to do with the way in which modern states construct society as they monitor and control it. In a similar vein the essential/local contrast

leads provincial people to evaluate cosmopolitan culture positively as refinement and negatively as foppishness or as adulteration. Although there is a sense (our sense) in which European dominance is perforce alien, the essential/local contrast constructs alienness in its own way and applies it only to the criticism of adulteration. My aim here is not to deny the obvious facts of colonial dominance and cultural difference, but to consider the durability and diversity of dominant representations and to point out the ambiguous and ambivalent connections between European and Maithil representations of speech.

Rather than characterize these representations by virtue of their historical period and cultural background, my aim has been to relate them to institutionalized practices. A sense of the world is constructed out of practices such that representations of language are bound up with one's ability to act. What is critical for understanding these constructions is not, or not merely, the way in which a sense of the world is a type of knowledge but the way in which agency in political culture brings together constructs and practices. It is not the case that census commissioners falsely understood Maithili; or that an independent body of linguists could test the claims of pandit-grammarians that Maithili is a 'language'. Rather the various constructions of language in Mithila enable persons to act in Maithil society by virtue of their speech, and in some cases disallow others. Modern states act through legal structures and their notions of speech enable claims of identity and political representation to be made. In their restrained style of command and the construction of autonomous speech forms the so-called big castes of Mithila achieve a cultural dominance that is inseparable from the way in which they act in local society. Meanwhile in the idea of a 'going language' semicommunication is constructed that poses few problems for mutual intelligibility. By not linking language to an autonomous cultural consciousness, Maithils are also enabled to form political groupings extending beyond the regional culture constructed by the 'big castes'. In every case reflections on speech inform action and reflections on action inform speech. From all these differences, it is clear that the quarrel in the family of Indo-Aryan vernaculars can never be sorted out; it stems from conflicts in the heart of Maithil political culture.

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