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COMPARING LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPES IN VRINDAVAN, UTTAR PRADESH AND NORFOLK ISLAND, SOUTH PACIFIC

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INTRODUCTION

At first glance it may seem strange and almost fruitless to compare the language ecology and linguistic status of two such seemingly disparate entities as an Indian holy city and a remote island in the South Pacific Ocean. Aside from their obvious geographical distance and cultural differences, Vrindavan, now a burgeoning and booming sizeable town, and Norfolk Island, a small island of 40 square kilometres and an external territory of Australia with a colourful history of paradise turned to hell and back again, present the language ecologist a considerable task. One would be hard pressed to find two more dissimilar linguistic and human-nature interactions. This is, however, the undertaking of the current paper.

I have been involved with the environmental movement in Vrindavan since 1998 and in the past five years I have been researching the linguistic aspects and language interaction in the town and their ecological ramifications. My current PhD project concerns placenames on Norfolk Island, South Pacific. Here I attempt to draw some parallels and work toward suggestions of a work-in-progress theory of linguistic landscapes, a relatively new and exciting field of applied linguistics and linguistic anthropology first proposed by Landry and Bourhis (1997) and developed further by Backhaus (2007). To set the mood of the current analysis some historical background of the two respective locales is required.

VRINDAVAN: A LINGUIST'S DREAM OR NIGHTMARE?

Vrindavan is revered and accepted among the religions of India as the childhood abode of Radha and Krishna, the Divine Couple and the purest example of love, joy and abandonment in the Hindu pantheon. The modern town was founded in the early 1500s and the remnants of this city planning is still present in the architecture and streetscape of the old town, nestled in the north eastern part of a peninsula-like outcrop of land that used to be bordered by the Yamuna, 11 kilometres from the medieval city of Mathura (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Vrindavan Location Map

Many of the rituals practised by the various manifestations of the Krishna cult have remained unchanged through the ages while the modern influence of pilgrimage, tourism and expanded development have left the town inundated under the force of change and progress. It is the philosophical aspects of the bhakti (devotional) movement's saints that forms the environmental movement's standpoint in Vrindavan (see White 1977, Snell 1991, Prime 1992) but as these, at least on first glance, have little to do with the linguistic aspects of the area, these will not be dealt with here. It is true, however, that the influence of these saints and seers and their respective birthplaces, languages and culture have had a strong effect on the current linguistic landscape of Vrindavan.

Aside from Khari-boli, modern standard Hindi, and Braj-bhasha, the local dialect of the Braj region, and the various other influences from pilgrims and residents from other areas of the Hindi speaking belt such as eastern Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, Bengali is the next most prevalent Hindustani language in Vrindavan. The main reason for this is quite simple: the cult of Krishna worship

founded by the saint Chaitanya originated in medieval Bengal, now modern day West Bengal and Bangladesh. His followers were encouraged to move to what had by then been established as Krishna's childhood abode to establish temples of worship and for propagating their philosophy. This was obviously done through the medium of Bengali, most likely initially the Shadhu-bhasha of that era and in turn influenced by the Cholti-bhasha impressed so strongly on the Bengali speaking world in the early 1900s by Rabindranath Tagore. A large Bengali speaking community is still present in the town today, and this is reflected in the spoken and written traditions of Vrindavan.

Other Hindustani languages with a presence are Oriya and Gujarati, most likely due to their association with various temple traditions and methods of worship. There is a long-standing historical affiliation between the Krishna worship of Orissa and Bengal and this is reflected in a minor presence of Oriya speakers in the community, especially surrounding the Gaudiya (Bengali) temples in the old town. The same is the case with a very minor occurrence of Gujarati signage on a small number of temples, most likely due to Vrindavan's close geographical proximity to Vrindavan and traditions of worship.

Like anywhere else in India, English is a major player in the linguistic ecology of Vrindavan, ranging from the varieties spoken by the educated class and native speaker foreign pilgrims to 'bazaar English' and other forms of English for communicative and practical purposes in day-to-day dealings. The Western Hare Krishna movement (ISKCON) has provided a continuous stream of pilgrims to the town for more than 30 years which has altered not only the economic and demographic status of the town but also the linguistic position. English's influence continues in Vrindavan and constantly challenges the status of Hindi in spoken and written domains. It is the latter category and more precisely signage and language choice that form a major part of the current investigation.

NORFOLK ISLAND: A SNAPSHOT OF ISOLATED LINGUISTIC INTERACTION

Norfolk Island, an isolated island in the southwest Pacific Ocean 1700 kilometres from Sydney, provides linguists a near laboratory case study in language change and the dialectical relationship (Bang & Døør 2007) between language and environment (see Figure 2 Norfolk Island location map).
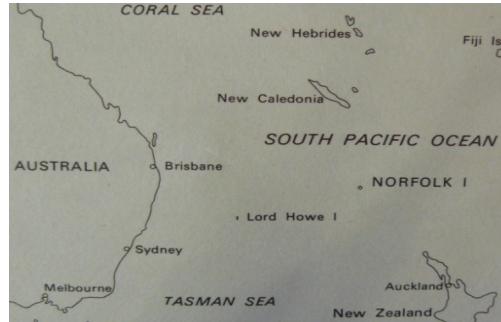
Figure 2 - Norfolk Island Location Map

Island environments provide linguists, anthropologists and environmentalists situations where the number and degree of parameters to be observed are greatly reduced. Norfolk Island affords the researcher the task of observing a small population's treatment of language and culture and various strategies of language planning and language revitalisation under relatively controlled circumstances.

Norfolk's history is generally divided into four major periods (Rickard 1995: 481):

1. The first convict settlement of 1788 – 1814;
2. The "planned Hell" of the second convict settlement;
3. The relocation in 1856 of the entire population of Pitcairn Island to Norfolk Island;
4. The Anglican Melanesian Mission had its headquarters stationed on Norfolk from 1866 – 1920.

Each historical period has left its marks and monuments. Linguistically I will be concerned with the interaction between Norf'k, the language of the descendents of the Pitcairn Islanders which is still spoken on Norfolk today, and (standard Australian) English, its linguistic stable mate on the Island.

Like many contact languages of the Pacific, Norf'k's status has remained an enigma. Despite attempts to produce a standardised orthography of Norf'k (Buffett 1999), the community has yet to agree on and use a system that can be utilised effectively in displaying the language in public. Furthermore, Buffett's system has been criticised both for its scientific soundness as well as its psychological adequacy, i.e. people do not use it because it does not make sense to them. These issues play havoc in establishing a minority language as a co-official language which occurred with the

implementation of the *Norf'k Language Act* (2004) side by side a monster language like English. Presenting the Norf'k language with consistent but possibly flexible spelling variations on street, road and house signs is paramount to exposing the language to public scrutiny and to 'internationalising' Norf'k, which occurred in 2007 with UNESCO declaring Norf'k an endangered language. These spelling issues, signage creation and the constant language planning tug-of-war with English on Norfolk Island form the theoretical basis of the research questions concerning linguistic landscapes.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What is offered here is an initial attempt at analysing the respective linguistic landscapes of these two regions and is by no means the last word on this matter. The data set to be analysed is not conclusive nor does it claim to be and the results obtained are neither to be taken as final. This paper aims at opening up these two environments to the scrutiny appropriate to research in linguistic landscapes, i.e. the analysis of signs for their language and power and language and society relations. The current paper provides the basis for further (comparative) research into the linguistics status of the respective languages in their respective areas.

The following research questions as an initial investigation into the linguistic landscapes of the two respective locales are:

1. What languages are used in signage in Vrindavan and why?
2. What language and power relationships does the use of the different languages in different parts of the town illustrate about the linguistic landscape of Vrindavan?
3. Is the Norf'k language used in signage on Norfolk Island?
4. What language and power relationships does the use of the Norf'k language illustrate in the linguistic landscape of Norfolk Island?
5. Are there any similarities and differences to be drawn from comparing the respective linguistic landscapes of Norfolk Island and Vrindavan?

METHODS

Data in the form of images of signs was collected during fieldwork in India in January 2008 and on Norfolk Island in February 2008. They were chosen based on the multiplicity of languages presented as well as the location of the signs within the cultural and religious landscape of the town and within the advertising landscape of

modern India. Selecting signs for analysis on Norfolk Island was based on totally different criteria as 1) Norf'k is not as prevalent as English on signs, 2) there are a lot of house names on signs in Norf'k, and 3) there are in reality only two languages which are used on signs on Norfolk Island: Norf'k and English. The attempt to define and describe what constitutes a sign using Norf'k words as opposed to English words does not arise in the Indian context with historically well-established orthographies such as Hindi, Bengali and Oriya.

RESULTS

The five research questions will be considered by referring to respective example images of signs and to the corpus as a whole. Figure 3 presents a typical sign employing Hindi and English.

Figure 3[1]

Such a bilingual presentation is so extremely common in India that it almost seems redundant to make the claim that such signs exist. It exposes the ubiquity and genericness of Hindi/English signs. The weight of such signs in expressing and exposing prevalent cultural values, typical behaviours and assumptions of a society like India cannot be underestimated. The linguistic and semiotic aspects of these interactions are even more important in rural India and especially in conservative religious locations such as Vrindavan.

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[1] All images have been taken by the author.

Figure 4 is an English-Bengali sign of an optician (English: optical, Bengali: chashmãr dokãn) in the old part of the town.

Figure 4

This standard sign of paint on concrete is used for advertising and this store is obviously owned and frequented largely by Bengalis. The total absence of any Hindi script is noted and is quite important and suggested is not merely an oversight.

The presentation of English words in the Devanagari script is so common in India nowadays that many words such as 'centre', 'tailor' and 'shop' have become a part of everyday spoken and written Hindi vernacular. Figure 5 provides a typical example of 'Krishnã Medical Store' where 'local and foreign medicines are available'.

Figure 5

Gopinath Bãzãr, where this sign is located, is the stronghold of the Bengali community so one would expect a Bengali equivalent which here is not present.[2] It is suggested and postulated in relation to research question 2 concerning language and power relationships that this store is not owned by Bengalis and the absence of Bengali is not an arbitrary point rather a deliberate act and statement of language planning, no matter how seemingly innocuous and naïve. This example is juxtaposed against the anomaly presented in Figure 6.

Figure 6

The 'Shri Amiy Gourang Mahaprabhu Mandir' is the monopoly of a group of Bengali widows based in and around the Bengali quarter on Gopinath Bãzãr. In this situation one would definitely expect the language and power relationships to tip in favour of Bengali being present on the temple's façade and the absence of such opens up the consideration of greater domains to language planning and linguistic landscapes in environments where diverse languages and cultures live so close together in such a culturally vibrant town as Vrindavan, i.e. property ownership, positioning of signage, cost of signage production, size of signage and issues of language and corruption.

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[2] During my first research visit to India in 1998 I met Bengali residents on Gopinath Bãzãr that had lived in Vrindavan for more than 30 years and were still not comfortable conversing in Hindi. This is not uncommon in parts of India where cultural segregation is commonplace and illustrates the complex interaction and role that language, culture, environment and in this case religion plays in forming the linguistic ecology and potential linguistic isolation and even linguistic exile in certain parts of the world.

Figure 7 and 8 show two signs near the main shopping district of Loi Bãzãr.

Figure 7

Figure 8

Though located in the Seva Kunj area of Vrindavan, another area rich in Bengali residents, the density is not as great as on Gopinath Bãzãr. Due to lack of space further examples cannot be given here, and this is the topic of a further paper, but here suffice to say there are at least two other Hindustani languages, i.e. Gujarati (Figure 7) and Oriya (Figure 8), in the linguistic landscape of Vrindavan. I claim that the presence of these two languages is directly linked to either (1) the ownership of

the temple, (2) the cultural background of the pilgrims who visit these temples, and (3) other language planning measures, e.g. personal agendas, historical facets of ownership, temple donors and patrons and family history, that would warrant the production and presentation of a minority language in a somewhat distant language ecology, e.g. Orissa where Oriya is spoken is approximately 1600 kilometres from Vrindavan.

On the whole signage on Norfolk Island is less garish, gaudy and more humble than in Vrindavan. There is obviously greater control of signage production and the consideration of what one is legally able to produce than in Vrindavan and for India as a general rule. This is not exactly surprising considering the absolute and relative population densities of the respective settings and the cultural and historical differences that exist. This has been one of the challenges in attempting to find the commonalities between these two research objects. Norfolk Island is commonly portrayed as a South Seas paradise with anything from pristine ocean views, coconut palms (which do not grow on the island) and lazy days in the sunshine among rolling hills and roaming cows. Some of these may be true and this initial investigation into the linguistic landscape of Norfolk as a prototype of language contact and very practical language planning aims at generating more questions for further consideration and future unfolding as part of the current PhD research.

Figure 9

'Wut-a-wey' (Figure 9) in Norf'k means 'How are you?' and is often spelt 'whataway' and 'watawieh'. It is the most common Norf'k term learnt by outsiders when coming to Norfolk and is the quintessential Norf'k expression used especially in the tourism industry. This sign is located on the side of a t-shirt boutique. 'Se meke it orn Norfolk Island!' means 'it is made on Norfolk Island!' and once again presents a common expression in Norf'k. This sign is an example of a pure Norf'k sign, i.e. all the words used are Norf'k (see later examples of mixed English and Norf'k signs). Figure 10 illustrates possible spelling variations in written Norf'k.

Figure 10

These two signs exist on the same establishment and exemplify the discrepancy in even the most fundamental variants in spoken/written Norf'k and thus the difficulties in establishing an internally consistent spelling system for a hitherto unwritten language (see Buffett 1999 for description of a possible writing system for Norf'k).

There has been a fair degree of resistance in the Norfolk Island community against accepting and putting Buffett's spelling system into practice. Many in the community feel that it is 'not the language they are speaking' and that Nobbs-Palmer's (1986) system and other suggestions put forward by community members in association with researchers at the University of Adelaide are more realistic and more usable. Figure 11 depicts an example of Buffett's system in action with Tuesday spelt 'Tyuusdi' and Friday spelt 'Fraidi'.

Figure 11

'Letl Art Gallery' (Figure 12) is an example of a mixed English-Norfolk sign.

Figure 12

'Letl' concurs with Buffett's system but 'art gallery' according to this orthography would not be presented in this form. One of the suggestions to establishing a more psychologically adequate orthography, i.e. a system that the community is happy with and will actually use in their everyday written communication, is that a standard be established for the 100 most commonly written Norf'k words and then encouraging personal choice, the use of previously established English spellings and/or personal

variations for the remaining areas of Norf'k vocabulary. The effect and use of such a format for the Norf'k language remains to be seen.

Figure 13

Figure 13 shows to the best of my knowledge the only example of Norf'k word on a street/road sign on Norfolk Island. 'Yorlor Lane' reveals a relic of the Polynesian past brought to Norfolk from Pitcairn Island in 1856: the yorlor, also spelt yollo, is a heavy stone implement used to grate unripe bananas and uncooked sweet potatoes before baking a well-known local dish named 'pilhai'. There are currently 53 unnamed streets, roads and easements on Norfolk Island awaiting naming via a process instigated by the Norfolk Island Administration planning department. This is another exciting example of language planning in action and its interaction with signage production and the manipulation of the linguistic landscape of a linguistically sensitive environment.

Figure 14

Figure 15

'Truly Auwas' ('Truly Ours' - Figure 14) and 'Auwas Hoem' ('Our Home' - Figure 15) depict the common behaviour on Norfolk of house naming. These signs, obviously erected by the owners of the houses, use the pronoun 'auwas' which demonstrates solidarity and is a strong statement of inclusion by the house owners as members of the Norf'k speaking community. The use of a similar sign using 'auwas' or 'ucklan' (us, the Norfolk Islanders) by a non-Norfolk Islander would invite ridicule and possibly even forced removal of the sign by members of the Norfolk Islander/Norf'k speaking community. The Norf'k pronominal system is more intricate than that of English and political alignment and shared aims are often expressed via the use of such potentially emotive lexical items.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Considering the five research questions the following conclusions are drawn:

1.   What languages are used in signage in Vrindavan and why

In descending degree of frequency Hindi, English, Bengali, Oriya, Gujarati. These are the languages of the people who reside in the town.

2.   What language and power relationships does the use of the different languages in different parts of the town illustrate about the linguistic landscape of Vrindavan?

Different linguistic groups want their language represented on their temples and in the areas in which they live. The presence of different languages in signage in Vrindavan shows that people (1) prioritise their language particularly in the geographical area they live, and (2) use a linguistic hierarchy when presenting various languages.

3.   Is the Norf'k language used in signage on Norfolk Island?

Yes, but using different spelling variations.

4.   What language and power relationships does the use of the Norf'k language illustrate in the linguistic landscape of Norfolk Island?

There are more signs in English than Norf'k on Norfolk Island but the use of Norf'k on signs is a weighty and involved political and social statement of identity. Different spelling variations also indicate various camps associated with current orthographical suggestions and the present distention connected to the issue of spelling standardisation on Norfolk Island.

5.   Are there any similarities and differences to be drawn from comparing the respective linguistic landscapes of Norfolk Island and Vrindavan?

Language demarcates geographical and social space in these two very different locales and it does so in very different ways. In Vrindavan, language boundaries are created by place of birth and one's religious tradition allegiance in a veritable eclectic cultural melting pot. On Norfolk Island, however, language boundaries are created through familial and blood relations in a very isolated and relatively un-eclectic place.

These tentative results yielded from rather broad research questions indicate:

1.   The applicability of opening these two environments up to the research scrutiny of typical for linguistic landscapes research (cf. Landry & Bourhis 1997), and
2.   That one can ask similar questions in two very different locations and on two apparently disparate data sets and still achieve good results.

In future research more signs and a much deeper analysis of the significance of these signs, especially in the religious context of Vrindavan, will yield much greater

precision in the interpretation of data and the applicability of results. For the Norfolk Island example future research will involve:

1. A greater number of signs for analysis, both English and Norf'k signs, and
2. More precision in analysis of the spelling systems used and comparing these systems and spelling variations to Buffett (1999) and suggestions and uses by the Norfolk Island Government and community.

Together and separately these further analyses will strengthen investigation into language in the public sphere and particularly language and power relations in (1) the Indian context, and (2) small island environments.

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